

**WESTMINSTER**  
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**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Wade in the Water

Dr. Jo Forrest



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The ancient Israelites were an agrarian people. Ever aware that the wild swings of the weather formed their existence, they learned to read the forces of nature. If the clover curled and the grass became coarse, soon rain would fall.

Unlike those of us who rely upon a weather app, they noticed every prediction to rain or drought, always anxious about water.

They read God's revelation, spelled out in the leaf of a tree, and sound or silence of a bird's song, from the creepy crawlies to the dome of the sky.

God's mark on nature shapes the ancient theologies they wrote into our scriptures. Since the dawn of times, the faithful held two books as maps to draw closer to God: Holy Scriptures and what is often called "the book of nature."

Centuries after the last book of the Bible was written and as Christianity moved from the fields and into the sanctuaries, the ecclesial politicking pushed the book of nature into the shadows.

No one could control nature and its revealed book, but they could with the other book. Ritual and structure overshadowed the holiness in the book of nature. By suppressing any reverence for the natural order gave license

to the quest to harness creation. To use rather than tend resources. To claim dominion and set aside mutual respect.

Yet, those theologians who were wise to the world, often called mystics or relegated to the fringes, sought to reclaim care for nature, proclaiming God's hand in daily life. Their long-silenced voices find new advocates, today, as people feel called to tend our natural resources.

Our sermon series in August explores this grand story of God and you from the beginning of time through the element of water. As common and necessary in our lives today, water flows through – pun intended – every aspect of the grand story of our faith.

Once you begin to write about water, you notice all the names for water, the verbs for its movement, the sounds it makes, its varied forms and colors, and its pervasive presence as to how we speak of life.

Today we begin in the beginning. Our first story of creation portrays God as an ethereal voice speaking from on high into a void over seven days.

The second creation story, stitched into the scrolls of Genesis, casts God as an artisan, as if donning a canvas apron to fashion the world with God's own hands. Think of a grandparent carving objects to adorn a child's play set.

Before I read, please pray with me.

*God of all creation, your word creates us. Your word undoes us. Your word redeems us. Silence in us any voice but your voice. Startle us with your truth that we walk humbly on this earth with you always before us, beneath us, beside us, and within us. Amen.*

Genesis 2:4b-14

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup>when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, <sup>6</sup>but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—<sup>7</sup> then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

<sup>8</sup>And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup>A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. <sup>11</sup>The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of

Havilah, where there is gold, <sup>12</sup> and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.

<sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

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In February of this year, the rover, Curiosity, sent back word of the clearest evidence yet of water on the planet Mars. Billions of years ago, waves on the surface of a shallow lake stirred up sediment at the lake bottom, over time created rippled textures on rock.

If you've ever hurtled down the white waters in the Rocky Mountains and looked up, you'd discover the same impact of water sculpting rock. Even when the water slows to a drift, its patience and persistence etches canyons through mighty mountains.

This rover traverses along a Martian timeline, no longer buoyed by water, allowing scientists to study how Mars evolved from a planet that was more Earth-like in its ancient past, with a warmer climate and plentiful water, to the freezing desert it is today.



The project scientist for Curiosity at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, explains: "The wave ripples, debris flows, and rhythmic layers all tell us that the story of wet-to-dry on Mars wasn't simple...Mars' ancient climate had a wonderful complexity to it, much like Earth's."<sup>1</sup>

We search for water since it is essential for life as we know it. Did it exist on Mars? Could it exist elsewhere?

Scientists debate how water reached the earth and whether the same process could seed distant planets.

Finding water vapor implies that if planets are forming, they will have water from the very beginning.

Just a week ago, the James Webb Space Telescope detected water vapor in a planetary system, PDS 70, located 370 light years away. The headlines of their news release states: "The finding shows that a water reservoir is available for terrestrial planets that might be coalescing there."<sup>2</sup>

NASA's search for the origin of life drives them to search for water in any form, molecules, atoms, vapors, evidence of the possibility. Nature tells us, water was and is in the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/nasas-curiosity-finds-surprise-clues-to-mars-watery-past>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2023/webb-detects-water-vapor-in-rocky-planet-forming-zone>

In scripture, God's hand fingers water into our world. Streams that flow to the ends of the world and the depth of the seas.

The origin and destiny of our lives remain bound in the waters of creation; "a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground."

After breathing into the dust of the ground to create a living being, God places into this landscape trees "pleasant to the sight and good for food" to sustain us. Since the beginning, life depends upon running water and the plants fed by these streams.

Usually, we skip over the next portion of the story, fixated on the brief time we live in the Garden of Eden and argue about why we left. We think it's all about us.

When read with humility, scripture is really all about God and all of God's creation. Our individual lives are just a tile in the mosaic's grand design.

Four rivers flow from Eden, Pishon heading to the place of gold, perhaps India. Gihon to the land of Cush, maybe Ethiopia. And the two rivers we know well from high school ancient civilization classes, the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Any attempt to locate a common origin for all such rivers remains pure speculation. As astronomers look to the

heavens for evidence of the origin of life, archeologists examine our past. The geography of the rivers pales next to the theology the ancient writers invest the story: God sends water into the entirety of the known world, for all places and peoples, not just the chosen.

An ancient reader would hear these rivers' names and imagine a body of water, vital to a community's existence. The names also imply the Nile, the Amazon, the Mississippi, the Hudson, and our three rivers. The writer locates God's creative acts into everyone's backyard, connecting Eden into our lives.<sup>3</sup> Human civilization began in this imagined place, under God's watchful care.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was believed "civilization" began in Europe, specifically Greece and Rome. Such a western-centric view of the world. Then a group of archeologists began to study the ancient Middle East, in the area formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the Mediterranean Sea.

The shape of this region led to its name, the "Fertile Crescent" as a crescent-shaped area that spans modern day Iraq, Turkey, Israel, and Palestine.

School children learn to call the area the Tigris and Euphrates rivers form, Mesopotamia, for the "land between the rivers."

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<sup>3</sup> Miguel Del a Torres, *Genesis, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

During the rainy season the rivers would flood the valleys, creating an oasis of fertile soil, optimal to sustain human life.<sup>4</sup>

Language flourished. Residents invented the wheel. The earliest known systems of writing emerged.

As recently as twenty years ago, people in the villages near the Euphrates remember date palm trees grew so thick and close together that their leaves blocked the sunlight.

The splashing of children in the irrigation canals and the sloshing of water jugs being carted home provided the backbeat of summer life.

Now, the irrigation canals are so dry in summer that the small bridges spanning them are barely necessary and the sounds of daily life signal water's scarcity: the crackle of brown grasses and the rustle of dried out palm leaves. Some palms have no leaves at all, their bare trunks standing like the columns of ancient ruins.

A villager, who has lived his entire life in this region describes, "The land was good, the soil was good," he remembers. Until the early 2000s, he said, "we grew wheat and barley, corn and clover."

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Tori, "The Fertile Crescent Explained," *UChicago News*, November 10, 2022, <https://news.uchicago.edu/explainer/fertile-crescent-explained>

Now, all that grows are small groups of tamarisk trees planted as a bulwark against the sands. “We are living now on the verge of life,” he said. “There is no agriculture, no planting possible anymore. This is the end of the line, the end of life. We wait for a solution from God, or from the good people.”<sup>5</sup>

God and good people.

With God so much is possible. From just a trickle of water, in the beginning, life took hold, and God’s world began to sustain life.

When we fell into fearing one another and destroying one another, God sent the son, not a large army, one son, to draw us back to God.

He teaches simple acts to care for neighbor and by extension to care for creation. One man, Jesus, who before he pours out his life for us, pours from a common cup, the fruit of the vine, nourished by water. He offers grace for all to be forgiven, for all to begin again.

He invites us to his table, in fellowship with all who have gone before, and the vastness of everyone today from north and

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<sup>5</sup>Alissa J. Rubin, “A Climate Warning from the Cradle of Civilization,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2023, A Climate Warning from the Cradle of Civilization - The New York Times ([nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

south and east and west, and those who will come in the future. He tells us to do this in memory of him.

We receive a trickle of that vine, actually not very much, but enough.

Enough to taste and remember his life poured out into a river of life with the hope we will care for the earth his father gave us, we will care for one another, we will treasure our connectedness.

In our communion, we participate in the waters of creation that flow into and out of our lives, and tend them with as with the same loving care God placed in the beginning.

At this table, may we remember how small acts lead to life. May we remember just how connected we all are.





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