

# “Troubling the Waters: Wading into Our Future”

Sermon preached on January 8, 2012 by Frank Yamada

First United Church, Oak Park

Texts: Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4–11 (allusion to John 5:4)

## 1. Introduction Quote

a. From the Novella by Norman MacLean, “A River Runs Through It”

i. Quote set up:

1. Son of a Presbyterian pastor who has two loves beyond the church: literature and fly fishing
2. He reflects on his life and the role of water in it:

“Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them... in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.”<sup>i</sup>

b. My own connection and nostalgia with water

i. Not the Big Blackfoot River but the Pacific Ocean

ii. I only feel at home when I am near big bodies of water

1. Lake Michigan not quite the same

iii. Surfing growing up – always felt more at one with myself, others, and the world when I was in the water

1. Crisp mornings with water like glass

2. For me, in a real, physical way, water is life

iv. Baptism – why when I was baptized, I was dunked in the Pacific Ocean with words of God’s assurance pronounced over me.

## 2. Water is Both Chaos and Life

a. Water is Chaos

i. Beyond my own nostalgia – Water is not just life, water is death/chaos

ii. In the ancient world

1. Water is chaos

2. Tiamat, chaos monster, in ancient Babylonian mythology, who must be defeated by Marduk; from her slain body comes the heaven and earth

iii. We understand this idea

1. It was just under a year ago that we watched in horror as a giant tsunami ravaged Japan
  2. Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean (December 2004)
  3. Katrina (2005)
  4. We are all too aware of water's death-dealing capacity
    - a. This is why many of the world's civilizations have flood stories similar to what we find in the biblical text
  5. Given the melting of the polar ice caps, and therefore the radically shifting temperature of our oceans, it is not too hard to imagine that water will continue to be a threat to our existence in the future.
- iv. We can hear this idea—water as chaos and threat of death— in Gen 1:1–5
1. Misperception that God creates *ex nihilo*, God orders chaos
  2. “In the beginning...” (note “...darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters”).
  3. God brings order from the chaos; but God never eliminates it.
  4. Chaos is always still there (waters from above/waters below)

### **GOD DOES NOT SAVE CREATION FROM CHAOS, GOD CREATES IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS**

--God's hands shape the creative and chaotic power of water to produce life (note one of the sources of life: creatures come forth from the water.

This leads to my second point about water...

- d. Water is Life
- i. We are literally born in water – the water flows and breaks at our birth
  - ii. If we go without water for more than a day, our bodies began to expire
  - iii. If we look at the biblical story, God does not eliminate the chaotic force of water, AND stories of life and salvation are often intimately connected to water.
    1. The flood – God saves one family, even as the death-dealing water wipes out the rest of creation
    2. The Exodus – God liberates the Israelites not by providing a bridge over, not by making the Sea disappear, but God makes a way through the waters, even as the watery chaos consumes Pharaoh's army.
    3. The Wilderness – in a place where food and water are scarce, God provides not just manna, but makes water—the source of life—to flow from a rock.
    4. So, it should come as no surprise that when God decides to act—to do something new and ancient in the person of Jesus—that Jesus says to John, “Yes John, we WILL do this, you will baptize me. I will go into the waters, in order to fulfill all righteousness.”
3. Conclusion: When God is at work, expect chaos and look for deliverance *through* the waters
- a. We live in chaotic times
    - i. I already mentioned our environmental crisis – water will in all likelihood play a role in the destiny of humanity for better or worse.

- ii. But we are also dealing with a flood of anxiety of our eroding financial base in the U.S. and Europe
- iii. Violence seems to be the norm, peace the exception. The media storm pounds us with bad news. How many more bombings, explosions, human deaths can we take? And this is not just the “world out there,” all we have to do is look at our own streets in Chicago to see this chaos.
- iv. There are days when I awake and it is hard not to hear the beginning of the flood story in Genesis 6, when God gets fed up with all of the violence, corruption, and noise and decides to cleanse the earth with a flood (thankfully God has other plans and promises to keep).
- v. Whenever I baptize a child or witness a baptism, I can’t help but think, in to what kind of world are we initiating you?
  - 1. But we do this, as an act of faith, knowing that somehow God will be present for this child.
  - 2. We pass this child through the waters—these death dealing, chaos-producing waters—believing that God’s promises will lead this child into God’s life.
- b. Good news is that chaos has always been with us... as long as water has; and that God always seems to make a way where we see “no-way.”
  - i. Water is chaos. Water carries with it the threat of death. But when God delivers us, when God saves us, when God decides to do something radical in the world or in God’s people, we can expect that somehow, someday, it will not be in spite of... in the absence of... around or over... BUT, God will make a way through the waters.
- g. When we experience chaos, when we see the threat of the waves, when we are anxious about flood waters rising... let us remember that when chaos is present, God is at work. God’s deliverance is near. God’s way is *through the waters*. God’s voice speaks to us as we emerge *from the waters*. We are claimed by God *in the waters*.
- h. Even in the end, when God makes all things right. When every tear will be wiped away. When suffering ceases. When peace reigns. And God’s reign is present in a city with streets of gold. Even there, God will make all things complete, the first and the last...Even here scripture reminds us, “...and a river runs through it.”

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<sup>i</sup> Norman MacLean, *A River Runs through It and Other Stories* with forward by Annie Proulx (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1976), 104.