



Soil & *Water*

STEWARDSHIP

Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home

The outreach and education theme for NACD this year focuses on watersheds. In the Bible, water is very significant and is used throughout the Old and New Testaments, often symbolizing the Holy Spirit. The church leaders guide will focus on physical water through the impacts of rain washing over the landscape and the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit in washing over our lives. Both the physical landscape and the landscape of our lives will be viewed in terms of caring for God's creation.

“Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessings of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” Hebrews 6:7-8.

Key Verse:

The original recipients of the letter of Hebrews were familiar with farming, so the writer uses a metaphor that will speak to them of spiritual matters using something familiar to them, the importance of penetrating rain in producing a crop. It is the slow, frequent rain that is most beneficial to the land. The land must drink it in - absorb it - in order for the water to make its way into the roots of the plant and produce a useful crop of vegetables, fruits, or grains.

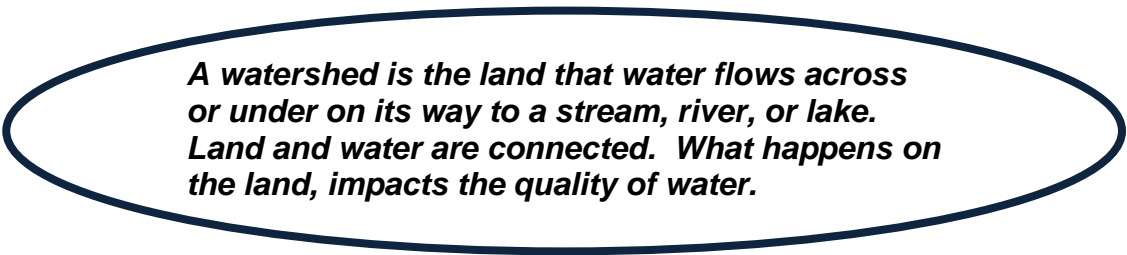
If the land is made up of hard packed soil, the rain may be falling, but the crops will not benefit, because the rain will wash off the surface bringing valuable top soil with it. The soil must receive the rain, and the roots of the crops help hold the soil and stop it from washing away.

As the world has developed over the past 2,000 years, we have come to learn the same is true in other types of landscapes, if they are hard or cannot be penetrated, there can be problems. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, when the ground is composed of more than 10% asphalt, buildings, concrete and other materials that water cannot penetrate, the earth is not able to filter out pollutants.

My son T.J. recently pointed out in one of his sermons that man creates cities of pavement, wood and brick. Yet no matter how hard we try, our creation is being invaded by God's creation. Living in the City of Boston, he still sees raccoons,

coyotes, native trees sprouting where they are not wanted, and grass popping up through the pavement. Man's response often involves chemical to control nature. When it rains, many of the pollutants that were deposited on the land accumulate and travel into water bodies, greatly threatening the health of our waters. This is especially true in a heavy rain, and is referred to as stormwater run-off.

Water is considered the universal solvent meaning that many things dissolve in it. As rain water runs over the surface of the land, it picks up pesticides, fertilizers, road salt, animal waste, automotive fluids and other chemicals – and carries them to the lowest point, which is where water collects – a pond, river, ocean, reservoir, etc. Pollutants from the land that penetrate into the ground during rain can threaten our ground water. This is how a watershed works.



A watershed is the land that water flows across or under on its way to a stream, river, or lake. Land and water are connected. What happens on the land, impacts the quality of water.

To apply our scripture to our lives metaphorically, we must consider that we are the land, the Holy Spirit is the rain, the roots are our commitment to Christ and the crop is the fruit of our lives.

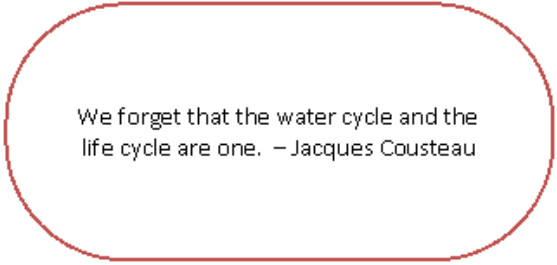
The Holy Spirit has been sent by God and is ever present and available to us every moment of every day and can be compared with the rain that is gentle and constant – the kind that penetrates into softened soil and produces a fruitful harvest.

If we are the land, we can compare our receptiveness to the rain to the condition of our hearts before God. If our hearts and minds are hard and do not allow the convicting power of the Holy Spirit to penetrate and change us, then it will do us no good. It can actually do us harm because our hearts will become hardened like Pharaoh in the Old Testament book of Exodus. There are no roots to hold the soil in place. The product of our lives will be like the thorns and thistles and hurt other people and the heart of God.

But if we wait upon the Lord, and call upon Him and welcome the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we allow the rain of the Holy Spirit to cleanse and penetrate us producing fruit and other beneficial crops. Fruit feeds others; it is beautiful to look at, nourishing and life giving. Galatians 5:22-23 speaks of fruit produced by the spirit as: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self control.

The Holy Spirit is part of the trinity – co-equal with the Father and the Son and one with them, yet each is distinct. This is one of the great mysteries the Church struggles with. Although an imperfect analogy, some use water to explain this mystery. Water can change forms. Sometimes it is liquid; sometimes it is solid as ice; and sometimes it is vapor as steam – yet it is always water.

Although the Bible does not use the word trinity to describe God, there are passages where we witness the presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all together. Specifically at the baptism of Jesus, where we have the Son in Christ, the Father speaking saying, “this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to Him”, and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove.



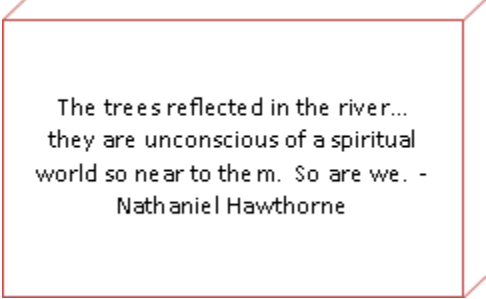
We forget that the water cycle and the life cycle are one. – Jacques Cousteau

The Holy Spirit has always been, but something spectacular was about to happen. Before the crucifixion the disciples were saddened that Jesus would be leaving them, but Jesus comforted them with these words in John 16:7-15: “But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. When He comes, He will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you; more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that He will receive what He will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

Before Jesus was crucified He said to His disciples, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” Acts 1:4-5. And indeed on Pentecost, after Jesus was taken up, the disciples were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was now in all who truly receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives, in a way that had not been experienced prior to the crucifixion. In Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit could be compared more as a visitor than a resident. Jesus words of comfort begin to make sense as we think of the fact that Jesus in bodily form was besides them, with them, but now believers would have God dwelling in

them in the form of the Holy Spirit: guiding, teaching, comforting, convicting them of sin, counseling and helping them.

John's baptism with water was a public demonstration of what faith in Jesus did in a believer's life. The water symbolizes cleansing from sin, and forgiveness from God. It also represents power over death. Death could not hold Jesus in the grave and it no longer has power over us. Jesus rose and we will one day rise in glorified bodies joined together as His body. Jesus said that among men born of woman there was none greater than John the Baptist. John said, "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."



The trees reflected in the river...
they are unconscious of a spiritual
world so near to them. So are we. -
Nathaniel Hawthorne

John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Christ. He was called before he was born and he was prophesied about in the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Malachi as one that would preach a message that was to turn the hearts of parents to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of righteousness, a message that would promote justice.

John the Baptist speaks boldly and clearly in Luke 3:2-20 where we learn that God is no respecter of persons. This is good news – but maybe not for everyone. Some of the Jews were very smug in their heritage. They were the descendents of Abraham. They had the family name. They were the chosen ones. But what they failed to realize is that Abraham was the father of their FAITH. Even Abraham was not pure and sinless, but he had faith and God counted that as righteousness. Even though these people were chosen by God, many were not producing fruit in keeping with repentance. They were not reflecting God in their lives. The people John was referring to were coming out to be baptized by him. They had the name, they were immersed in water, but there was no evidence! John is telling them, "it's not going through the motions that will save you, you must have faith, and you must produce fruit in your lives. It's what is in your heart. You need to change – love others, provide for them, don't cheat. The waters of baptism are not meant to wash your body; they are symbolic of washing of your very soul, of Jesus taking away your sin. The waters of Baptism were symbolic of new life; one lived in a repentant state, trusting in God to help you live right. They thought maybe John was the Messiah but John answered them, "I am not worthy to untie his sandals."

The fact that God is no respecter of persons is good news for us. Just as the heritage of the Jews did not gain them salvation but rather faith did – the door was open to the gentiles - that's most of the church! Regardless of where we came from, regardless of our heritage, regardless of our name, regardless of whether we are black, white, yellow or red, intelligent or mentally disabled, rich or poor. Regardless if our life was one of prostitution, stealing, murdering, immorality or if you are the president of World Vision saving starving children – what matters is repentance of the heart - turning to Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. None of us are righteous. Not one. But John was saying that Jesus was coming to die on the cross and take the punishment for those who will believe, those who will receive him as their Lord. And Jesus would know the heart. He doesn't need a court. He will look right through you and he will clear his threshing floor to gather the wheat into his barn, and he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

If the waters of baptism are symbolic of our faith in Jesus and the washing away and forgiveness of our sins, one may ask where does our sin go? What happens to all the pollution of our lives? It is diverted. To use our metaphor, it is filtered through the vegetated soil and cleansed. The place it goes is onto Christ Himself. It is nailed to the cross. He took the punishment for all who will receive His offer to accept His pardon.

Isaiah 1:16-19 "Wash and make yourself clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. Come now, let us settle the matter, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land."

We need to remember that God's ways are higher than ours. Let's face it, there is nothing reasonable in human thinking for God, the Creator of all things, coming to earth to die for a sinful people, taking away their sins, and bringing them into His Kingdom wearing white robes, in purity – when in the past their sins were scarlet red! His ways are not our ways. His justice is not our justice. It is the love, mercy and justice of a mighty wonderful counselor who knows our weaknesses and comes to rescue us anyway.

Let us not forget his instruction. He calls to do right and to care for the fatherless and the widow, for the oppressed, and to act justly.

“Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home”

Think of your life, what flows out of it? Is it life giving and full of fruit of the Spirit or destructive and full of thorns and thistles that hurt others?

God has redeemed us and He calls us to be redemptive. We live in a troubled, broken world marred by sin.

Sometimes we are destructive without intent – yet the water still runs off and harms God’s human and non-human creation.

This summer I went on a whale watch out of Plymouth, MA. One of the whales we saw was named Tulip. Tulip is a humpback whale and mother of a calf. She regularly migrates along the east coast of the US and to the Caribbean Islands. As a nursing mom she needs to produce 100 gallons of milk per day! But Tulip is ill and in danger of dying. If she dies, her calf will likely die too.

While we traveled, the staff on the vessel pulled balloons out of the water and mentioned that they believe that Tulip ingested plastic, likely a balloon, and that is the cause of her illness.

Perhaps there was a celebration somewhere. Something exciting and honorable was being celebrated, and people let loose balloons as a symbol of their joy. It could even have been a church celebration. No harm was meant, but the wind carried the balloon or the rain water washed it across the landscape into the ocean and Tulip was attracted to the colors and consumed it. I thought of how horrible I would feel if during Tulip’s autopsy, a note I wrote were found inside the balloon!

What does your life shed onto those around you? Regardless of what that may have been in the past, you can begin to produce fruit – you can be redeemed by Jesus and redemptive toward others and God’s natural creation – the earth and the creatures on it.

In 2012 most of our nation has been devastated by drought. Over 1,200 counties were designated disaster areas as of July. One report from Peoria, Illinois indicated that much of the corn grown was so full of nitrogen from the drought that it could not be consumed by humans or animals and was good only for composting.

We need to reach out to the hurting and lonely. Psalm 68:6 says that God places the lonely in families. Each of us can be a part of the Lord's ministry, acting as His body, His hands and feet to reach out and provide a place of security and love, a place of rest for those in need.

Our nation is in need of gentle, consistent rain.

As we pray to God for rain to water our crops and feed our nation, let us take the time to also pray for spiritual revival, rain of the Holy Spirit and spiritual fruit to feed those around us. As we look upon the dry cracked land, we must search our very souls and ask if our hearts are like that soil. Make a conscious decision to allow the work of the Holy Spirit, the rain sent from God, to enter in and flow



Remember that God loves the non-human world He created, and He calls us to be stewards of His creation. Can we think of ways that the land in our community could become less polluted? Can we find ways for water to absorb into the soil rather than running off collecting pollutants from the pavement? Consider installing a rain garden, grass swale or using less pavement and concrete on your property. Learn about organic gardening, chemical reduction in and around your home, and keep animal waste from entering into waterways. More information on how to do this can be found at the NACD and EPA websites.

Don't let what runs off your physical land or the landscape of your life cause harm to others, or yourself. Pray for guidance and take the time to learn about God's desire for us to become stewards of His creation; our fellow man and this earth. Take time to know and apply what the Bible teaches, and more importantly get to know its author.

Reviewed by:

Reverend Dean Hay, Jr. Senior Pastor for the United Community Church of God in Somerset County, PA

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Reverend T.J. DeMarco, Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Worcester, MA

Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home
Litany

- LEADER: LORD, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water. Jeremiah 17:13.
- CONGREGATION: But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. Jeremiah 17:7-8.
- LEADER: Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. Psalm 1:1-2.
- CONGREGATION: That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers. Psalm 1:3.
- LEADER: Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” John 7:37b – 38.
- ALL: As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God! Psalm 42:1.

Written by: Gina DeMarco, District Manager Northern RI Conservation District, RI

*For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
Revelation 7:17*

Music Recommendations

Hymns:

Nothing but the Blood by Robert Lowry

It is well with my Soul by Horatio Spafford

I've been Redeemed by anonymous

Lord, Speak to Me that I may Speak by Frances Ridley Havergal

Grace Greater than Our Sin by Julia Johnston

Contemporary:

Let it Rain by Michael W. Smith or Newsboys

After the Rain by September Rain: www.septemberrainnh.com – several other song by this band are recommended.



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