

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

July 6, 2025

Water: A World of Possibilities

Dr. Jo Forrest

Water: A World of Possibilities

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2025 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 6, 2025

We continue our sermon series on the fundamental elements of nature –earth water, wind/air, and fire – and human nature.

God creates the heavens and the earth. Then God separates the dry land from the waters, unleashing water’s creative force to carve valleys from mountains, irrigate deserts, and bubble up in springs.

From the dust of the earth God fashions humankind, breathes air into our lungs, puts a fire in our bellies, and brings us to life with blood pulsing through our veins, blood that relies upon water.

Water testifies to God’s presence to tend what God makes.

From start to finish in holy scriptures water bubbles, gushes, gurgles, flows, floods, rainbows the sky or suddenly dries up. Then it pours out of God’s upper chambers all over again, to nurture, sustain, wash, cleanse, baptize, heal or reveal the possibilities of faith through Jesus’ miracles as he commands water.

Any story that asserts God sends floods to drown or that God dries up rivers on a whim to punish people must be read against the question what does that story say about humanity – it’s usually a lesson in our disobedience.

God does not inflict revenge. God does not torment through natural events.

We grieve with the families who lost loved ones in the recent storm in Texas. We pray for them and for all people whose hearts ache because they know the joy of camping and mourn in solidarity.

Anyone who claims “God sent the storm” taking the lives of so many souls seeks more to be in control of a narrative that diminishes God. Or they say such hurtful things because they cower before the palpable grief of another and fragility of life.

Coincidentally the August the sermon series we planned is entitled “Little Christian Lies” to refute those aphorisms that diminish God and others.

God’s heart breaks at the death of so many just as surely as those who mourn their loved ones. We trust this because when God’s own son was killed, eternal love raised him.

Today’s sermon on water was scheduled months ago to reflect on the wonder of creation. Like an ever-flowing stream, water symbolizes the possibilities of our lives. We turn to a psalmist who employs metaphors of water to depict God’s creative and redemptive power at work.

Please pray with me...

Creator God, the ways you inhabit our bodies and nourish our lives with living water is so constant that we too often forget. Slow us down.

Center our thoughts on you. As we hear these ancient words give them fresh meaning to open our lives to the possibilities you place before us. Amen.

Psalm 65

⁵By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.

⁶By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

⁷You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

⁸Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout
for joy.

⁹You visit the earth and water it;
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

¹² The pastures of the wilderness overflow;
the hills gird themselves with joy;

¹³ the meadows clothe themselves with flocks;
the valleys deck themselves with grain;
they shout and sing together for joy.

On January 10, 1992 the container ship *Ever Laurel* was hit by a storm in the tempestuous seas near the Aleutian Islands on its journey from Hong Kong to Tacoma, WA.

The winds reached hurricane force, with thirty-six-foot waves slamming the giant vessel so violently that twelve containers broke loose and toppled from the deck. One of the containers ruptured, either striking the side of the ship or colliding with another during its fall.

That single 40-foot-long box contained 28,800 bath toys—yellow ducks, red beavers, blue turtles, and green frogs. Picture something in your mind's eye like the iconic yellow ducky made famous by Ernie of *Sesame Street*.

After their escape, these duckies, along with their less recognizable former shipmates, braved the watery currents in the North Pacific Gyre. A gyre is a large system of rotating ocean currents.

Oceanographers hypothesized there are five gyres linked together for water to flow from one sea to another and touch distant shores but could never prove this.

In the decades since these toys went overboard, ducky sightings have occurred in Hawaii, Alaska, the west coast of South America, South Africa, and Australia. Some froze in Arctic ice. A small flotilla of ducks, beavers, turtles and frogs traversed the Northwest Passage to arrive in Newfoundland and even Scotland.

The psalmist's words from millennia ago ring true today, "Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs."

The beachcombers who collected the charismatic bath-tub-toys turned their curiosity to google for answers. Luckily, an oceanographer from the University of Washington had created a website to describe the calamity and asked anyone to submit their ducky's this vital and otherwise elusive data.

This scientist delighted saying, "Until the ducks came along, we didn't know how long it took to complete a circuit of a gyre. It was like knowing that a planet is in the solar system but not being able to say how long it takes to orbit."¹

God must just be amused at our folly and delighted at our discovery. Despite centuries, literally centuries of exploration and mapping by some of the greatest sailors, God captures our attention with yellow ducks to show us how water connects this world, from one distant ocean to another land mass at the furthest point on our earth.

The Bible tells a grand story of all the ways God fashions water to demonstrate just how desperately God wants us to live into the possibilities laid before us.

Whenever you read a story about water, ask yourself, what is it that God wants for me?

At the beginning in Genesis, one river flows out of Eden, to become the watershed that cradles civilization (Genesis 2:10-14). The final book, Revelation, invites us to "'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rv 22:17; 21:6)

¹ Eric Paul Roorda "Ahoy, Friendly Floatee," *Johns Hopkins University Magazine*, Summer 2021, <https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2021/summer/rubber-duckies-ocean/> See also <https://www.vsnb.com/floating-rubber-ducks-ocean-teach-us-good-lessons>

As water permeates landscapes, so will God saturate our soulscapes.

The psalm we just read fits into a category scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the “psalms of reorientation.” After the disarray we feel from some chaotic event or near-death experiences, a psalm of reorientation does two things: it praises God for saving life and commands humility lest we forget that God is God and we are not God.²

The praise this psalm offers to God could have occurred after a long-awaited harvest, life threatening deluge, or the opposite; the fields parched in drought before the rains.

Even though we know that water is the difference between life and death, until it becomes either scarce or deadly we take it for granted. The modern convenience we enjoy turning on the faucet to quench our thirst or standing beneath a warm shower can keep us from appreciating access to clear water. Our distance from nature also distances us from grasping how much we rely upon nature and others.

Hoarding, claiming ownership, and denying access to water begins by turning from God in our hearts and with our speech. Pollution begins with our selfishness, our greed, our fear of

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 123-167.

scarcity, and leads to poisoning our relationships as much as nature's elements.

Proverbs 25:26 states " A good person who gives in to a bad person is a muddied spring, a polluted well." (The MSG).

Today, indigenous cultures across the world, who remain closely tied to natural water resources, echo the ancient psalmist's reverence for water's divine origin.

In 2008 people in Ecuador, a small country with a vast moral imagination began to change the world when they debated new articles to their constitution. After decades of oil drilling that dumped billions of gallons of toxins and crude into rivers and waterways, a movement of known as The Rights of Nature began. The Rights asserts that rivers, possess a right to exist, to regenerate, be restored, and respected.

Shortly before the vote to include this language within the constitution, the poet Eduardo Galeano wrote:

Forests are dying, the poles are melting, the air is becoming unbreathable and the waters undrinkable...Nature has a lot to say, and it has been long time for us, her children, to stop playing deaf.

The Assembly voted to enshrine the right to life for a river into law.³

³ Robert MacFarland, *Is a River Alive?*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2025), 43.

A world and decade away, a man rang the police station in Agra, India to report a murder: a violent assault and attempted poisoning. The victim was the Yamuna, a river tributary, and the perpetrators were the government officials who allowed the pollution which literally killed all life within its waters.

This man's cry of murder was inspired by a court decree four days earlier that the Yamuna and the Ganges—two of Hindu's most sacred rivers—should be recognized as living entities with attendant rights. Both of those rivers find their source in glacial fields and become united with mystical underground waters before reaching Delhi. (*River*, 146-147).

Similar efforts in England seek to protect the River Ouse. The author of new legislation writes, "people feel they are not being heard, and in particular that the river is not being heard...this is a way of giving a voice as a single entity, from source to sea." (*River*, 189).

These are three of the rivers Robert MacFarlane sinks into in his newest exploration of nature: *Is a River Alive*. In his world hopping exploration of water and the people whose lives depend upon rivers and watersheds, Macfarlane argues that "somehow we need to find new kinds of imagining, new ways of being that will leave us less alone in this world. . . Our

aliveness, as well as all life that lies beyond the human, is at stake in this.”

Preserving water, in all its forms, is one way to become more connected. God sends water into our very being, provides a cool drink on a hot day, and surrounds us with water. Everything and everyone in creation, God tends with water. Water rains from the heavens to earth, trickles from miniscule springs to rivers, into vast bodies of water and into you and me.

God wants us to flourish by participating in this grand creation. By recognizing and sustaining those people who live in the margins. When we've turned away from God and each other, God wants us to know that we can start again. God wants us to dwell in possibility.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org