



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

March 26, 2023 ♦ Fifth Sunday in Lent



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

Prelude

Koki Sato

Congregational Introit

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476 (v. 1)

**My life flows on in endless song; above earth’s lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn, that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing;
it finds an echo in my soul—how can I keep from singing?**

Opening Scripture – Genesis 2:8-14

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹² and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

* Opening Hymn

“Shall We Gather at the River” #597 (vv. 1-3)

**Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod,
with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?**

**[refrain] Yes, we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river,
gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.**

On the margin of the river, washing up its silver spray,
we will walk and worship ever, all the happy golden day. (*refrain*)

As we reach the shining river, lay we every burden down;
grace our spirits will deliver, and provide a robe and crown. (*refrain*)

* Psalm 46 (portions)

One: God is our refuge and strength;

Many: a very present help in trouble!

One: Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the
mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

**Many: though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its
tumult.**

One: There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of
the Most High.

**Many: God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when
the morning dawns.**

One: The LORD of hosts is with us;

Many: The God of Rachel and Leah is our refuge.

One: Come, behold the words of the Holy One;

**Many: She makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; she breaks the bow,
shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire.**

One: “Be still and know that I am God;”

Many: The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Rachel and Leah is our refuge!

A Time for Children (10:30)

Prayer of Preparation (*sung, unison*)

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

An Argentine folk song.



Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly. My heart, my heart a - dores you! My
¡San - to, san - to, san - to, mi co - ra - zón te a - do - ra! Mi



heart knows how to say to you: You are ho - ly, Lord!
co - ra - zón te sa - be de - cir: ¡San - to e - res, Dios!

“Scripture”

“River in the Rain” from *Big River*
Anoka UCC String Band

Roger Miller

*(chorus) River in the rain, sometimes at night you look like a long white train
Winding your way away somewhere, river I love you don't you care?*

*Well, if you're on the run winding someplace, just trying to find the sun
Whether the sunshine, whether the rain, river I love you just the same.*

*But sometimes in a time of trouble,
When you're out of hand and your muddy bubbles roll across my floor
Carryin' away the things I treasure; Hell, there ain't no way to measure
Why I love you more than I did the day before.*

*River in the rain, Sometimes at night you look like a long white train
Winding your way away from me, river, I've never seen the sea.*

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Precious Lord, Take My Hand” #472

**Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light:
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.**

**When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,
when my life is almost gone,
hear me cry, hear my call, hold my hand, lest I fall:
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.**

**When the shadows appear and the night draws near,
and the day is past and gone,
at the river I stand, guide my feet, hold my hand:
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.**

Prayers of the People

*If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all),
raise your hand and a Deacon will bring you a microphone. Offer your prayer and finish by saying,
“God in your love” to which we will all respond, “**Hear our prayer.**”*

Sung Prayer

“Pour Out Your Spirit”

C. Grundy

**From the sacred waters of my birth
to the sacred waters of this hour,
I have leaned upon you who knit me in my mother’s womb;
O pour out your Spirit now.**

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).
We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offering

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by sending your gifts by mail, text, or online (uccanoka.org/donate).
You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:
www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is gWKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476 (v. 4)

**I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it;
and day by day this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing;
all things are mine since I am Christ’s—how can I keep from singing?**

Benediction

Closing Scripture – Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and

of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Congregational Blessing

“God Be With You” (#809)

Dorsey/Hutchins

**God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.
O God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.**

Postlude

Koki Sato

You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time, please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

I always thought of myself as more of a lake person than a river person. It’s because of our cabin up north, naturally. For five generations, my family has traveled to the Park Rapids area to enjoy our own private vacation spot ever since my grandfather’s uncle, a pharmacist from Omaha who married a Minnesotan from up around Shell Lake, built the original structure himself out of jack pine logs on the shore of Big Mantrap Lake. For most of my forty-nine years, Mantrap has been a haven, a refuge, a place of peace to which I can retreat from the world for a week or two every year. Those have been my waters of rest, especially on quiet mornings when the water is still and you can see the sky perfectly reflected on the lake’s surface. And yet, as prominently as that lake figures in my life and upbringing, it might just be that rivers have shaped me far more profoundly.

That’s certainly the case in Scripture, where just like the River Styx, rivers represent a border between the realms of life and death. A passage through a river or similar body of water is supposed to be understood as a passage from life into death and back into life, reborn and renewed. Christians picked up on these ideas in the development of the sacrament of Baptism, especially when it involves full-immersion. The movement into and under the water is considered a death of the old self, and the reemergence is a rebirth or new birth in the love of Jesus. Any time we remember our baptisms, we are remembering how we join Jesus in both his dying and in his Resurrection. It is a quintessentially Christian theology.

Both of my pastoral calls have been to churches that sit near the confluence of two major rivers. This call, of course, puts me near the joining of the Rum and the Mississippi. My first call to St. Luke’s United Church of Christ in Columbus, Nebraska, put me just north of the junction of the Platte River and the Loup River. The Platte is a wide, majestic stream fed by runoff from the mountains. Its headwaters are up in the Rockies, and it flows slowly across Nebraska until it spills into the Missouri River. The Loup is a river of another variety entirely. Its sources are three different Loup branches, all of which are fed by

springs in the Nebraska Sandhills. Because of this, the combined 1800 miles of Loup River and its tributaries are recognized as the most constant flowing river system in the world. That's a jarring reality when one lives in Columbus, for the Platte is anything but constant. In the hot summer, and also sometimes in the late winter when ice dams form upstream, the Platte goes dry, as if it were a valley of dry bones. It's only reborn when the Loup fills it anew. In their own way, those two rivers represent death and life just as in the Biblical worldview, with the Platte evocative of the post-Edenic difficulty and struggles of life and the Loup reminiscent of the river of Eden that waters the garden. They are together a constant reminder of both joy and sorrow, sickness and health, plenty and want. They evoke both the difficulty of life and the anticipation of a return to Paradise.

Big River is a musical based on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and the song "River in the Rain" is sung by Huck and his friend Jim as they float upon the Mississippi near Hannibal, Missouri, where the river runs wide, muddy, and brown. I can see why Jim might think that there's no way to measure just exactly **why** he loves that river. It's not pretty in those parts. It's a far cry from the beautiful river that flows by the city of Anoka. Down there, it's stained with the rancid effluvia of industry, agriculture, and erosion. The catfish you can catch are as muddy as the water, their native iridescence hidden after filtering so much pollution. To put it plainly, by the time the Mississippi River gets to northeast Missouri it's *ugly*. But I can see why Jim loves it. As a slave, he's already been living in the valley of the shadow of death, and that muddy water carries him away from cruelty and toward hope. For him, it's the Jordan, into which he goes a slave, and from which he emerges in freedom. Or perhaps it's his own Red Sea, where a people with whom the black community in America has so long found common cause pass through from slavery to freedom, from death to life, from a land of oppression to a land of promise.

Though I received the sacrament of Baptism at a font in the United Church of Christ, First Congregational of Crete, Nebraska, I'm almost tempted to say that I experienced a more defining baptism in the waters of the North Loup River near Burwell, Nebraska, waters that flow by Kamp Kaleo, the church camp of the UCC's Nebraska Conference. It was in 2005 that I returned to those waters after nearly two decades away, summoned by a friend to be a counselor for a week of camp. Perhaps "called" is the better word; after all, in Hebrew, *kaleo* means "called." Oddly enough, it also means "sound" or "voice" in Hawaiian, and sure enough, three and a half weeks after that camp, I heard my call to ministry. I like to think that something about those blessed, living waters brought me out of the old and into the new, creating new possibilities that became blessings. Much like they were for Jim, the Loup waters created a path into new life for me. I should also mention just why I love those waters "more than the day before," because in that same week of Kamp I met the person who would, six years later, become my wife. A robe and a crown would have been a poor trade for what that river gave me.

As I said, my life has been shaped more by rivers than lakes, and I think there's something of God in all of that. Lakes are restful, and we all need moments of rest in our lives, times where we retreat, like Jesus did, into quietness and solitude so that our weary bodies and spirits can rejuvenate. But sooner or later, God calls us to get back into the river, because God is no lake. God is a mighty river. Perhaps you've experienced God's guidance in your life. I have, and though I have at times described it in ways that invoke the wind or even fire, both symbols of the Holy Spirit, another of her symbols is water. Specifically, *flowing* water. Its current is always pushing us and prodding us in a direction of God's choosing—not because God dictates it, but because God invites us to into a future for which she hopes. Sometimes that river's pull is so subtle as to be easily missable. At other times the pull is gently insistent, such as when my friend Bob kept asking me to come to Kamp. At other times, the river pulls at us with heady, almost frightening strength, making us fear that we'll be swept away into the unknown.

But it isn't unknown. The River always flows toward grace, and we can choose to swim with it. I learned that in that 2005 summer. Up until that point, my life had felt directionless. I had graduated from college in 1996 without a particularly marketable degree. I went to graduate school in Boston and

emerged from there in 1999 in similar straits. You have to use a religious studies major pretty creatively if you're not doing something obvious like going into ministry or academia, neither of which were on my bucket list. I had left my first full-time job in April of 2003 and had subsisted on various part-time jobs and temping. By 2005 I was depressed and weary from swimming against the current.

That's how a dear and wise friend characterized it to me after I said yes to my call: "Life's a lot easier when you're not swimming against the current." In hindsight, it all seemed rather obvious. I'm not saying that God was telling me where to go, but it sure seems like she had a good idea. I've been swimming with the river's guidance ever since.

Tradition says I'm supposed to stand in this pulpit and steer the flock, to offer guidance and counsel that lead us all into closer relationship with God. Today that feels like a strange call, because I don't know how to tell you exactly how to swim with the river. Only you can answer that. But I have faith that you're in one, and I believe one other thing: all rivers lead to the sea, those abiding deeps that once symbolized chaos but now embody Love. And though it's not from *Big River*, I am reminded of another of my favorite river songs, a Paul Williams original on John Denver's Christmas album with the Muppets. I leave you with these words, praying that you will hear the Spirit amidst them.

**Like a baby when it is sleeping in its loving mother's arms,
What a newborn baby dreams is a mystery.**

**But his life will find a purpose and in time he'll understand
When the river meets the sea.**

When the river meets the almighty sea.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.