



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
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## Blue Mind: You Must Have a Mind of the Great Miami River

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 2:10-14, Psalm 46:1-7

### **Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:**

Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden. Having disobeyed God, having tried to shift the blame, now laboring under their respective curses, but also wearing the clothes that God has graciously made for them—Adam and Eve leave Eden. But they aren't the only thing to leave Eden. Four rivers also leave Eden, which, unlike Adam and Eve's leaving, seems to have been God's original intention. Their leaving is what's related in this passage. Beyond that, no one can figure what this passage is doing in the Bible: the four rivers play no role in the story; one of them can't even be identified; the geography seems to be off for at least two of them.

My guess is that the passage is in the Bible for one reason: it show us that the river in paradise also flows out into our world. Listen now for God's Word: Genesis chapter 2 verses 10-14 . . .

### **Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:**

"Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. . . . So the narrator in —Norman Maclean's book, later made into a movie, *A River Runs Through It*.

And the same is true of the Bible: a river runs through it: it begins with the creation of heaven and earth, in the first chapters of Genesis, with a river flowing from the garden of Eden to water the whole earth. And it continues all the way to the final chapter, the final chapter of the Book Revelation, with the vision of the new heaven and the new earth:

*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 through the middle of the street of the city.*

A river runs through it—through the whole Bible, beginning to end, and also in the middle. I'm now about to read one of the passages from the middle, Psalm 46. It tells us that, in midst of all the changes—the mountains shaking, the sea roaring—in the midst of all of the changes, eternal God is with us: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God; God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved." Listen now for God's Word, Psalm 46, verses 1-7 . . .

### **Sermon:**

I want you to take a moment and think of your favorite body of water—really any body of water: a river, a lake, the ocean at a particular beach you've been to or as you've seen it from the deck of a boat or ship you've been on, a pond, a stream, creek, or brook, the puddles you jumped in when you were a little kid, a swimming pool indoors or out, a fountain in a city or town or your backyard.

Think of a body of water, really, any body of water: how it looks—the colors, all the shades of blue, green, and brown, the light shimmering, playing, jumping off of it; how it sounds—the lapping of the waves, rushing or roaring, bubbling, babbling, or murmuring; how it smells—the scent of water; how it

feels—when you wade in, slide in, dive in—that first moment when your head goes under and you’re in another, different, muffled world; or just how it feels to cup your hands and let the water run through your fingers, or to splash it on your shoulders and face—the soft, awakening, familiar surprise of it, the weight and the taste of it, the joy and life of it.

Think of a body of water, any body of water.

You now have, I hope, a little bit of a *blue mind*. That’s Wallace J. Nichols term for the “human-water connection”—the state of mind we are in when we are being positively affected—positively moved—by water:

**Blue Mind:** “a mildly meditative state characterized by calm, peacefulness, unity, and a sense of general happiness and satisfaction with life in the moment. . . . This is the huge advantage of water: you don’t need to meditate to take advantage of its healing effects because it meditates you.”—Wallace J. Nichols, *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science That Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do*.

This book is only one of many, many books published in recent years relating brain science, neuroscience, to one thing or to another or another, indeed to everything. In this case, Nichols’ argues that neuroscience now confirms and explains this human-water connection that we have known about since, well, since the beginning of time.

And so now I have a confession: I’m a bit of a neuroscience skeptic. This says far more about me than it does about neuroscience. It’s just that I’m old enough to have seen the development of any number of new fields in any number of disciplines, and to have also seen the kind of overheated, overextended, overinflated, faddishness that goes along with their being popularized—in the academy, in the media, and in society at large.

“This explains everything,” is the general tone and tenor of it.

“No, it doesn’t,” is my general response.

It certainly explains some things, predicts some things, raises new and interesting questions, and opens new vistas for research and discovery. And even more than that, it awakens and deepens our sense of wonder, awe, and mystery. You may remember, a few weeks back, I quoted Isaac Newton, a pretty fair scientist in his own right, saying:

*I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.*

That is a fine description of the sense of mystery, awe and wonder that genuine scientific discovery can bring, and please note that Newton describes it in terms of a body of water, as looking out on a great ocean—his was a blue mind, too.

The problem with “this explains everything” is that it kills that sense of mystery, even the spirit of scientific inquiry itself. “This explains everything” is meant to explain *away*—everything. For example, everything from human bonding to human brutality, from the human experience of beauty to human buying decisions (yes, there is now a recognized field called neuromarketing) is now said to be “nothing but” so many neurons “firing” in our brains, along certain “synaptic circuits,” in ways “hard-wired” into us. And with such “nothing-buttery” (all our thoughts, feelings, and actions—indeed our very selves—are reduced to, are “nothing but,” these material processes), neuroscience becomes only the latest theory used to explain away everything from human courtship to the ups and downs of the stock market. Free market economics, Darwinian evolution, and Marxism being three earlier examples that have been—and are still being—so misused.

Now don't get me wrong: all of these theories explain and predict *some* things, raise new questions, and open new vistas for research (although to greatly differing degrees and in different ways). They wouldn't so interesting to so many intelligent people if they didn't. They may even awaken and deepen our sense of wonder, awe, and mystery. But they don't explain everything.

All that being said, some of this neuroscience stuff—in particular this blue mind stuff—is pretty cool. So let me put a philosophical-theological spin on it: A blue mind is one that is meditating—or to to follow Nichols, being meditated by—water in such a way that it knows eternity in time, and time in eternity.

“Time,” Plato said, “is a moving image of eternity.” OK, let me unpack that. Over here, there's time, the realm of change at least in the abstract; and over here, there's eternity, the realm of permanence, at least in the abstract. Plato knew that. But Plato also knew that neither time nor eternity exists in the abstract entirely separate, apart, divorced from the other. Instead, in the concrete and particular, time and eternity, change and permanence, are always interwoven. The simplest example will serve:

A solid ball of wax, as you move it close to a flame, melts into liquid. There's been change: from A to B, solid to liquid. Yet, there's also been permanence: it's still the same wax, and you know that, even though all its sensible properties have changed. That's only one example, but this interweaving of change and permanence is always with us everywhere: in everything from the weather (the seasons change yet the cycle of the seasons endures) to our very selves (you have changed over the past ten years, yet you're still the same person).

In the concrete and particular, time and eternity, change and permanence, are always interwoven. Time is a moving image of eternity. And a river is a moving image of time. Really, any body of water, but especially a river.

Change and permanence, time and eternity: rivers symbolize both—come to be both—in our imaginations. They're always changing, flowing, moving. “You can't step into the same river twice,” said the ancient philosopher. And yet at the same time, they're always the same, always there: dawn to dusk, day and night, through the changing seasons, as the centuries and the millennia roll on, so do rivers—flowing, flowing, ever-flowing. Through it all, it's still the same river—step in it as many times as you will.

Yes, yes, their courses will change through great expanses of time, and no doubt rivers appear and disappear in geologic time, but in our time, as we experience time, rivers are always there—changing, flowing, and moving, yes—but always *there*, changing, flowing, and moving. Change and permanence, time and eternity—rivers have come to mean both in our imaginations.

Time is a moving image of eternity. And a river—really, any body of water, but especially a river—is a moving image of time. To Plato, the question was not whether time and eternity are interwoven. They are—always and everywhere. The question was how: how did this happen? how does it continue? And how will it end?

*In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God, all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. And the word became flesh and dwelled among us,, full of grace and truth, and to all who believe in his name he gave power to become children of God.*

That, of course, is from the Bible, from the Prologue to the Gospel of John; and Plato living some 400 years before Jesus didn't know those words. But you can see why one early church figure—Clement of Alexandria—said that Plato was “Moses speaking Greek.” Just as Moses, the traditional author of the Old Testament was, on the Christian reading, thought to be unknowingly talking about, foreshadowing, showing the need for, pointing towards, prefiguring, and prophesying about Jesus in Hebrew; so also Plato, in Greek.

Time and eternity are interwoven in, through, and by Jesus the Messiah. And Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." Paul says the same thing about Jesus in his Letter to the Colossians:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things . . .*

That is how it happened, and this is how it continues. Again, reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians:  
*In him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*

And this is how it will end. Again, Paul:

*Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Peace—that is how it ends.

"I've got peace like a river; I've got peace like a river; I've got peace like a river in my soul," so our Knox Choir singing the old African-American spiritual. And so Langston Hughes in his poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*: "I've known rivers: My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

What I'm trying to say here is that to know God, to know Jesus as the image of the invisible God, to know Jesus as the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things were created, all things hold together, and all things will be brought to the fullness of God in peace, you don't have to know neuroscience or Plato or the history of philosophy or theology (though they can help), you don't have to know Langston Hughes' poetry or the old African-American spirituals (though they can certainly help), you don't even have to know John's Gospel or Paul's letters or very much about the Bible at all (although they can most certainly help) . . . all you have to do is have a little bit of a blue mind: a mind being positively affected by, positively moved by, water, by the healing effects of water. A mind at peace: because the human-water-connection is also a human-water-God connection; so baptism.

So in a few minutes, during the offering, as the choir sings *Deep River*, take a moment. Shut your eyes and take a moment. Yes, pass the plate first, but then you shut your eyes:

Take a moment and think of your favorite body of water—for me it's the Great Miami River, one of the joys of my life right now is waking up to see the Great Miami River (always changing, always the same); but, really, any body of water will do.

Think about how it looks—the colors, all the shades of blue, green, and brown, the light shimmering, playing, jumping off of it; how it sounds—the lapping of the waves, rushing or roaring, burbling, babbling, or murmuring; how it smells—the scent of water; how it feels—when you wade in, slide in, dive in—that first moment when you're under and you're in another, different, muffled world; or just how it feels to cup your hands and let the water run through your fingers, or to splash it on your shoulders and face—the soft, awakening, familiar surprise of it, the weight and the taste of it, the joy and life of it.

As the choir sings, think of that water, meditate on that water, that water and the music—or better, let them meditate you.

A blue mind: one that is being meditated by water, by God, in such a way that it knows eternity in time, and time in eternity. The mind of Christ.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.