

## Season of Creation – Rivers

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Good morning. I am honored to be asked to present to you during this Season of Creation. This opportunity allows for me to merge two of the greatest source of pleasure and happiness in my life—the San Antonio River and the the wonderful community of the Church of Reconciliation.

I admit being up here talking to you is much more intimidating to me than speaking in front of Mayors, County Judges, Legislators and Congressmen. But, as we discussed at the Church Retreat last weekend, God can give you the confidence to face the most daunting tasks!

As I prepared for this presentation I reviewed many scripture readings to select the readings for today that would link the significance of rivers and water in our spiritual connection with Creation, God and the life and teachings of Jesus. I was particularly drawn to the Genesis passage of when God spoke with Noah after the flood staying to him “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you---birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God then says that rainbows serve as a symbol of his covenant with us. That is an amazing optimistic promise from God. But, what I thought when I read this promise, is are we who inhabit this planet, this country, this city making the same covenant with God to protect the earth so those floods or other destructive forces won’t destroy the earth? God can only fulfill his promise to us, if we are also the stewards of this creation to protect it from the effects of our actions on earth. I am sure the flood victims in North and South Carolina and those of Harvey, Puerto Rico, and the even our own area are truly questioning God’s covenant to protect the earth from flooding. The fact is our planet is changing and we shouldn’t question God’s covenant with us, we should make sure we are doing everything in our power to make the same promise to him.

There are 3,660,000 miles of Rivers in the United States. Of those, only 12,754 miles are designated protected through the Congressionally established National

Wild and Scenic River program. Getting a river listed in these categories is not easy and requires commitments to keep the river as it is designated. If a river is designated WILD it is free from impoundments, is pristine and very primitive and the river is not accessible to the public; a SCENIC designation is a river has limited accessibility but is still largely primitive. A RECREATIONAL designation through the program is readily accessible by the public but might have some impoundments. This program has designated 208 national wild and scenic rivers in 40 states. Protection is jointly provided by several federal agencies, tribes and local partners in each state. Alaska has the most miles of river in the program at 3,210, followed by Oregon, California, Idaho and Michigan. Texas has 184,797 miles of rivers with 191.2 miles dedicated through the program all along the Rio Grande river through Big Bend. The river has 95 miles designated wild with 96 miles designated as scenic.

Communities worked hard to secure the protection for these rivers and now work even harder to keep them that way. There are many threats to these rivers that come with a growing population.

We are fortunate that we have one of the most well-known rivers in the world here in San Antonio. It is primary known as a tourist destination, but the San Antonio River Authority has worked to extend the river's notoriety beyond the banks of the historic River Walk. I hope through this presentation, I will expand your knowledge of the river and promote your stewardship of this vital natural resource.

It was unfortunate that the weather yesterday caused us to cancel the outing on the Mission Reach. Maybe after this presentation today you will be inspired to join us when we reschedule the event.

I have worked on improvements to the river since 1997—including the extension of the river north to the Museum Reach which has generated tremendous economic development which has brought a renewed vibrancy downtown. And is the home of Robert and Julie Woody! As much as I am proud of the beauty and success of the Museum Reach, the Mission Reach project is truly my pride and joy—I grew up close to this part of the San Antonio River and it has been a big part of my life. This 9 mile stretch of the river has been a labor of love for 16 years—working through many hurdles to get the project designed, funded and constructed. The last section of the project opened October 2013—5 years ago

next month. Since its opening, we have seen the amazing power of creation through the on-going restoration of the degraded ecosystem.

As a bit of history, after many floods from the early urbanization, the San Antonio River Authority in 1954, partnered with the US Army Corps of Engineers, the City of San Antonio and Bexar County to channelize 31 miles of the San Antonio River and its tributaries to provide more flood protection. Over the course of two decades, the river was straightened, channelized and denuded of all trees and natural vegetation. As drastic as that sounds today, that was the conventional engineering of the day and has been used on urban river's throughout the country to protect growing cities from riverine flooding. It has worked and protected life and property from flooding, but at the devastation of the natural function of river systems and their ecosystems. As flood and river management engineering has advanced, our desire to repair the river's ecosystem while still providing flood protection moved forward in earnest in the late 90s and into the early 2000s. We have added hundreds of acres of riparian and aquatic restoration, 25,000 trees and woody vegetation. The restoration is paying off—and has established a robust food web that supports plants, fish and birds that are returning to the river. Oh and many more people are also enjoying the beauty and recreational offerings of the river.

Stewardship must reach beyond the restoration of the river if we want to ensure the protection of our rivers, creeks, bays and estuaries. It takes you.

It might be best to hear from the San Antonio River herself. I delivered a TED talk in 2014 entitled "Confessions of the San Antonio River" which, as a side note, was also a challenging talk to prepare and deliver. You can all go on YouTube to see the actual performance, but I still feel the talk is relevant for the Season of Creation. So, here is a reprise of my TED talk, adapted for the pulpit! Here we go...

First of all, can I get a little thank you, for all I have given this city, I have supported human life for over 12,000 years. I am the major tourist attraction in the city generating \$3.1 billion of dollars of economic return annually for this community. I am THE identity for this city – the city was named after me. I AM THE SAN ANTONIO RIVER. I am not just some little stream, I extend 240 miles, way beyond the River Walk. I have a watershed that covers nearly 4200 square miles, and I nourish an important ecosystem. all the way to the bays and

estuaries providing fresh water for the habitat of the endangered whooping crane

I AM A significant water resource worth protecting, but you wouldn't know it in this town. I admit it, I am a little churned up. I have some confessions that I want to share with you this morning.

But first, Thank you for the significant investment you have made to restore my ecosystem and to extend my economic and recreational value to this community, but I must warn you that investment is not sustainable if I do not start getting the respect I deserve.

From where I am flowing, very few of you really know or care about the looming threats to my existence and health. After long periods drought, everyone is happy when the rain comes. It fills the aquifer, reduces water restrictions and greens up your yards.

But, I confess, I dread the rain. It might be crazy to hear a river, admitting she doesn't like the rain. It is true my headwaters are spring-fed. I know a good rain recharges the aquifer and brings my springs back to life, but at what cost to the rest of me?

When the rain comes in San Antonio, my water gets so very nasty. It is disgusting really--Storms bring runoff and runoff brings with it pollutants from all the human activities up in my watersheds..... and the trash don't let me forget to talk to you about the trash.

It is embarrassing to admit, I, and many of my tributaries do not even meet federal water quality standards—that means we are considered impaired! The greatest impairment comes from bacteria that is washed into me when it rains. There's a lot of bacteria and other harmful pollutants like metals, hydrocarbons and nutrients that accumulate on all hardened surfaces like streets and parking lots, then when that first flush of rain comes, those contaminants are so concentrated they degrade my water quality, kill fish, and make it unsafe for human activities like swimming.

And the rain also makes me uncontrollable. At times, the rain comes so fast and rushes over all the parking lots and other hardened services built up in my watersheds, I get so angry and forceful and I end up eroding what little natural banks I have left. Over the years, I have had more flash floods and become even more dangerous.

Oh and that trash. I must tell you about the trash. I cry a river when I see all the trash that gets washed into me when it rains. When the storms come tons and tons of trash flow from the neighborhoods, into my tributaries and then gets washed right to me. My banks become lined with all types of litter.

So, maybe now you can understand why this ole river dreads the rain.

Well, next I must confess, I do have a serious case of natural resource envy. Aquifer, Aquifer—you would think that is the only natural water resource you have in this town. I would love to get half the attention the Edwards Aquifer receives.

Think about it--You humans have altered your life to protect the aquifer. You have become national leaders in water conservation and reuse, spent millions of dollars to buy tens of thousands of acres over the recharge zone to prevent development. Consider this, most people know when they are in the recharge zone, but I bet few know which watershed they live in. The recharge zone is only a small part of Bexar County—100% of Bexar County is in my watershed. So with that, it seems that I should be at least as important as the aquifer, right? Honestly, I just feel some times that I am not viewed as an important WATER RESOURCE that deserves protection like the aquifer. I am just a great place to take family and friends for dinner when they are in town.

My last confession might be a bit more controversial especially in the home of the World Champion Spurs, but.... I admit, Mark Cuban is my hero.

Yes that is right .....the owner of the Dallas Mavericks is my hero and a close second is the loud mouthed Charles Barkley. I truly appreciate what those guys have done to raise awareness of the state of my cleanliness and health or lack thereof. When Mark Cuban called me a nasty, muddy creek and Charles Barkley

echoed his remarks, I became the most talked about river in the nation—and everyone in town came to my defense.

Unfortunately, my time in the limelight lasted only as long as a media cycle. Although the media hype has faded, the threats to my water quality remain.

I get it, the demise of the San Antonio River is not an immediate crisis, my needs are not urgent, YET

But just be aware the longer my health needs go unmet, the harder and more expensive it will become to bring me back to a healthy ecosystem. My health could take a turn for the worse if development continues the way it is going. It is time to show this old river some respect. I am a WATER resource worth saving and not just a pretty picture on a tourism brochure.

You want to help me RIGHT? Become my voice by demanding that your city leaders and development community embrace sustainable development concepts on all public and private projects. Incorporating Low Impact Development features like rain gardens, vegetated buffer strips and simple green space along roads and parking lots will filter pollutants in storm water runoff before it reaches me-- and my tributaries. These techniques work and will improve MY water quality.

You should also demand a reduction in impervious cover. That would help slow down the stormwater and reduce the impact of flash flooding.

Basically, I am asking you to change how you build in my watersheds. Making my watersheds more sustainable, will make your city more attractive, improve MY water quality and provide places for people to gather for recreation. You should look to my health and water quality as THE barometer of how well you are managing your land. That would be a great standard for a “River City,” don’t you think?

I hope you haven’t forgotten about the trash. You must attack the litter problem as a call to action for the community to change personal behaviors. The cleanest cities in the world have a **culture** of pride and personal responsibility toward litter reduction and recycling. Having citizens take ownership of cleaning up my watersheds and actively reducing trash that flows to me, would really make me overflow with joy.

My time is almost up. I hope that I have convinced you that I deserve more respect. I cannot stress enough that I am very grateful for the millions you have invested to spruce me up and I do look and feel much better now than I have in decades. But, without individual stewardship and improved land management in my watersheds, the investment you have made in me, sadly, will not be sustainable.

I have given your city an international identity and earned you the International River Prize and contributed to the World Heritage Designation for the San Antonio Missions. I have given you a rich history full of beauty and economic prosperity—please give me a future.

Since I presented that TED talk, we continue to make improvements to tributaries to the San Antonio River including on-going improvements to the San Pedro Creek and we have plans to do more. However, as the San Antonio River warned, we all must take a more serious look at how our actions impact the health and sustainability of our waterways. As God made his covenant to Noah to protect the earth from the destruction of floods, I think today, seeing how our development of our planet and cities has altered our climate and watersheds, God is inviting us to make this a two-way covenant. He will do his part, if we do ours.

I have set up a table in Brown Hall with information on the River and its stewardship if you are interested in learning more.

Thank you