Native tribes, people of faith, those who farm and fish for a living – in fact all of us who need water or food to survive – celebrate the gifts of the great Columbia Basin watershed. Sacred and secular values come together when we care for our shared waters and common home.

The Hebrew Bible proclaims “wherever the river goes, every living creature will live, and there will be very many fish…” (Ezekiel 47:9). Indigenous traditions also give thanks to a generous Creator. According to the Umatilla, “Water was created first, life and land were created next, land promised to take care of all life, and all life promised to take care of the land.” In geologic time, the huge outpouring of basalt and the melting water from Earth’s ice ages engraved the great Columbia and Snake River watersheds that map makers and scientists study today. Regardless of origin, these rivers now give life to all of us.

How should we care for the Columbia Basin watershed into the future?

Our faith guides us to make good decisions about the fate of the Columbia, the Snake, and all the tributaries that support Native tribes and our Northwest farms, fisheries, and tourist destinations. We share values that teach us:

• These rivers and their vast inland watershed, which nourish 259,000 square miles of our region, are a gift from God. As we treat the gift, so we treat the Giver. We see the presence of God in nature, and by respecting our common home we give honor to the Divine.

• Our faith calls us to be good stewards of the Earth. Scripture instructs us that God created the resources that provide for us, but we may not abuse these gifts nor steal them from our children. Today we call this moral imperative “sustainability.”

• Protecting the ecosystems of our neighbors as we care for our own land and waters is one way to honor the Golden Rule. Pope Francis calls this “integral ecology,” meaning our concern for others includes keeping their water and food systems as healthy as our own.

• Justice is a deeply-held moral value for people of faith. Native nations living in the Columbia Basin suffered terrible losses of life, land, and culture when the settlers arrived. Now, salmon runs are endangered by dammed rivers and warming waters. Justice requires that elected officials and government agencies respect tribes as key decision-makers in all aspects of watershed protection and salmon recovery.
Shared Values, Shared Waters

The watersheds of the Snake and Columbia Rivers are home to vibrant and diverse communities. Commercial fishermen deliver to our tables salmon that have migrated hundreds of miles through the Columbia Basin. Wheat farmers from the Palouse grow grain to feed the world. Children grow tall and wield their first fishing rods in bustling riverside towns. First Nations practice both modern and ancient fishing and harvesting traditions that connect them to their ancient and abundant home.

While there are sometimes competing issues among these different constituencies, there are also shared values, including love of the Inland Northwest, respect for God’s creation, and a desire for a better future for all people of the region. Faith leaders can play an important role in reconciling differences and creating a path forward that honors the needs of the local communities, farmers, fishermen, and Native tribes while restoring God’s great gift of salmon to the region.

Inland Northwest Communities

Everyone benefits when towns turn toward and celebrate their riverfronts. Revitalizing riverside neighborhoods attracts new talent to the region and encourages local young adults to stay and start their careers and families here. Maintaining the four dams on the Lower Snake River requires hundreds of millions of dollars each year, while much more money will be needed soon to update aging infrastructure. Rather than continuing financial support for these obsolete dams, using our tax dollars to revitalize waterfronts in Lewiston/Clarkston and other river towns will bring an economic revival to the region.

Spokane chose to redevelop its waterfront and as a result Riverfront Park is a showcase attraction, bringing in new businesses, providing recreational opportunities for young and old alike, and amplifying community connections. We can infuse Southeast Washington’s river towns with new life through sound financial investment in our waterfronts rather than supporting crumbling dams.

Northwest Native Tribes

Native tribes are more than simply stakeholders as they have inherent rights as first people. Native nations also have treaty rights with the United States government which gives them legal status. Indigenous people gave up thousands of acres of their land for the right to hunt and fish in their “usual and accustomed places,” a 163 year-old promise which has not been kept by the government. Restoring salmon runs honors these agreements and the moral imperative for justice.

Farmers and Fishermen

Agriculture is the backbone of the Inland Northwest economy and farmers and growers have a big stake in maintaining good transportation options to get their products to market. Most farmers don’t care how wheat gets to market, they care how much it costs. In fact, agricultural shipping on the Snake and Columbia Rivers from the Palouse is down by 70% and pulse crops must use rail or truck to get their crops to the coast. In any path forward, farmers must be kept whole. It is time to have a watershed-wide conversation on whether investing in better rail and road infrastructure for farmers can provide a way forward for both the future of Palouse agriculture and fishing economies elsewhere in the Columbia Basin.

There are strong parallels between Palouse farmers and commercial fishermen on the Columbia River. Both livelihoods feed the region and the world, and both rely on healthy ecosystems. Yet the four dams on the Lower Snake River have contributed to the decimation of salmon populations and fishing communities – while the Columbia dams provide significant benefits to the region, these Snake River dams have proved to be four dams too many for the salmon. Any positive resolution must restore wild salmon fisheries and build better transportation choices for farmers.

A Future We Can Believe In

People of faith imagine the world twenty years from now, in which the varying needs of all God’s children have been honored, salmon runs are restored, tribes are respected for their status as caretakers of creation, and farmers have modern and efficient routes to market. We can do this if we all work together.