

The River of Life

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Acts 16:9-15 and Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

*“As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord, show me the way!*

*O sinners let's go down,
Let's go down, come on down,
O sinners let's go down,
Down in the river to pray.”*

For someone who really doesn't like water all that much, when I think about it, rivers have been an important part of my environment. I was born just south of the confluence of three rivers, in western Pennsylvania, the Ohio, the Allegheny and the Monongahela. I grew up near the Y Bridge in Zanesville, Ohio, the only one like it in the world, at the confluence of the Licking and Muskingum Rivers. In Chicago for many years, I drove over the Chicago River, an important trade route in its day now known mostly by non-Chicagoans as the river that gets dyed green for St. Patrick's Day. And here...well...the Genesee River defines so much culturally and economically and politically. A key moment in the life of this congregation came in the late 1800's when we jumped the river and landed in this spot. You could probably have the same kind of reflections about other fundamental elements of life, but once you think about things – like rivers – you realize what a core narrative element they can be in any life.

It is true biblically. In the story of the Acts of the Apostles, we read of Paul's travels to Philippi. Outside of the city gate, there was a river, where people gathered to meet and pray. There Paul meets Lydia, a woman of some means and a leader with deep faith. She is baptized. At the river.

And this extraordinary vision from the Book of Revelation. We proper Presbyterians don't know what to do with the Book of Revelation, with its unsettling imagery. We know that people use Revelation to predict and prophesy, sometimes even to intimidate and scare. That's not for us, we say, so rather than engage, we neglect. But we neglect to our own diminishment. Revelation

is a unique kind of writing in the Bible – in the midst of narrative accounts and letters and prayers and songs, Revelation is unique. It is “apocalyptic,” another term that discomforts us. It shouldn’t. Revelation is the only exclusively apocalyptic book in the Bible, though there are portions of other books, the Old Testament prophets in particular, with apocalyptic affirmations. It remains a mysterious term – a combination of visionary and prophetic, imagining and envisioning a time to come.

Scholars are all over the map on Revelation, but the consensus is that it was composed by a man named John, likely imprisoned on an island called Patmos, at a time later than Jesus but only a generation or so. And this writing is his vision, his hope, his dream, for how life will be some day, for him, for the church, the Christian community, and not only for the church, but for all of God’s glorious creation.

Why we have trouble with it is that at points the Revelation imagery seems so bizarre, if not downright frightening. And we also have trouble because we wrestle with the tension between how things are and how things will be. Yet consider the context. Christianity, not yet established, seeking modest footholds in a culture marked by Roman domination, where even the whiff of Christian practice could land you in jail or worse. Political, cultural, economic hardship. Rather than accepting the status quo, John prophesied. He envisioned. He dreamed. He prophesied about his captors and oppressors, against a repressive empire. He prophesied about the church’s faithfulness, proclaiming the gospel in uninhibited ways. And he prophesied about the future. Mountains and light. Fountains and angels. All sorts of imagery that can baffle us. But we cannot let that get in our way of his deeper vision. He prophesied about what was to come in order to give him, and us, hope about the what-was now.

These are no ordinary dreams. I bet that vocations like lawyers and teachers and accountants have their own recurring dreams. A common preaching dream is one I have from time to time – late for church, can’t find the way, enter the building, can’t find the sanctuary, find the sanctuary, can’t find the pulpit, find the pulpit, can’t find the sermon, find the sermon, lost my voice, finally speak, realize I have no clothes on.

No, John’s is no ordinary dream. It is a vision of hope. A holy city, with perpetual light generated by God. And all the nations will come, all the peoples. And no falsehood will be practiced. That is not scary; it is beautiful, a vision when the way things will be is not the way things are, to give hope for the future and sustenance for the presence.

Then this: “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. 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...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." A vision, a beautiful, beautiful vision of a river, a river of life.

We can look at it as scary, or irrelevant, or antiquated. We can look at it as pie-in-the-sky, with no connection to real life. We can look at it as reality avoidance on steroids.

Or this: Michael Lomax writes that "In the present, God gives us a 'tour of heaven' to provide strength until we are completely made whole in God's future. But, while we are down here waiting, this tour also gives us the audacity to hope against hope and to struggle for healing to come on earth as it is in heaven." (The African-American Lectionary)

Hope against hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr. famously had a dream, a vision of an imagined future rooted deeply in changing the present.

- Dare we put ourselves in John's shoes, in John's context, and envision a new reality based on hope and faith?
- Dare we dream – in the face of a world beset by a decaying environment and warfare and oppression – dare we dream of a reality when nations will gather in light?
- Dare we dream, ourselves, or on behalf of those who cannot dream?
- Dare we dream with those facing cancer, that they will be released from their suffering and pain?
- Dare we dream with those in abusive situations, that they will find health and wholeness?
- Dare we dream with those questioned about their appearance, their behavior, their identity, their affections, that they will find full acceptance, the acceptance they already find from God?
- Dare we dream – with neighbors just a few miles from here, and children especially, crushed by racism and poverty, threatened by gun violence – dare we dream of that time and place where safety and security and access and opportunity are givens?
- Dare we dream?

That was all that John was doing, dreaming inspired dreams, fueled by a deep faith in the risen Christ and boundless hope, so that he, and we, have sustenance to live our lives now, not willing to accept the way things are, courage to change, coupled with an unwavering hope in God's future.

Your hopes and dreams and visions will be yours; mine will be mine. But we get a sense of what God's are – justice, peace and reconciliation. Our calling is to align ours with God's to help

usher in a new heaven and new earth now, even as we await that day when this vision will be fully and finally realized.

For John that looked like a river. And why not?

The poet Mary Oliver writes:

“I don’t know who God is exactly./ But I’ll tell you this./ I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone/and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking./ Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,/ and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water./ And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying./ Said the river I am part of holiness./ And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water./ Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going./ Sometimes the river murmurs, sometimes it raves./ And still, pressed deep into my mind, the river/ keeps coming, touching me, passing by on its/ long journey, its pale, infallible voice/singing.”

Said the river: imagine...

Norman Maclean writes: “Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.” (*A River Runs Through It*)

And one time, long ago, a forbear of our faith, in a God-inspired moment, living in the ugliness of what was, envisioned what might be. Now we, in our own God-inspired moments, go down to the river and endeavor to do the same, dreaming of what-will-be, even as we commit ourselves to changing the what-is. All to the glory of God, whose light illumines our way, and whose love makes all things new. Amen.