

## The River Runs Through It

Revelation 22:1-5

*An angel showed me the river. Its water was the water of life. It sparkled like crystal jewels as it flowed from the throne of God right through the street in the middle of the town.*

Two quite different rivers have defined and shaped my life. I grew up near the Mississippi, the 2,300 mile long “Father of Waters” that cuts through the middle of our continent, flowing from its Minnesota source in the North to that vast delta in the Gulf of Mexico in the South. That great river also divides our nation East and West, geographically and psychologically. When I was young, I stood on the Iowa banks and looked across to the strange and unknown land called Illinois to the east. It was somehow different over there, and if you rode the train across the old iron bridge, the rails would take you to Chicago, that big, brash, broad-shouldered metropolis on a great lake. If you rode the rails the other way, the Zephyr would take you to Denver, in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and if you went as far West as you could possibly go, to Los Angeles in the seductive state of California. The old highway bridge charged a dime toll to cross the Mississippi by car, but only a nickel if you walked. I swam and learned to water ski in its muddy waters, always watching out for dangerous currents, undertows, floating debris and water moccasins. My high school buddy, Dave Metzger, and I, scared our parents one summer and took a canoe trip down the Mighty Mississippi and fancied ourselves Huck Finn and Jim, camping on an island sandbar and portaging around locks and dams.

Ole Man River running by my Iowa hometown of Burlington established forever who I was and how I would view the world. I was shocked and confused when maps in geography lessons told me that the great Amazon flowed from west to east in South America and the Rhine and Nile flowed south to north in Europe and Africa. It did not seem possible that a river could flow from anywhere but up, where North would be on most maps. The writings of Samuel Clemens and local Mark Twain lore inspired me to apply for a river barge crew, and had I been accepted for such a job, the summer after high school, who knows what different directions my life might have taken.

The other river that defined and shaped my life was the Jordan in the Holy Land of Palestine and Israel. In length the Jordan does not compare to the Mississippi,

being less than 200 miles from its headwaters in the mountainous North to the Dead Sea in the below sea level South. But the Jordan is at least as much to the volatile, holy and ancient Mideast of the Old World as the Mississippi is to the Midwest of the New World. It is the lifeblood flowing through an arid land. It flows through the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus lived and taught, and where his first disciples worked as fishermen. In the Jordan's flowing waters John baptized Jesus and many others. The Jordan inspired the psalmist and prophets who wrote of the fountain of life whose streams make glad the city of God. When my in-laws visited Israel in the '80s, they brought a wine bottle full of Jordan's water, which I carefully used for baptisms for years. Symbolically, all of us who have been baptized in Christ, have been sprinkled with or dunked into the waters of the Jordan River. (When I went down in the river to pray, studyin' about that good old way and who shall wear the robe and crown, Good Lord, show me the way...)

The history of this river runs deeper than Jesus, too. Crossing the Jordan was the final hurdle before God's people could return from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. This ancient river runs through the heart of biblical faith. Indeed, all children of Abraham, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, rely on the Jordan for their life. That river is a fountain of life, living water.

Today's glimpse of a dream in the Revelation of John is also nourished by a great river. This river is unnamed but its waters sparkle like crystals as it flows directly from the throne of God through the street in the middle of the holy city. This river waters the tree of life whose leaves heal the nations. In the beginning, a river flowed through Eden and watered a certain tree, and its fruit led to separation from God and the scattering of humanity. But now, here in this vision of the end in God's good time, another river and tree and fruit bring the scattered nations together. Hunger and war will be no more and all will see God and gather together for worship. The Bible begins with Genesis and the account of the fall. The Bible ends with Revelation and this account of the children of God standing up to be all that God created us to be. If we stick with the whole drama of the mighty acts of God in history, from creation to redemption, we see that God does indeed make us stronger in the broken places. As individuals and as nations, God waters the earth for growth and for blessing. A river runs through all of this.

John says we will see God and we will worship God. We see God face to face, something that has never been possible in history. Even Moses, you recall, could not see God face to face. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush and later, God would only allow Moses to see his back side, the effects of his presence. But

face to face? Never! And Jesus, in his dying moments, cried out in the words of the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Bible is clear: God is so great, so awesome, so beyond anything that we can think or imagine or control, that a face to face encounter would surely mean death. But here in the holy city of John's revelation of the end, along the banks of the river of life, here we see God face to face. Directly. One on one. No intermediaries or translators or saints to go between required. Here at water's edge, we see God face to face, and we fall down in worship. Commenting on this text, William Barclay says, "Where God is always seen all life becomes an act of worship." It won't be a matter of spending an hour in church. All that we do, all that we are, all that we have will be arranged and orchestrated and performed in such a way that everything about us glorifies God and takes a place in the great choir of the heavenly host.

As some of you know, I sing in a chorus that does concerts around Christmas and Easter, The Lutheran Acappella Choir of Milwaukee. There are about fifty of us, quite a few retired Lutheran pastors and church musicians, as well as a few young professionals and graduate students, and everything in between. It is a joy to be a part of this group. We rehearse for two hours every Tuesday night at St Matthew's Lutheran church in Wauwatosa. Choral singing, like being in a band or on an athletic team, is all about the team working together. No individual should stick out. It's all about blend and balance. It is about flow, as with a river. You look at a great river flowing by and you don't think about the individual drops or even the buckets of drops, but the millions of gallons that flow.

Our mission trip gang this summer enjoyed an afternoon of whitewater rafting on the Green River in the Wyoming mountains. We were impressed with the power of the river which was higher and faster than any time in the last century. We saw where the river had carved away its normal banks and rocks the size of this place crashed down into the riverbed. A dozen of us bobbed on the surface as our guide explained river features where, if we were to get trapped there, it might be impossible to escape by ourselves. Elsewhere this summer, other rivers flooded cities and washed out roads and airports and caused homes to float away and bob just as we had in our rubber raft. Rivers can be terrifying in their fury and devastating in their force. They're not all baptismal blessing, that's for sure. Like the sun, fire and wind, the waters of the earth represent destructive as well as productive force. We are always trying to harness and control these great forces of nature, but their magnitude can be most humbling.

The Apostle Paul used this idea to say that in baptism we are put to death with Christ. We are drowned to death in the very rivers of life! Our old life is washed away. In baptism we share in Christ's death in order that we might also share in his resurrection. "Studyin' about that good old way." The river runs through it. It flows down from the mountains of our high ideals and best moments, sweeps us up in baptism along its banks, flows in and around and through the Galilee, where we sit on the beach and listen to Jesus teach us from the boat, and then continues to flow down, down, down to the Dead Sea, to that low place from which nothing escapes. The river of life runs through it all and never lets us down. And in the end, its waters make the trees flourish, and their luscious fruits bring the healing that leads to the face to face with God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of all life. The ultimate worship. The ultimate communion. The ultimate relationship. The ultimate and final love. Come on in. The water's fine. Take me to the water....