

There Is a River: A Meditation on Psalm 46

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It is sometimes pointed out that the Bible begins and ends in a garden. God plants humanity in a verdant garden where every good thing grows in harmony, and all is balanced, abundant, blessed. And God promises that there will be a great re-balancing in the fullness of time, when we will be returned to the state of wholeness God intended, with every tear wiped away, back to the garden.

Inside this vision, throughout the biblical witness, runs another powerful metaphor of God's goodness and compassion, artfully paired with the garden; at the beginning and the end is the river, the source of life. A river flows out from the garden. A river flows through all of salvation history. And at the great summation, we shall gather by the river flowing through the center of the city of God where it waters the tree of life.

In the beginning, there were four rivers that flowed from Eden. Two of them, the Tigris and the Euphrates, are rivers that are present on maps today. My great grandfather's name was Euphrates Allgood Tidwell, which we took to mean something about our family's historical and even mythic origins. Those other two rivers flowing out of Eden seem to remind us that the story Genesis tells us another kind of history, another kind of mythic origin, a place we cannot trace the river back to and visit like tourists, a place we must long for and feel the grief of not being able to inhabit.

In the center of the biblical story runs the Jordan River, a place where our ancestors crossed over in symbolic and historic ways. A dividing of waters happens at the Jordan as the people at long last enter the Promised Land. Elijah ascends to heaven there. Namaan is cured of his leprosy by washing in the river. It is no coincidence, then, that Jesus appears by the River Jordan to begin his ministry, immersing his story into the larger river story.

Every genre of the biblical literature includes river metaphors in some way, from the historical granting of land to Abram, one riverbank to the next; to prophetic declarations of divine providence that will make water flow in the desert; to the many references to the river in the Psalms.

Today we focus on one remarkable river passage from the Psalter—well known but not well-studied, quoted often but barely discussed in the commentaries. Psalm 46 gives us a series of remarkable contrasts, the chaos of swirling, raging, uncontrollable waters and the river whose streams make glad the city where God dwells. A warning of God's desolation appears, and yet when that desolation occurs, it is war that is desolated, the bows broken, the spears shattered. It is a psalm of action, of war, and of destruction, yet it ends with the beloved call to be still and know God.

The image depicted by Psalm 46 is a map of the Hebrew imagination, where Zion, the symbolic title for Jerusalem, is the hill where God dwells with humans. Zion sits on the capstone of a deep spring holding back the waters that God tamed at creation, always threatening to explode again. Jerusalem is the center, the oasis in the wilderness of the world where ample water flows, the watchtower from which we can see cultures rise and fall and rise again. It is the navel, the nexus of the spiritual

plane and the political-social one brought together by the sovereignty of God.

There at the center of these two dimensions of God's activity flows the river for the city. The earth itself may change, but the city will not be moved. And yet the city is not understood to be an impregnable fortress, but it is the presence of God in the city that provides the refuge and strength. Both the waters and the kingdoms roar in this psalm, and both the mountains and the kingdoms tilt and totter.¹ What is eternal is the presence, not in fixed geographic specificity but in covenantal dependability. And the evidence of that certainty is the river, making glad the city that gladdens God's people.

The river connects it all, flowing from time past into time to come. In his poem "Ask Me," William Stafford reminds us that the river we see here as we stand at the bank is the same as the river upstream and yet not the same—that what we receive today is the result of something upstream we will never quite see. He puts it this way:

We know
the current is there, hidden: and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

The river connects place and time, creation and eschatology. Einstein used the river as the symbol for the continual existence of everything that has ever happened, and if we could just move up or down its banks, we could dip into every moment that has ever been, back from the days before this place was built, running upstream to see just in our own great American river, the Mississippi, the sight of Martin Luther King driving into Memphis, of a young river pilot being taught to mark the twain, of pioneers on their way west stopping in awe at the crossing they faced, up the river to the time the river was named maybe by the Choctaws who say their name for the Mississippi means "Here is a river beyond all age."

And if we run further up the river of time, we might see Ezekiel receiving a powerful word for the exiles in Babylon by the river Chebar, and Jacob wrestling all night at the ford of the Jabbok and gaining the name Israel, and further back, Pharaoh's daughter lifting baby Moses out of the Nile. We know that we stand downstream from a long and powerful tradition, a river of promise. And we are called to be its stewards and its students.

Last summer my seminary Explorations class spent part of our time learning about the river from which we get our drinking water here in Atlanta. The Chattahoochee might not be a river many of us think about in our day-to-day life, but even if you drink nothing but purely filtered Icelandic fjord water from a crystal decanter, you need the water from the Chattahoochee to run your bath and water your garden and power your dishwasher. One community in south Atlanta lives in a more intimate way with the Chattahoochee. Proctor Creek is a watershed, an important water source for those who live downstream. Proctor Creek is also a place where the water infrastructure is poorly designed and frequently inadequate.

Because we have so much development in the city, too many parking lots, and not enough green space to absorb the rain, the water running off all these hard surfaces

goes into the sewers and into the river, carrying gas and oil and trash, pollutants that foul the water downstream. And when it rains hard for days in a row, sewers begin to back up. In Proctor Creek, a poor and mostly African-American neighborhood, the sewers have backed up onto the streets and yards of homes close to the creek, poured out raw sewage so often that some houses there have been condemned, whole blocks torn down, and still the problem is not fixed. Proctor Creek is an essential watershed and a blight; it is covered over with concrete everywhere and still the water moves, underground, unseen but powerful.

People who live near Proctor Creek know we are connected. They know that what happens upstream literally and figuratively affects them. Only a short distance from the neighborhood sits the state legislature where decisions are made for them and us and for miles downstream, and they feel the currents of new development and urbanization creating conflicts in the demand for more water. This is the shadow side of the poet's vision, of the comings and goings from miles away that bring the river before us.

There is a remarkable coalition of people who care about the river, The Riverkeepers, who care for and monitor the condition of our streams and rivers. They take water samples to make sure the water is not contaminated, they watch for signs of illegal construction dumping, they work to educate us about doing our share, and they push for policy that would protect our resources. One of them lives just down the street from the seminary at the end of McKinnon Drive, where she keeps a little creek clean that flows practically from her doorstep down to the Altamaha River which flows all the way to the southeastern coast.

You and I are called to join her, to be river-keepers in a literal and in a spiritual sense. We are called to watch out for the way the river moves, to feel its currents from upstream, to care about what happens along her banks, to know how connected we all are. The gospel of John tells us that a river flows out of the heart of every believer, so there is no wonder that our bodies and our spirits thirst to be there, to stand in it, to drink deeply of its delights.

Kingdoms roar and totter, but the center holds; out of it flows a healing tide, and in it we can rest. That contrast between the constant flow of the river in our psalm and the stillness it calls for is something Brother Richard Rohr, a Franciscan spiritual director, speaks of when he describes God as a riverbed of mercy. . . vast, silent, restful, and resourceful, receiving and letting go.²

This riverbed of mercy, the vast flow of love, is our deepest home to which we return over and over; we receive its mercies and pass along its wisdom. It awakens our sense of justice, calls us to let righteousness roll down like mighty water; it soothes our fears and grief; and its continual current will scour granite boulders to sand. It carries mystery, time, and hope. It speaks, it sings, it whispers. What the river says, that is what we say.

Notes

1 James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation Commentary Series* (Louisville: Westminster JohnKnox, 1994), 185,

2 Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond, The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 23.