

Every Mother's Child

The two passages I've just read are quite diverse. Other than the fact that they are both contained in the New Testament of our Bible and that they both point to the ongoing revelation of the power of God through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit, it would be easy to say that they have very little, if anything, in common. But as I read and re-read these passages this week, two similarities jumped out at me. One is a recurring image, that of the river, which guided my selection of hymns this week. The other similarity is that of a theme, which may not be immediately apparent, that of national identity and its place in the Reign of God. So, this morning, I want to explore first the image and then the theme to see how they might have been heard in the context of the time of writing and what they might mean to us today. And, this being Mothers' Day, I also want to briefly consider the impact of one of the remarkable women of the Bible.

Rivers have always fascinated me. My life has been nearly evenly split between times when I lived a short drive from the sea – the Gulf of Mexico, the English Channel, Long Island Sound, Puget Sound – and times when I have lived near a river – The Mississippi and the Missouri, the Ohio, the Wabash. The history of my family is full of stories about rivers – that same Mississippi where both my grandfathers worked and one died, the White River that ran near my grandparents' place in Arkansas, Joachim Creek just down a bluff from my other grandparents' home in Herculaneum, the Meramec where Connie and I often went after work in the early part of our relationship. I know I am not alone in my fascination with rivers as they are a powerful image in literature of all kinds. I've mentioned before my childhood favorite, The Wind in the Willows, which takes place primarily in the happy world of the Riverbank, but you may think more quickly of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which is set on and around the Mississippi, or of a more local favorite, Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It. In these books and many more, the river is the metaphor for the great sweep of life, of life continually refreshed and renewed, of life that bears us along, we know not where.

Perhaps this connection with rivers is tied deep within the collective memory of our species, for rivers have long meant easy access to life-giving fresh water and an ease of travel for those who learned the craft of boats. It is no accident that the most ancient civilizations sprang up near mighty rivers. Most of us remember the Nile, which birthed ancient Egypt, and ancient Mesopotamia, literally "the land between the rivers" of the Tigris and Euphrates, the eldest civilizations which gave birth to the peoples of our Bible. But we should also remember the Indus of South Asia, the Yellow and Yang-tze Rivers of China, and the Mekong of Southeast Asia. For the ancient peoples of these river valleys and others, the river symbolized life, an image we can find in the Bible from the rivers of Eden in Genesis to the rivers of justice and righteousness in the vision of the prophet Amos, which give spiritual life, to the river flowing from the throne of God in Revelation, which gives eternal life. Most of those ancient cultures had myths concerning cycles of death and rebirth tied to the cyclical floods of their rivers and so rivers in literature are often as much a symbol of new life as of ongoing life. We think of the act of baptism, modeled for us by Jesus in the River Jordan, as being symbolic of our new life. It would also have been a symbol of spiritual rebirth for first century Jews who baptized Gentile converts, which may be why Paul and Luke looked for a place of prayer for Jews at the riverside of the Gentile city of Philippi.

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Of course, it's also true that rivers for us often symbolize borders and the divisions between people. In the current furious debate over immigration, the Rio Grande stands as a powerful symbol for the difference between "our side" and "their side." Folks from Texas and Oklahoma will tell you that the Red River is the demarcation line between civility and barbarism (which side is which depends on where you were born) and people in Indiana and Kentucky likewise turn up their noses at those on the other side of the Ohio. In Biblical terms, you've got to cross the Jordan to get to the Promised Land, an image that lives on today in hymns and songs such as Johnny Cash and June Carter's wonderful duet, "The Far Side Banks of Jordan" (I hope you know it). The Bible is full of other references to rivers as dividing lines, too, such as God's promise to Abraham that his offspring will possess all the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates, a promise that God has kept well, even if Abraham's warring children can't manage to share the land in peace.

For all that rivers, Biblical and otherwise, stand as dividing lines between people, in our passages this morning the rivers become places where divisions between peoples are washed away. Notice that I said divisions and not differences. As we continue to think about these verses, I want to raise the theme of national identities, both in their positive and negative aspects.

Let's consider first our story from Acts. As we heard last week, the Good News about Jesus has been spreading from the Jews to Gentiles in the general vicinity of Judaea, mostly due to the work of Paul and his partners but also abetted, albeit reluctantly at first, by Peter. From relatively close cities in Syria, such as Caesarea and Antioch, Paul begins to travel more widely afield. As he himself is from Tarsus, a city on the southern coast of what we now know as Turkey, it is relatively natural for him to travel in the subcontinent of Asia Minor. Culturally, linguistically, historically, these people all have much in common with Paul and with his Jewish brothers and sisters. But then a peculiar thing happens. Traveling with Timothy and Silas, Paul finds that their attempts to visit other cities in Asia Minor are blocked somehow by the Holy Spirit – Luke does not specify how. Instead, Paul has a vision: "there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us.""

Those of us of primarily European descent often celebrate this incident as the beginning of the Church in Europe but I think we may not always consider how remarkable it was. Paul, that "Hebrew of the Hebrews," is being called into a very different world. While educated persons around the Mediterranean spoke Greek and the cultures of that part of the world had been profoundly affected by Greek culture, there were still enormous differences between Hellenized Judaea and Hellas itself. We do well to remember, too, that Hellenistic culture came to the Jews and their neighbors as a result of their being conquered by Alexander the Great. After the relatively easy-going reign of the Persian Empire – it was the Persian Emperor Cyrus, remember, who allowed the Jews to return to their land and his successors who allowed them to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple – the Jews had suffered through the reign of Alexander's Hellenistic successors such as the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes. And now Paul is plunging into Macedonia, the seat of Alexander's empire, even to the city of Philippi, named for the great general's father. As a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus would have had no love for the Greeks who had conquered his land before being replaced by the Romans, who had desecrated the Temple, and whose decadent civilization he must have seen as eroding the morals and practice of Judaism. But as a Christian,

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the renamed Paul felt compelled by compassion to take the Gospel of Jesus across the water into enemy territory.

If that seems like the kind of scenario that only God could bring about, here's another twist: Paul's first convert in Europe was a fellow Asian. It's unlikely, by the way, that her name was Lydia. Lydia was the name of the ancient kingdom in what is now western Turkey where the city of Thyatira was located. Our text here is probably corrupt – Luke may have originally written about a woman from Lydia, a Gentile worshipper of the God of Abraham, who was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. Her name is lost to us, though she may have been one of the two leaders in the church at Philippi that Paul mentions in his letter to them – Euodia or Syntyche. Lydia is easier to say, though, so we'll stick with that. For any of us who can trace our Christian family history back to Europe or European missionaries, Lydia is a hero of the faith, our spiritual great-great-great-grandmother, an appropriate person to remember on this Mothers' Day. Who can know what would have happened to Paul or the European mission had Lydia not insisted that the missionary group stay at her home? The Gospel would have somehow come to Europe, I am sure, but Paul may have grown discouraged and gone back to Asia, never to travel through Greece or establish churches in Philippi or Thessalonica or Corinth with whom his later correspondence forms a significant part of our Canon.

And so, by a river outside the city of Philippi, a Jew from Tarsus (Paul) and a Jew from Antioch (Silas) and a young man from Lystra with a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (Timothy) met a Gentile convert to Judaism from Thyatira and made her a follower of Jesus and the first member of the first church in Europe. Now, that's a God thing! And we thought Evergreen was multi-cultural!

More seriously, however, I want to return to the very beginning of this passage for a moment. The impetus for this missionary journey is a vision Paul has of "a man from Macedonia." Clearly this dream figure stands as a representative of all the people of Macedonia. Some commentators have also linked this figure with the Old Testament tradition, found especially in Genesis, Daniel and the Psalms, that every nation has its own angel or demi-god, subservient to the One True God of Israel. In his fine book, Unmasking the Powers, the Methodist theologian Walter Wink connects this idea to the more modern idea of national spirit or identity. It is a concept that should seem familiar to us. In popular culture, many countries have become known with a sort of cultural shorthand that sums up the attributes we most associate with them. Sometimes this shorthand can be positive, sometimes derogatory. I'm pleased to say I don't hear as many ethnic jokes as I used to but I'm sure that most of us remember hearing them. In those jokes, people from Poland were inevitably stupid; the Irish were drunks, Mexicans lazy, and so forth. Positively, we may think of the courage of Poles after the Solidarity demonstrations, the poetic spirit of the Irish, the hospitality of Mexicans, and so forth. The positives and negatives blend together to give us a snapshot of a people and a nation that only changes for us in the face of powerful evidence.

In Unmasking the Powers, Wink connects the idea of a national character to a national vocation or calling from God. He suggests that each nation has a role to play in the unfolding of God's great plan and that, just as we as individuals can reject God's call on our lives and go our own way, so to can nations reject their place in God's plan and wander from their destiny. Most

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famously, Israel was to be God's light to the other nations and, indeed, with the spread and influence both of Judaism and of the Good News of Christ Jesus, she has been so. But there have also been times in the national life of Israel when she has failed in her call, rejected positive involvement with the nations or mistreated her own poor and vulnerable. In such times, there have been national consequences, such as the destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian Exile. Modern Israel seems to constantly stand at the brink of war and destruction – some of this is certainly due to blind enmity on the part of others but the careful reader of history and current events must ask honestly if a reliance on strength of arms and chariots hasn't brought about some of Israel's problems just as it did when King Josiah rode out against Pharaoh Necho to his destruction, an action which set into motion the chain of events leading to the Exile. Or consider the nation of Persia, when Cyrus answered God's call to free the Jews, as I mentioned earlier. Now, renamed as Iran, the nation is one of Israel's bitterest enemies. How has Persia/Iran lost their character as a champion of freedoms for smaller countries? Persian exiles that I know would point to the extreme Islamic fundamentalism of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors as the change point.

With these notions in mind, let us turn to the vision of John the Revelator. Here, too, there is a river and here, too, there is a gathering of peoples from diverse places. In fact, John's vision includes all the nations being brought into the light of the New Jerusalem and all the kings of the world honoring God and the Lamb with their glory. Perhaps these are not simply human kings but the personifications of the spirit of each nation bringing the realization of their finest attributes to the throne of God. One commentator, Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC, writes of the New Jerusalem's always-open gates, "Just because the nations and kings are coming is no reason to worry about a future repeat of oppression and injustice... God's drawing of the kings and nations to God's self, to the holy city, is no threat; the uncleanness that had led to oppression, violence, and evil will stay removed forever."

I find it significant that all nations are seen as joining the throng at the throne of God. It is a vision of universal grace in which no group of people is omitted from God's love. As the people of all countries have done since nationhood became a reality, we in America have often drawn up our lists of who's in and who's out as far as our national favor is concerned. Membership on those lists has fluctuated over the years. Our nation was birthed in war with Great Britain, yet for decades the British have been considered our closest allies. The War of Independence could not have been won without the aid of the French and we have rallied to their cause in two World Wars but it hasn't been so very long ago that people were renaming America's favorite potato as Freedom Fries, much as we previously switched from sauerkraut to Victory Cabbage in defiance of our sometime enemies, sometime friends, the Germans. Our list of national good guys and bad guys changes with the transient political climate – something our old friend Koheleth, writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes might have called *hevel* or vanity. But in the steadfast love of God, all nations are destined to reach their full potential of greatness.

Of course, we are not there yet, and I do mean "we" and not "they." As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever." Walter Wink imagines a message to us all from the Angel of America, of which the following is a portion: "I am a young and energetic servant of the living God. I bear a unique pattern and

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possibility which has already brought the world great blessings in freedom, and can do so much more. But there are many whose vision has become clouded, who have lost the vision of America for the world, and now think only of the world for America. I hold this light, far higher than the lamp of Liberty, but indistinguishable from her: the vision of a nation free of poverty and hunger, a nation of opportunity, a nation where the creative novelty of the divine will is for the first time in human history celebrated and preferred, a nation which attracts other nations toward freedom rather than imposing it on them, a nation of persons liberated from the tyranny of convention, able to pursue their own creative ways. Learn to love this vision better. Learn to love your nation's soul, and do not let its perversions of its destiny turn your heart away. My light of hope is still raised over your shore, and more people than ever in history are fleeing to me, yet my hands are tied by the dark power created by your worship of things. Wealth is your real god, and all your gravest sins have been committed for it. You bought and sold slaves and killed my native peoples for wealth, you intervene in foreign lands for wealth, you sacrifice your own children in wars fought for control of world markets... Your idolatry is almost unlimited. I can only be what I am: the call to your own fulfillment as a nation. I can, no more than God, revoke your freedom to do evil. If you choose idols, I cannot stop you. I stand helpless while you do evil, and can only see that you are visited with the inevitable consequences of your acts.”

John the Revelator's vision, of course, is not simply of how the future will or should look. Because it is a poem of sorts, written in code to encourage a people suffering under the present darkness of their age, it also contains clues on how to bring the Kingdom of God for which we pray to fruition on earth as it is in heaven. Broadening an image from the prophet Ezekiel, the Revelator writes, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb... On either side of the river is the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” What is this river and what is this tree? How are the nations to be healed, if such a thing is possible on this side Jordan? What is our part? The answers are in our Scriptures and in our songs. Again, let us recall the word of the Lord that came to Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The river is justice and righteousness. We didn't sing it today but we all know it: peace is a river; joy, a fountain; love, an ocean. Jesus taught that he was the water of life. God is our fount of every blessing. These are the things which nourish the tree of life whose leaves will heal the nations – justice, righteousness, peace, joy, love, the words and work of Jesus, the grace of God the Father. Perhaps the tree is the Church, the Body of Christ. Perhaps we are the leaves. We cannot achieve healing for the nations alone but we can work for it together with God's help. And before we try to pull the mote from the eye of our neighbors, we need to work on the log in our own national eye. We must remember on this Mothers' Day, that every mother's child, whether American or Mexican or Russian or Chinese or Israeli or Arab, every mother's child is a part of God's loving future. We must remember that every mother's child needs the correction of God's love. And we must remember that every mother's child needs us to do our part to bring about the Beloved Community. May God give us compassion and wisdom for the endeavor. May God bless every mother's child. Amen.