

“The River”

Scripture

Psalm 46 (NRSV)

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though
the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; 3 though its waters roar
and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Selah)
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy
habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall
not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his
voice, the earth melts. 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob
is our refuge. (Selah) 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what
desolations he has brought on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to
the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he
burns the shields with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am
exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." 11 The Lord of
hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Scripture

2 Corinthians 1:17-22 (NRSV)

17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans
according to ordinary human standards, ready to say "Yes, yes" and
"No, no" at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to
you has not been "Yes and No." 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ,
whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not
"Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." 20 For in him every one of
God's promises is a "Yes." For this reason it is through him that we say
the "Amen," to the glory of God. 21 But it is God who establishes us
with you in Christ and has anointed us, 22 by putting his seal on us and
giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-2 (NRSV)

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he
sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and
taught them, saying:

In our special music today, we heard lyrics which poetically expressed the
give-and-take drama of a relationship. Realities of brokenness, expressed in
metaphors like "the river" which "goes on and on" and "the sea that divides us,"
meet a hope for reconciliation that the situation "is a temporary one" and that

there would be a “bridge to bring us back together.” Sometimes the poetry of songs says more than perhaps was originally intended. Probably this song is about an unwelcome separation which looks to be resolved. Yet, what we might hear in the meaning-beyond-the-lyrics is an insight into what it is to live in our con-“temporary” world that often seems chaotic, troubled and frantic, yet by God’s grace is still a place for hope and blessing, having in it a call for faithful and energetic vocation. The river which floods and brings unsettling change, and the sea which is churned and driven by hurricane winds, nevertheless contain seeds of new beginnings and anticipate new possibilities for relationships in bridges that bring us back together.

Historian Diana Butler Bass seems to believe this is so, for instance. As a metaphor for our day, which many call our “post-modern” world, Butler Bass speaks of how we are riding a river. This past summer when the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers (and their tributaries) were overflowing their banks flooding towns and countryside, provided an apt image of what it is to live in our times, she said. Everything has rushed together. Everything is mixed together. And it’s all moving. It’s all in flux. And at the end of its journey the outlines of what was will have been changed.

She spoke of our age with an illustration that I had seen myself. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch, a Category 5 hurricane with 180 mph winds, stalled over the poor nation of Honduras and dumped 75 inches of rain over the course of five days. A very mountainous country, the waters rushed down to the lower elevations in a wall. Many of the people who lived by the rivers were washed away. A bridge, recently built over the Choluteca River at the bottom of this rush of water, was left standing. I saw it with my own eyes. But both banks were gone and the river had moved a mile away. So the bridge stood there like a monument to the mathematical symbol of Pi, all alone.

This is our day, our time. Globalization, climate change, new mixtures of diverse people and cultures, astronomical gaps between rich and poor, religious contention showing differences in our core beliefs, individualism and entitlement as social norms, science and technology once accepted as normative, questioned as if they were culprits in possible apocalyptic catastrophes, these are the stormy waters on which we ride.

Immanuel Kant, one of the foundational philosophers of what we call modernity, was known for the regularity of his daily walk. People said that they could set their clocks according to the precise moment that Kant would walk by their homes or places of business. That reliability is what modernity sought. We will come up with the truth of how things work. We will uncover the moral law by which society should live. But what followed was a century of World Wars that were bloody beyond the millennia that preceded it. The moral truth became my moral truth became one truth among many, many, and we just don’t know what to do with them all. So, we have become post-modern. And it is a river ride.

Yet, instead of feeling overwhelmed or despairing about this change, I find myself both energized and hopeful. The mountain may have been thrown into the sea, and though its waters roar and foam, God is still our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Just as today’s floods bring tomorrow’s

fertile soils, so I believe that God is doing something on this wild river. Our task at hand is to discern what that might be. Or to use, Paul's rhetoric in his second letter to the Corinthian church, there is no "yes and no" in God for us. In Jesus Christ every one of God's promises is a "Yes."

Now, I'm not talking about the power of positive thinking here. When Paul writes that God's "Yes" is found in Jesus' good news to us, he is writing about God's actions, God's purposes. Positive thinking is self-generated. For Paul, the "Yes" in Jesus' promise is *discerned*.

As Episcopal priest, Frederick Schmidt, says instead of "I-questions," discernment is about asking "God-questions." Mark McIntosh notes in the history of Christianity, these are questions "of faith, of distinguishing between good and evil. They are questions that seek a] practical wisdom. They ask us to a greater sensitivity to pursue God's will. Finally, they include the contemplation of wisdom. That's a mouthful, to be sure. Maybe all that is needed to understand God-questions is a picture of Jesus, who climbs a hillside, sits down, crosses his legs and begins to teach a crowd of followers.

The hearers have come anticipating something good and helpful in Jesus' words. They've come to hear something of God in Jesus' words. And the first word that he will say is: "blessed." "Blessed are those who. . ." The discernment we are called to is with regard to God's blessings. But don't slip too quickly into asking those I-questions again. The blessings Jesus describe are not things like health, wealth and happiness. Instead, leading us to God-questions, he says: "Blessed are those who . . . are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, peacemakers, merciful, pure in heart, who hunger and thirst for righteousness." In other words, when we find ourselves "spiritual beggars," or in other words, those who "cannot sustain hope and purpose out of our own strength," when we are those who are meek not in passive or timid ways, but where our meekness is a humbleness before God which leaves us content with simple gifts and simple graces, it is there we find blessing beyond what we can manufacture or take.

Down in Washington, a 20-something, young woman named Renee Grayson began attending a church where discerning God's blessings was a communal practice. Wanting at first to "take things slowly, to ease into the community" she resisted going deeper into participating in the church's quest. A special program was being offered, but she walked out the building, headed to the Metro, and as she was going down the escalator, she felt this urgent call to turn around, go back and join in. Having gone all the way down, she instead headed right back up and opened herself to the God-questions she could start asking.

By doing so, she changed. "I have seen, heard and felt God's presence in the 'day to day,'" she testified. "And my relationship with God has deepened exponentially in now, the last six years of my life. I've learned it is a relationship that requires paying attention, taking action, and making difficult decisions. It requires me to get out of my comfort zone and to take risks . . . I've learned if I say yes, God will help me with the rest."

For the next several weeks we will be seeking to discern such "yes's" in each of the blessings or the beatitudes which we hear from Jesus as he sits to

teach in his Sermon on the Mount. My hope is that we hear his words in the river in which we may be finding ourselves. A new landscape is forming before us. Let us believe that there is blessing in answering Jesus' "yes," with one of our own. Amen.