

A RIVER OF GRACE¹
Isaiah 43: 1-7
Revelation 22: 1-5
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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The Bible begins and ends with a vision of a river. In Genesis we read, *A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden...*². Then at the end of the Bible that same river makes another appearance: *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. This river was for the healing of the nations.*³

I

That opening description in Genesis describes a river flowing through a world at odds with itself and with God. Cain kills his brother Abel, Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, nations are constantly lifting up a sword against nations, and Jesus is betrayed and crucified. That river flows through a world of fratricide and betrayal, a world of selfishness and greed, a world turned against itself. Sound familiar?

Yet there is another vision at the end of the Bible. Now the river is not contaminated with the power-grabbing of an empire or the waste of

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, June 7, 2009.

² Genesis 2: 10.

³ Revelation 22: 1-2.

war. It is a gift-giving river that nourishes the earth and all creation. It is a river that cannot be privatized or exploited for the benefit of a few. It is not controlled by any ecclesiastical headquarters or domineering dictator. It is not polluted by selfishness or greed. It flows freely from the throne of God to the whole of creation, so that finally every living thing is nourished by the transforming power of the Spirit of God.

And like the river in Genesis, the river in Revelation has a tree of life, but it is no longer inaccessible to humanity. It grows alongside the river, drawing nourishment from the free-flowing waters of life, producing fruit that is plentiful and sufficient for all. Its leaves are filled with the medicinal qualities that heal and transform not just individuals, but whole nations.

We are all nourished by rivers. The poet Langston Hughes wrote:

Love known rivers:

Love known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of
human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.

I built my hut by the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom
turn all golden in the sunset.

Love known rivers.

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.⁴

⁴ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

Langston Hughes was writing to remind his people that their history began long before 1619, when their ancestors had been snatched from their homelands only to survive the Middle Passage and to be brought to this land and others. He writes a word of hope to remind them that theirs is not a legacy of enslavement, but that their spiritual DNA was rich with the resources of a people who had been nourished by many a river.

It is the same truth for Native Americans whose story does not begin when Europeans came to this land. Great civilizations of Native Americans were nourished by many a river for centuries before Europeans ever set foot on these shores.

II

Then there is the book and the movie, *A River Runs Through It*. The book opens with these words: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing."⁵ It is a story about a family living in western Montana at the junction of two great rivers. Two brothers, Norman and Paul, are sons of a Presbyterian minister from Scotland. The story invites us to look beneath the surface of our own lives so as to catch, perhaps, a glimpse of the river of God's grace running through our lives.

⁵ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 1.

The father taught his sons to fly-fish Presbyterian style· by first learning the disciplined art of casting. With their mother's metronome he taught them casting using a four-count rhythm. Norman says, "My brother and I would have preferred to start learning how to fish by going out and catching a few, omitting entirely anything difficult or technical⁶ that would take away from the fun. But it was not by way of fun that we were introduced to our father's art. If our father had had his way, nobody who did not know how to fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching him."⁶

So the boys learned the relationship between grace and discipline. Throughout the story, fly-fishing is a metaphor for the mastery of an art that requires discipline and grace.

The same could be said for our worship. There is room for spontaneity in worship. We can approach both God and trout with a reverence for their elusive mystery. If some churches seem too restrained in their worship of God, part of the reason may be our firm conviction that worship involves a certain amount of discipline and grace, and a lifetime of prayer and immersion in the scriptures. Nothing of excellence comes without discipline. What is true for fly-fishing is equally true in regard to the

⁶ Maclean, pp. 2-3.

life of faith. As the boys' father says, "All good things come by grace and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy."⁷

III

Today is the last Sunday the sanctuary choir will sing until the fall. As we thank them today in our own various ways, let us recognize that the beauty and the power of their music comes from discipline, and art, and ultimately grace. Theirs is what we might call a disciplined spontaneity. The music ministry of this church is a river of grace for us all. It runs through our souls, and we are blessed by it. We pause today to recognize and thank the choir. Their ministry to us is like that *river that flows from the throne of God*.

We live as beneficiaries of such discipline and grace. The imagery of that river is particularly fitting for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Later in the same chapter of Revelation, the text says, "Come." *And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*⁸

⁷ Maclean, p. 4.

⁸ Revelation 22: 17.