

“Shall We Gather at the River”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
6 Easter – May 9, 2010 (Mother’s Day)
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?

In the beginning of the biblical story, we hear that the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, and a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden. The man and the woman lived in the garden. Then came the snake and the forbidden fruit and turning away from God. Then came banishment from the garden, the closing of the gate, and the beginning of wandering in the wilderness.

Over and over we hear this story. Our spiritual ancestors throughout scripture spent a lot of time wandering in the wilderness. And the wilderness in that part of the world is dry and barren. When I went to the Holy Land, one of the things that changed for me was my concept of the wilderness. It used to be that when I pictured the Israelites leaving Egypt and wandering for forty years, I just assumed that they were in a jungle-like area with trees and streams. Likewise, when I imagined Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, I pictured him strolling along forest paths, hungry yes, but otherwise in a cool and shady place.

Of course my images of what biblical wilderness looks like had nothing to do with reality. It’s desert over there. One of the bleakest landscapes I have

ever seen. For miles and miles and miles, there is nothing but dirt and sand and hills of dirt and more sand and maybe some rocks. No trees. No bushes. No streams. No nothing. Dry. Barren. Dead.

It is through that landscape that Adam and Eve wandered when they left the garden and through that landscape that the Hebrew people wandered when they left Egypt and the Nile. Rivers and wells were extremely important. They were the source of life.

On the margin of the river,
Washing up its silver spray,
We will talk and worship ever,
All the happy golden day.

Wilderness isn't always a literal place. We don't have to be wandering through a desert to experience it. It's part of the spiritual life. When the ancient Israelites spent so much time in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it was really because they kept turning away from God, not because of the enormous distance from Egypt to Canaan. No matter how God provided for them, causing water to flow from the rocks and manna to descend from heaven, the people kept complaining. They simply could not trust God.

Being in the wilderness teaches us of our dependence on God, even though when we're there it frequently feels like God is very far away. It can be hard to pray when we're in a desert time. Worship can feel empty and hollow. Instead of talking and worshiping on the banks of the life-giving river, we may feel like the spiritual juice has been drained out of us.

Sometimes it is an event that drives us into the wilderness, like illness, or the loss of a loved one, a job, or a dream. Sometimes it's something we've done, something that we know is wrong, something we feel can't be forgiven. Sometimes transition will lead us into the desert as we leave behind the familiar and enter something new and potentially frightening or disorienting. As we struggle to get our bearings, we may fall away from God and feel abandoned. Upon occasion we may slip into the wilderness without even knowing it. Our lives get busy and we become distracted, and the routine of daily activity slowly turns into the landscape of the desert. We feel far from the abundant waters of God's grace.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, feeling dry and barren, it can be tempting to turn even farther away from God, when what we need most to do is to turn and face God again. If it feels hard to pray, we need to ask others to pray for us. We can even ask God to help us pray. We can tell God about where we are and how we feel. We can read the scriptures, encountering the stories of others who have wandered in the wilderness, and learn from their experiences. We can read other spiritual writers who have also encountered dry times and are willing to share what they learned. One of the most helpful things can be finding and naming the blessings for which we are grateful. When I am in a dry wilderness time, this is often one of the most difficult things. I rebel against it, thinking, "I'm angry at God right now. I don't want to think about being grateful." But when I lie in bed at night and think through the day and list the blessings that are always there even in the midst of the terribly dryness, then I do feel like I'm taking small sips of water, enough to ease my thirst. God is always there, ready with life-giving water, if only we will take the time to drink.

Ere we reach the shining river,
Lay we every burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver,
And provide a robe and crown.

Robert Lowry wrote the words and music to the hymn, “Shall We Gather at the River.” He describes the experience in this way: “One afternoon in July, 1864, when I was pastor at Hanson Place Baptist Church, Brooklyn, the weather was oppressively hot, and I was lying on a lounge in a state of physical exhaustion...My imagination began to take itself wings. Visions of the future passed before me with startling vividness. The imagery of the apocalypse took the form of a tableau. Brightest of all were the throne, the heavenly river, and the gathering of the saints...I began to wonder why the hymn writers had said so much about the ‘river of death’ and so little about the ‘pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb.’ As I mused, the words began to construct themselves. They came first as a question of Christian inquiry, ‘Shall we gather?’ Then they broke in chorus, ‘Yes, we’ll gather.’ On this question and answer the hymn developed itself. The music came with the hymn.”

Out of Lowry’s experience of heat and exhaustion, truly a desert time for him, he imagined the same vision that is described for us in Revelation today. Out of his wilderness came a hymn that would speak to generations of people.

Soon we’ll reach the silver river,
Soon our pilgrimage will cease;
Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace.

With all the bad news lately of oil spills and flooding and bomb scares and increasing unemployment, it's easy to feel like we're in the desert.

Sometimes as I hear the news of terrible things going on in the world, and I learn of more people who have contracted illnesses, and I sit with people who are dying, I find that it's easy to lose a sense of hope. But then I learn of the kind act of a stranger or hear about an unexpected recovery or smell the sweet scent of honeysuckle as I take my evening walk by the light of the setting sun, and I remember that God is here in the wilderness with us.

When Jesus left us, he sent the Holy Spirit, who is present even now.

At the beginning of our story, there was a beautiful garden with a river flowing through it and trees of every kind of fruit just waiting to be picked. At the ending of our story, there will be a beautiful city with the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing through it and the tree of life, with its twelve different fruits and its leaves of healing, growing by the river. When we get there, we will be clean, and there will be no more darkness, for the Lord God will be our light. While we are here, it may seem that we are eternally in the wilderness, but there are moments of peace even here, glimpses of grace, sips of water to sustain us until we come at last to gather with the saints. It only takes a taste to make our hearts sing,

Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.