

Shining Faces, Healing Leaves

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 22, 2022

Texts: Acts 16:9-15, Psalm 67, Revelation 21:10-22:1-5, John 14:23-29

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 67

O God, be gracious to us and bless us; make your face shine upon us,

that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,

for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us;

let all the ends of the earth revere the Blessed One.

SCRIPTURE READING Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their

foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

GOSPEL READING

John 14:23-29

Jesus' farewell teaching reverts again and again to the great mystery of God's love.

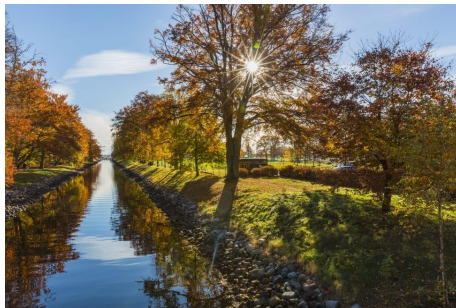
Jesus assured his disciples, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe."

O God, be gracious to us and bless us, and make your face shine on us.

When the sun shines on the river, the river shines back.

When God shines on us, we shine back, too.



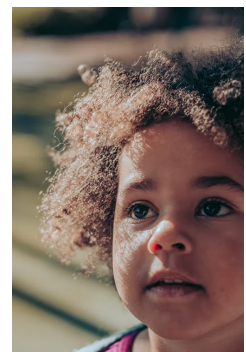
People are drawn to water: rapids and rushing rivers for excitement, yes. But for daily fare, I prefer still waters. Still waters that run deep. Still waters that shine.

When Paul and his friends answered the call of a Macedonian man who appeared in a dream, they made for his city with all speed. When they arrived, they didn't set up a soap box in the city square to preach from. They didn't barge into the local synagogue. They went outside the city gates, outside the noise and crush of the crowds, following those who had gone down to the river to pray. In the quiet, God opened the hearts of the women who had gathered there. Lydia and her family were baptized, there, in the living water. And she opened her home to those who had shined the Light of God on her.

When the sun shines on the river, the river shines back.

When God shines on us, we shine back.

Any idea of paradise we hold must surely include water. John's vision in Revelation grants us a picture of heaven that is dear to our hearts: the Light that comes from no lamp, or sun, or moon, but straight from the Son of God, the Lamb, who has risen like the dawn. And the Light shines on the river of the water of life, flowing through the holy city, flanked on each side by the tree of life, whose fruit never fails but ripens month by month, and whose leaves are for



the healing of the nations. And the Light of God shines on the faces of God's people, and God's name is written on their foreheads.

When the sun shines on the river, the river shines back.

When God shines on us, we shine back.

Before Jesus went to his death on the cross, before that terrible day when the sun hid its face and darkness covered the whole land from noon until three, he said a prolonged and gentle goodbye to his disciples. Over and over he promised them his help. He promised he would be with them always in ways they couldn't understand yet but which they would surely recognize when it came. He gave them again and again the command to love one another, and assured them that obedience would come naturally. And he promised them peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. So don't be troubled. Don't be afraid."

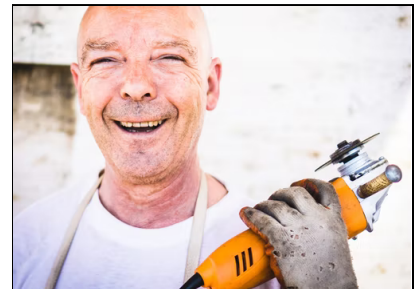
When the sun shines on the river, the river shines back.

When God shines on us, we shine back. And we know peace.



Never has the world needed the light and the love and the peace of God more than today. But we're mistaken if we think that our time is the only hard time, or even the worst time. What matters right now is that it's our time. Our time to live, and wait for God's Light, and listen for God's voice, and our time to act in obedience to Jesus' command. Our task is to love those we have been given to love, those who share this time with us, with

all the gifts and tools we have.



The saying goes that you can never step into the same river twice. Rivers are always on the move, just as history is always on the move. But the river remains the river, flowing from its source in mountain peaks or deep springs, flowing to its home in the sea. Time flows from God and returns to God; we cannot change the past; we cannot foresee the future. But we can live and love and serve God and one another now. Today. While we are in this life, faith is the light that shines on this river, and shows us the next right thing to do.

We pray, as the psalmist prayed in his time, or her time:

O God be gracious to us and bless us; make your face shine upon us;

That your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

How many times in the readings, in this psalm and in Revelation, do you hear the words nations and peoples, all nations and all peoples, all the ends of the earth? Do you remember the meaning of the word "all"? It means "no exceptions." Each and every one. Do you believe that healing is

possible? For all times, in all places, and even now, in this place and in our time? Yes, even for our enemies; yes, even those who seem to us to have been distorted by fear and driven by hate. No, not *even* those; *especially* those. How else will all nations and all peoples and all the ends of the earth learn to love, unless the light of God, the light of love shines on them?



But it's hard to love those we don't yet know; it's hard to shine on people whose faces we never see. It's hard to shine at all until God's face has shined on us. But when it does, loving those we have come to know as fellow humans comes naturally. All peoples, all nations, are children of one God, struggling along day to day as we do. People on whom God also shines.

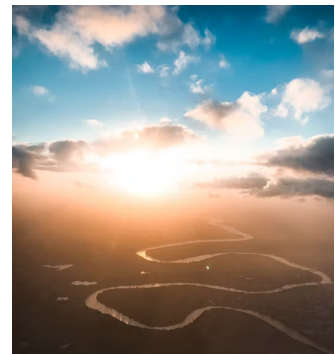
A few years ago, I learned an Islamic proverb that has stayed with me: "The ocean refuses no river." Think about it. "The ocean refuses no river." The truth I hear is that God is the ocean to whom all rivers run. And no one who truly seeks God, no matter what nationality they were born into, or what creed they profess, will be refused.

Rivers flow, and keep on flowing. Trees grow, and keep on growing. And those that spring from the light and love of God bear good fruit, bear leaves for the healing of the nations. This is what I was reminded of on my journey earlier this month: God's world, the heavenly city, surrounds our world, is present with us, near to us. Jesus' project was not just to get his friends into heaven, but to get heaven into his friends. The Lamb, the living Word, lives in you. The living Word lives in us, and in all nations and all peoples.

If we truly had heaven on the inside, imagine how we could look on the outside. Imagine how we might behave. Imagine how the world would change.

When the sun shines on the river, the river shines back.

When God shines on us, we shine back. And we know peace.



Prayers

God, Lord of all creation, lover of life and of everything, please help us to love in our very small way what You love infinitely and everywhere. We thank You that we can offer just this one prayer and that will be more than enough, because in reality every thing and every one is connected, and nothing stands alone. To pray for one part is really to pray for the whole, and so we do. Help us each day to stand for love, for healing, for the good, for the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation, because we know this is what You desire: as Jesus prayed, that all may be one. We offer our prayer together with all the holy names of God, we offer our prayer together with Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,.... (*Prayer from Richard Rohr*)