

Psalm 46:1-11 Revelation 21:10; 21:22 - 22:7 May 22, 2022
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When Nancy and I visited our daughter, Natalie, in Seoul, South Korea in June 2015, we toured many interesting sites, including a 16th century king's palace and the 1988 Summer Olympics Village. One of the most beautiful places we visited was a park next to the Han River, which flows through the middle of Seoul. The Han River is 319 miles long and flows east to west, dividing Seoul into northern and southern sections. The Korean government has developed eleven parks along the river where people go to swim, sail, ski, fish, and get away from the summer heat of the major metropolis.

On a June evening, we walked along the Han River and were amazed at how many people had gathered at the river to enjoy a picnic, listen to music, walk in the water, and sit by the river. There was so much to see and do at the river. The Korean government's plan to revitalize the Han River and downtown Seoul is a success. The river that runs through it is life-giving and life-restoring. No wonder so many people in that bustling city of 10 million gather at the river on a regular basis.

This morning we heard about another river, a beautiful, beautiful river where the saints gather, a river that flows by the throne of God. That river in the new Jerusalem reminds us of yet another river in the Garden of Eden: "A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates." (Genesis 2:10-14)

The mighty rivers of the world shape the land and the people who live near them – the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Nile, the Yangtze, the Colorado, the Snake, and the Ganges. Closer to home, we are familiar with the Cape Fear River and the Northeast Cape Fear River, both for the businesses and tourism they support and for the devastation they can bring in hurricane season. On the other end of the spectrum, more and more we are hearing about the severe droughts out West which threaten to dry up mighty rivers and cause dangerous water shortages. It's understandable why people throughout the world and throughout history have gathered by the river to find life.

On a hot July day in 1864, as the Civil War raged and a typhus/typhoid epidemic was spreading through New York City, Robert Lowry, pastor of the Hanson Place Baptist Church in Brooklyn, was lying down in his house, completely exhausted. As he laid there, he began to imagine visions of the future and he found himself thinking about Revelation 22, with its picture of the heavenly throne, the river flowing from the

throne of God, and the saints gathered at the river. Rev. Lowry writes, “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.”¹

[This might be a good place to pause and tell the old story about the preacher who wound up his temperance sermon by saying, “If I had all the beer in the world, I’d take it and throw it in the river!” When he heard a few “Amens!” he got more excited. “And if I had all the wine in the world, I’d take it and throw it in the river!” Now the congregation was really responding, so he gave them a big finish, “And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I’d take it and throw it into the river! Amen!” As he sat down, the choir director stood up and sheepishly announced, “Our closing hymn today is #275, Shall We Gather at the River?”]

The 319 mile-long Hudson River begins in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, flows through the Hudson River Valley, acts as the state line between New Jersey and New York at New York City, and flows into the Atlantic Ocean. New York City is the largest city in the world in area, at 4,669 square miles (compare that to just 234 square miles for Seoul). And yet, the Big Apple, as huge as it is, pales in comparison to the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. The dimensions are incomprehensible: 1400 miles long x 1400 miles wide = 1,960,000 square miles (or about half of the 3.8 million square miles of the United States). But wait! There’s more! The new Jerusalem is 1400 miles high, whatever that means! For reference (if it really helps), the Burj Khalifa in Dubai is the tallest building in the world and it is just barely more than half a mile tall and the International Space Station flies at an average altitude of 248 miles. The new Jerusalem is a cube of a little more than 2.7 billion cubic miles, whatever that means!

But wait! There’s more! The walls are 75 yards tall and made of jasper. The city itself is made of pure gold, clear as glass. Each of the four walls has three gates. Each of the gates is a pearl – not inlaid with pearl, but one pearl! La Peregrina of Panama is the largest pearl ever found on earth. It measures .7 inches long. These pearly gates can be estimated conservatively at 37.5 yards tall. That’s one big oyster! And the foundations are adorned with every jewel: red, yellow, brown, green, blue, yellow-green, pale green, yellow-orange, apple green, deep green, violet.

Before I read the New Testament lesson from Revelation this morning, I asked you to listen and try to imagine the picture John paints for us of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven from God. A city shaped like a cube, 1400 miles on each side. Walls 75 yards tall. Gates made out of enormous pearls. Gold as clear as glass. A river running through it, bright as crystal. It’s unimaginable, isn’t it? Don’t you think that’s exactly John’s point in writing down this vision? Even when we try to imagine what it will be like to be with God, the best we can do is picture the most magnificent things on earth and multiply them to the nth degree – and still, it’s unimaginable.

But, as one biblical scholar has said, when you get to the end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation, and you wade through all of the fantastic dimensions and architectural plans of the new Jerusalem, ultimately it's not *what* you encounter, but *God* you encounter – the God who is our home; the God who will dwell with us; the God who will be with us; the God who will wipe every tear from our eyes; the God who is seated on the throne by the river of the water of life; the God who is our light.

Very often you hear these words from Revelation 21 & 22 read at funerals, which is certainly appropriate. Much of our musing about what heaven will be like is based on John's description of the new Jerusalem. However, at the end of his wonderful commentary on Revelation, M. Eugene Boring points out that the picture of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21 & 22 "does not attempt to answer speculative questions about the future; it is offered as an orientation for life in the present."²

I agree with the professor's evaluation, because John wrote Revelation to bring a word of hope to Christians at the end of the first century A.D. who were besieged and bombarded and persecuted and tempted on every side to give up their faith in almighty God, the Creator and Ruler of all there is, who sent his Son to usher in God's kingdom, not just way off in the future, but in the midst of the difficult, challenging lives they had.

For that reason, Revelation is just as relevant for us today as it was for the people who first heard it read in Asia Minor in the last decade of the first century. Don't get me wrong! I don't equate every experience we have as Christians with what those early believers went through (although there are certainly Christians in today's world who are in the same situation). But we live in a world that does not reflect the character of God's kingdom which Jesus proclaimed in his Sermon on the Mount and demonstrated in his ministry of welcome, acceptance, healing, justice, and peace.

For that very reason, John's vision in Revelation is a call to Christians in every age to live in the present as people who are citizens of the new Jerusalem. If God's purpose at the end is symbolized by a city full of light, with wide open gates to welcome the nations, with a life-giving river flowing through it, with trees growing on its banks whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, then certainly that is the kind of life and community and witness we should work for right now. If not, then why do we pray, week in and week out, maybe even day by day, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ***on earth as it is in heaven***"?

It is said that a wise theologian once noted that we should not speculate on the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. After reading and hearing Revelation 21 & 22, it's tempting to speculate, if not on the furniture of heaven, then at least the architecture and urban planning of heaven. But if we fixate on the new city itself – or try to guess or even describe in detail what it will be like – we very likely will miss seeing who is sitting on the throne and we will ignore God's call to live faithful lives today, based on the promise of tomorrow symbolized by the incomprehensible and unimaginable new Jerusalem.

In a few minutes we will sing four verses of "Shall We Gather at the River?" Most hymnals omit Robert Lowry's fifth verse:

*At the smiling of the river,
Mirror of the Savior's face,
Saints, whom death will never sever,
Lift their songs of saving grace.*

Shall we gather at the river? Let's hope that some day we will all "gather at the river, the beautiful, beautiful river; gather with saints at the river that flows by the throne of God."

In the meantime, just as people gather at the Han River that flows through Seoul for refreshment and renourishment and energy, let us gather at the river with the one who said, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

Let us gather at the river now to be refreshed, nourished, and energized for the work God calls us to do as his people, in his kingdom, here, today, right now.

Shall we gather at the river?

Yes, we'll gather at the river!

Let us pray: written by St. Boniface (ca. 672-754)

Born in Anglo-Saxon England, leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to the Germanic parts of the Frankish Empire during the 8th century A.D.

Eternal God, the refuge and help of all your children, we praise you for all you have given us, for all you have done for us, for all that you are to us. In our weakness, you are strength, in our darkness, you are light, in our sorrow, you are comfort and peace. We cannot number your blessings, we cannot declare your love: For all your blessings we bless you. May we live as in your presence, and love the things that you love, and serve you in our daily lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: Apocalyptic vision leads to famous 19th-century hymn, 'Shall We Gather at the River?'" at www.umcdiscipleship.org.

²M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 224.