



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - January 15, 2017 Sermon

Deep Like the Rivers: Hope in God

Psalm 42, Revelation 22:1-5

I've known rivers:
I've 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 dawns were young.
I built my hut near 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.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
—*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Langston Hughes, 1902-1967

You could not step twice into the same river.—Heraclitus, 535-475 BCE

For what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.—Huck Finn, from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

One of the things I loved right away about Dayton was the rivers. From the first, even before I knew their names, or where they were, or where they came from, I could feel them: feel how they shaped the contours of the city, and of course soon enough I learned how they shaped the history of the city. They surprised me—the rivers. I'd be driving down South Patterson, with the hospital on my left—not the prettiest part of town—but then you crest that little hill, and there on your left is UD, in front of you is Carillon Park, and there to your right, stretched out before you, is the Great Miami River, green-shining in the sun, winding its way down to the Ohio River. And it wasn't just in my car. When I'd be running or biking on the Miami Valley trails—you know those trails don't always stay in sight of their rivers: sometimes they move away, and then all you see is trees on one side and old warehouses with tractor trailers sticking out of them on the other—but keep going!—because, maybe 400 yards later, the trail turns back again and there's the river, right where it's always been, moving, moving, moving.

"I've known rivers: My soul has grown deep like the rivers." That's Langston Hughes, the African-American poet, playwright and novelist, and he wrote those words on first seeing the Mississippi River.

I've known rivers: My soul has grown deep like the rivers. Rivers get inside us, they shape the contours of our lives and souls, certainly the Mississippi has shaped America's soul, and the Great Miami, Dayton's.

Change and constancy, the passage of time and eternity, rivers symbolize both—come to be both—in our imaginations.

Change and the passing of time: they're always changing, flowing, moving. "You can't step into the same river twice," said the ancient philosopher. And of course he wasn't talking only about rivers, but about our lives, and time, our existence itself.

And yet at the same time, constancy and eternity: there are patterns of change, and those patterns persist and endure: dawn to dusk, day to night, the cycle of the seasons (if you want to appreciate the seasons, just live on a river), the ebb and flow of the tides, flood and drought, the growth and movement of plants and animals, and of human travel, settlement, and civilization.

But even more than the patterns of change: the constancy and the eternity of the rivers themselves. As the centuries and the millennia roll on, the rivers are always flowing, flowing, flowing. Yes, their courses will change through great expanses of time, and no doubt rivers appear and disappear in geologic time, but in our time, as we experience time, rivers are always there—changing, flowing, and moving, yes—but always there, changing, flowing, and moving. Change and constancy, time and eternity—rivers have come to mean both in our imaginations.

And because rivers are always there, peoples, states, and nations have used them as markers, as boundaries, both political and cultural. It's as if we want to borrow the permanence of the river as a way to establish and legitimize what would otherwise be transitory and arbitrary differences.

The American east is not the American west because of the Mississippi River; Downtown Dayton is not North Dayton because of the Great Miami river; Ohio is not Kentucky because of the Ohio river. And for much of the 19th-century in America, a human being was not a human being but a piece of property to be bought and sold because of that same Ohio river.

Which makes their hope all the more remarkable. You can hear that hope in their Spirituals, in today's Spirituals in particular: "I'm gonna sing 'til the Spirit moves in my heart. I'm gonna sing 'til Jesus comes. It was grace that brought me, grace that taught me, grace that kept me, and grace that will lead me home. I'm gonna sing 'til my Jesus comes."

That's hope. And in a few minutes, you'll hear hope again in another spiritual:

"Deep river, my home is over Jordan. . . .
Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over to that Promised Land, where all is peace."

In that spiritual, *Deep River*, the Jordan river is also a boundary-marker, but in this case (as with rivers in songs, stories, and poems the world over) it's a boundary marker between life and death, between this world and the next.

The African-American slaves, the first singers of those spirituals, looked at our rivers and found hope. But you know, it doesn't have to be that way: you could look at rivers and their everflowingness and see—feel—only despair:

Futility futility all is futility, All streams run to the sea, they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome; more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

That's despair, and that's in the Bible, in the Book of Ecclesiastes. (Every human emotion, John Calvin said, is represented in the Bible as in a mirror). And yet while that note of despair should be in the Bible (the whole range of human emotions needs to be in the Bible because we need to see ourselves—to find ourselves—there), that note of despair is neither the first word nor the last word in the Bible about rivers:

Here's the Bible's first word about rivers: in the opening chapters of Genesis: "the Lord God made a river to flow out of Eden to water the garden."

And here's the Bible's last word, in the final chapter of the Book of Revelation (the passage I just read): "then I saw the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb."

And in between, Jesus says: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

Living water. The river that flows from God and back to God: the river of life, the river of light and love. And so, however we may use the rivers in our world to divide ourselves and divide ourselves from God, those divisions are not eternal. It's the river of God that is eternal; and it is a river of life, not death. The river of life waters the tree of life and the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations. And so we too, like those who first sang the spirituals, can hope. We can hope because we can feel that river of God, feel that healing, even when we can't see it. Feel how that river has shaped the contours of our world and lives, and then on those occasions when we catch a glimpse of that river, a glimpse that surprises us, we can know, if only for a moment, the source of that hope.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan. . . Deep River: Lord, I want to cross over to that Promised Land, where all is peace. Or as the boy, who once floated down the Mississippi River on a raft, protecting a runaway slave, put it, "what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others."

You may think it weird, or at least a little incongruous, that I'm preaching hope, right now. These seem to be anxious—not hopeful days: days when nobody seems satisfied or feels right and kind towards anybody; days when things that once seemed as enduring as a river, suddenly seem imperiled.

The Christian church in North America, for example. The fastest growing religious group among Americans under the age of 35 is "nones." And I don't mean Roman Catholic women taking orders. I mean those who, under the heading "religion," check the box, "None—n-o-n-e." And this loss of young adults is especially pronounced in the so-called mainline denominations, including Presbyterianism.

In our political life too: the integrity of our elections, the rule of law, a commitment to the common good that manifests itself in some measure of truthfulness and self-restraint in our political speech, or at least the belief that our political speech should have some measure of truthfulness and self-restraint, our shared belief in the American dream, a dream of a place where everybody is satisfied and feels right and kind towards the others—all these things that once seemed as much a part of the American landscape as our many rivers, that seemed to shape the contours of our national soul, as the Mississippi River shaped our national history and geography—all these things now suddenly seem imperiled.

Anxious not hopeful times—and therefore, all the more reason to hope. All the more reason to hope because we hope not in ourselves but in God; we hope not in the world as we have made it, but because God has made it, and loves it still; we hope because, at the center of all things, a river runs through it. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Now I know the question that's coming: Hope is all well and good, but what can we do? We ask that question, and it's a good, well-meaning and earnest question; and we ask it because we are Americans and Presbyterians which means we are good, well-meaning, and earnest—most of the time. And I could say a lot of good, well-meaning, and earnest things in response to that question: we need to get involved, get engaged, try harder. We need to talk less, listen more; to understand one another better. We need to exercise more truthfulness and self-restraint in our speech, and if our social media do not encourage that, all the more reason to do it. We need to love our youth and model Christian discipleship for them. We need to reclaim the true mission of the church which is to share God's love in Jesus Christ with the world. We need to work together to meet the challenges that confront us to ensure our church and our country become what God intends them to be, that we become what intends us to be. Those are all good, well-meaning, and earnest things, so let's just say that I said them all and many more things like them.

But here's what I really want to say: Go to the river. Any of Dayton's five rivers will do—you could go over to Riverscape Park (it's close), but, really, any river will do. But don't just look at the river while driving by it in your car (you don't want to drive into the river, after all), but find a place where you can look at the river, and let it get inside you. Look at the river, and see change and constancy, time and eternity, and see that river as an image of—or better, see it as,—the river of God, the eternal God who comes to us in time, and was baptized for our sakes in the Jordan River, the one who promised that “out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

Look at the river as the river of God, and see the God-given, God-grown, God-glowing goodness of things—the goodness of this country and its people. See the way the river of God has shaped the contours of this country, its history and its soul. Look at the river and let that goodness get inside you.

Or if you can't look at a river—and I know, I know it's freezing out today—listen to *Deep River* as the choir sings it. Listen to *Deep River* and think of the God-given, God-grown, God-glowing goodness of things, the goodness of this church and its people, of Presbyterianism, of the Reformed tradition, of the church universal—Jesus' church. Think of the way the river of God has shaped the contours of this church, its history and its soul. Listen to *Deep River*, and let that goodness get inside you—and take hope.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

“I've known rivers: My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.