

“Where the River Flows”

Introduction: Last Monday Rama and I went to see the movie *Harriet*. It is a biographical sketch of the life of Harriet Tubman, a woman born into slavery (in 1820?) in Maryland who escaped in 1849 to Pennsylvania and became a free woman. It was a 100-mile journey that she undertook entirely on her own. That is remarkable enough, but what is truly remarkable to me is that she didn't just stay there enjoying her newfound freedom. Instead, she became a “Conductor” on what was known as the Underground Railroad and returned to the South some 13 times to rescue a total of 70 family and friends from slavery. Later, during the Civil War, she led a raid that freed an additional 700 slaves!

Her life, lived not just to enjoy her own freedom but to lead others to experience such freedom, struck a chord with me as I reflected on Ezekiel 47 and the final and climactic vision God gave to his prophet. Last week we looked at the beginning of this final vision which consisted of a picture of a new temple and the return of the glory of God to fill this temple (Ez. 40-43). Pondering the beauty and the perfection of this new temple, and the encouraging hope that God would dwell among them again, was to lead the Israelites in exile to ponder the holiness of God and to begin to heed his call to be holy as he is holy.

But importantly, the vision doesn't end with God and his people gathering in the temple to enjoy one another's holiness! The pouring out of this river of the water of life that Ezekiel sees as the vision continues reveals God's desire that his glory flow out from himself, through his people, and into a thirsty world, bringing his life wherever it flows.

I. The River from the Temple in Jerusalem

A. So, as we step back into this final vision, Ezekiel's divine tour guide has taken him back to the east gate from where he can now see a trickle of water coming from under the threshold of the main entrance. Before he has time to wonder how he didn't see this when he had been there earlier, his guide leads him along a now steadily growing stream, stopping to take soundings at four points along the way, or every 500 meters. At first the water is ankle deep, then he finds himself wading up to his knees, then the water comes up to his waist, and finally it's deep enough to swim in.

B. Following his guide wisely back to the river bank, Ezekiel hears the guide explain that this river flows all the way down to the Dead Sea where it will make the salt water fresh (except for the swamps and marshes which will produce enough salt for preserving and seasoning of food) and enable a large number of living creatures and fish to thrive, turning the Dead Sea into a fishermen's paradise! In addition, fruit trees will grow on each side of the river which, nourished by this water of life, will be able to produce fruit for food all year long, as well as healing balm that will come from its leaves. Simply put, God promises that where the river flows, everything will live (v. 9).

C. Now, this image of a healing river would have been a significant one for God's people, for water was a significant resource for those who lived in the Ancient Near East. It was scarce yet necessary for life. Therefore, scenes of abundance in the Bible are often depicted by scenes of water. So, for instance, we read that the garden of Eden was watered by a river that then flowed from Eden and separated into four rivers flowing out into the whole earth (Ge. 2:10-14). In our psalm for this morning (46), a river symbolizes the joy of those living within the security of God's presence. In Psalm 65 water depicts literal rain which brings great fertility to the land. In Psalm 36 we hear of how God satisfies our

thirst from his “river of delights.” The prophet Joel picks up this theme as he symbolically describes God’s new creation as mountains dripping with wine, hills flowing with milk, ravines running with water, and fountains flowing out of the Lord’s house to water the valleys (3:18). In a world threatened with famine, infertility, and death, a river that transforms all that it touches would have been a much anticipated and welcomed thing. But when, and how, would it begin to flow?

II. The River from the Temples of God’s People

A. Obviously this kind of transformation on this kind of abundant scale, as described in the psalms and the prophets, is yet to come. What we see as we skip ahead to the vision John is given of God’s new creation in the book of Revelation is that this river of life is a central part of the New Jerusalem. As we said last week, this new city has no need for a temple; it’s all temple! So it shouldn’t surprise us to see the river flowing out from the throne of God right down the middle of the city street where it brings healing for the nations so that people from every nation, tribe, and language will be worshipping and serving the living God. And not to miss that coming as it does from the throne of God, this healing river reveals to us that the source of new life is God, and that God’s nature and desire is to give, and to give, and to keep on giving!

B. But, do we need to wait until the end of time to experience such a river? Jesus would say “no,” we can begin to participate in this abundant giving and multinational healing now. To that end, John records these words of Jesus in chapter 7:

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

The festival in question is the Feast of Tabernacles, a time of remembering and celebrating how God had been with his people during their wilderness wanderings. During that feast there was a water ceremony which took place each day in which a golden flask was filled with water and poured out from the temple. It was to look back to God’s provision of water in the desert and to look forward to the fulfillment of scriptures like Ezekiel 47. After seven days of this ceremony, Jesus stood up and took this image and applied it to himself. He claimed to be the source of living water and that the water pointed toward the thirst-quenching gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that he would be giving to all who entered an ongoing, trusting relationship with him.

C. Putting this all together, we might picture the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as turning each believer, and then each community of believers, into miniature temples. Paul actually references both in his first letter to the church in Corinth:

To the community: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” - 1 Cor. 3:16

To the individual believer: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” - 1 Cor. 6:19

In both cases, God's people are not living in a way in which blessing is flowing to others and Paul has to call them to account. These temples are not to exist for themselves, nor are people free to live however they want, but (like Harriet Tubman) are to be a source of blessing to all who are around them as the thirst-quenching life of Jesus they have received flows out from them and points others to him.

D. I think this can also be a helpful image for us as we think about our financial stewardship in these days. It takes me to words of King David as he reflected on offerings that God's people had been bringing to support the building of the first temple. He prayed, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chron. 29:14). In other words, everything that flows out from us has first flowed into us from God. It is only because of the life-giving generosity of God that we have anything to give, and as we give, we serve as a conduit for God's healing grace. God's desire is that his glory flow out from himself, through his people, and into a thirsty world.

E. It's also important to notice that no gift is too small or too insignificant for God to use. For, notice again how this river begins...with a trickle! It's a flow of water probably no larger than would pour out of the mouth of a bottle, and then, within just over a mile, it becomes a swiftly flowing river too deep to cross, bringing great and much needed fertility to all it touches. God is like that! I think of when Jesus held up five loaves of bread and two fish, offering all that he had to the Father, and the Father blessed it and multiplied it so that it fed a crowd of thousands, with leftovers. Or when Jesus told a parable about the growth of the Kingdom of God, he said that it begins like a mustard seed—the tiniest of seeds—and when rightly planted, will grow to become the largest of all the plants in the garden. God can take what we give, no matter how much, if we give cheerfully, thoughtfully, sacrificially, and joyfully out of the grace he has poured out on us, and use what we give to meet the thirst of others and to magnify his glory. What a privilege we have to participate in the river that brings everything to life.