

August 23, 2015      “There Is A River”      Psalm 46:4

2015 has been quite the year. And we have a way to go before it is over. Way back at the beginning of the year Barbara and I, you will recall, made a pilgrimage to Israel, “walking in the footsteps of Jesus”. My mind is still boggled by the idea that a nation that has made the marks, Israel has made on the whole of the world, could only have one river, and as I never seem to tire of telling people, and that river the size of what we would call Rawdon Creek. Only one fresh water lake...the Sea of Galilee.

How easy it is to forget the degree to which Ontario in general, Canada in particular is blessed with its abundance of fresh water rivers and creeks and lakes. Our tour guide told us that his mind was boggled, by the sight of Niagra Falls. There is nothing like it in the Holy Land. There is nothing like it in the whole of the Middle East. That part of the world is for the most part desert. I am still trying to come to grips with that reality.

And yet in marvelous ways of God that very experience of the desert, a dry and thirsty land, gives rise to this metaphor of the grace of God. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” O yes. O yes. Without the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee and the great Aquaducts that carry that water supply all the way to Jerusalem, there would be no Jerusalem. The home of the Temple of Solomon. The site of the Dome of the Rock. The sites and villages and fields that Jesus walked. The roads He took that led Him to Jerusalem, and the cross and the open tomb. And yes for so many who have worshipped and do worship in that city of God, there is one river that makes it possible and it is a gift of the grace of God, that blesses those who believe.

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So we should not be surprised at the eagerness with which Christians in particular grab this metaphor of the river to speak of the transforming nature of the presence of God. The river as a sign of the miraculous. Without water there is no city. Without water there is no life. Except we be washed in the waters of our baptism accompanied by our profession of faith there is no new life, no hope of life eternal through faith in Jesus. Water makes everything man can do in that harsh desert environment possible. Without there is just the burning heat, the rock, the blazing sand, and the beasts and birds that make the desert their home,

We began our service here this morning singing, “Shall We Gather At The River. The beautiful, beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river, that flows by the throne of God.” And here we are literally living out that sentiment. Making that idea real. Making it life. We gathered within sight of the Trent waterway courtesy of our hosts. I'm sure they had not idea when they began making this place their home how it would become so meaningful to the church family of which they are a part. On behalf of all of us we thank them for generously sharing their home and this setting with the rest of us. Here we are gathered at the river. And as every Canadian knows it is a beautiful day when you can be a part of a worship gathering at the waters edge. It is beautiful. And here we gather with the saints. Always remember that word saints by definition in the Bible is not talking about people who are perfect, who have the holy glare of of a halo about their heads. No! The saints in the Bible are your common everyday garden variety Christian. People who believe. Dare I say, people who believe and make the prayer quickly after that statement, “Lord help my unbelief!” Old sinners like myself, but for the grace of God, the shed blood of Christ, and just enough faith to try and follow our master, our Lord. As the hymn says that river makes glad

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the city of God. That tide of saving grace is the ingredient that brings joy to our experience in the midst of real living which at times can be really hard. Why? Because even as we experience our pain and sometimes real hardship, that river of grace flows by the throne of God. We confess we cannot help ourselves. We altered by the fact of our being borne, carried by the throne of God, because faith is a genuine part of our lives and our experience.

And of course this is only one hymn that grasps at that metaphor. There is also hymn number 30. “As the deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you. You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.” The recognition that without water there is no life. That worship is akin to being able to drink a glass of water on a hot day, when you are really, really, really thirsty. The implication of this hymn, just like Psalm 46 is that God alone satisfies the deepest needs of our hearts, of our souls, of our minds.

The chorus # 247 in our little Master Chorus Book says “There is

a river that flows from deep within, There is a fountain that frees the soul from sin. Come to the water. There is a vast supply. There is a river, that never shall run dry.” It is not talking about the Niagra River with its thundering falls that continues to impress people from all around the world. It is not talking about the Obonga River that flows through the heart of Northwestern Ontario wilderness to Lake Nipigon. It is talking very simply and in tangible terms about faith in Jesus, and how that faith affects the way we live and the degree to which we enjoy life. Basking in the presence of God and all that His Spirit brings our way.

No lesser a commentator than John Calvin says this about verse 4 of Psalm 46. “The prophet simply intended to say, that the

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small streams of a river would afford to the holy city, abundant cause for rejoicing, though the whole world should be moved or destroyed.” He goes on, “In like manner we have portrayed for us the victory of faith (I add the words...faith in Jesus and the God whom he reveals) we have portrayed for the victory of faith over the whole world....it triumphs over all fear.”

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the most high dwells.” Psalm 46:4. David the shepherd king wrote these words. He writes that this is what we need to remember when the earth gives way as in an earth quake. When the ground moves beneath our feet. My father used to say one of the things he liked about Canada was the ground tended to stay where it was supposed to, beneath your feet. And that the Canadian experience of storms was not that of the far east for example where Monsoons regularly swept through destroying cities and carrying hundreds of people away in their devastation of the landscape. The presence of this river is a presence of peace in a world turned upside down.

Some would say that that seems to be changing as we continue to experience climate change. I would simply point out that the more chaos seems to be injected into our lives and the lives of those whom we love, the greater is the soul's longing for signs of peace and hope. And for those who are able to enjoy the rivers, the creeks, and the lakes of our country in the summer time there is the great temptation to lay back in the sunshine listening to the sounds made by the water and the waves and say “life is

good!” Life is good. And I would simply add...Because God is near. Life is good because God is near.

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That's the thread that runs through the teaching of Psalm 46. When faith grasps that God is near it is as though everything that is wrong in the world is somehow altered and turned to right. It is not that there is no pain or difficulty, but that what changes is a result of the realization of what the Psalmist wrote in verse 11...The Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. In closing I would simply like to quote another hymn from our Book of Praise....”With the Lord as my guide, I will walk through the desert, rest by the water, run in the wind. With the Lord by my side, I will stand on the mountain, drink from the fountain, of love deep within.

To God be the glory. Let us pray:

O healing river, send down your waters,  
Send down your water upon this land,  
O healing river send down your waters,  
To wash the blood from off the sand.

This land is thirsting, this land is parching  
No seed is growing in the barren ground,  
This land is thirsting, this land is parching  
O healing river, send your waters down.  
Amen.