

Let the River Run
Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5

Sixth Sunday of Easter/ 26th May 2019

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...” (Rev. 21:1-2).

Just over three years ago, nearly one hundred Presbyterians assembled in a city. It wasn't the new Jerusalem but the City of Baltimore. Members of Baltimore Presbytery gathered on the corner of Penn and North Avenues, in front of the CVS that was looted and then burned in the uprising the previous April. We walked, singing as we walked along North Avenue to an outdoor vigil at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, the first Presbyterian church in the city established for enslaved African Americans. We were there to remember the death of Freddie Gray, on April 12, 2015, and the riots, the uprising, the destruction, the despair that swept through Baltimore.

In prayer and song and testimony we confessed the systemic sins of racism and poverty and privilege and inequality and the church's complicity in all of it. And we lit candles and promised that we would let our lights shine in the dark places, and that we would keep walking—keep walking to a better place, keep walking toward a better time, keep walking into a future that embodies God's love and justice.

If you've spent any time in that part of Baltimore, in Sandtown-Winchester, you know that racism and impoverishment and unemployment and economic inequality are not new issues for the city. Freddie Gray was (and remains) the tip of the iceberg. Driving back to Catonsville after the vigil, I remember seeing a tree growing within the shell of a building, a row house. Its branches were growing through where windows and a roof once were. The tree, a Lilac tree, in full bloom, was about four-stories high. It was a powerful symbol for me that afternoon. That shell of that house had been sitting there, empty, abandoned, devoid of human life, for a long time—long enough for a tree to grow through it. Actually, there are many shells with trees growing through them.

Drive through those streets, block after block of row houses and tenements, and your thoughts begin to wonder—what is it like to live there? You think of the children growing up there, the food deserts, the economic disparity, the lack of meaningful employment, families trying to survive, just trying to keep their children safe in streets where gun violence and murder are on the rise. The level of devastation in some neighborhoods is comparable to war-torn regions of the world. When you're on the Amtrak train going north from Baltimore you can't ignore it. Looking in from the outside, one feels overwhelmed by it all. If you live there it must feel overwhelming, feeling as if the entire world is against you. All of it—the injustice, the economic disparity—is generations, even centuries, in the making, often very intentional, and it's going to take the commitment, passion, and imagination of generations to come to correct it.

Since Freddie Gray, the presbytery has been very intentional about its response. We've given matters of race and racial injustice our thoughts and prayers, and then followed them with concrete action. We have explored the roots of racism, we've explored unconscious bias, and white skin privilege. A Dismantling Racism Task Force was formed,

facilitated by Susan Krehbiel. I joined the Task Force. We've had honest, frank theological discussions about race, the history of racism, and privilege. And then we proposed that the presbytery adopt a new policy—the only kind in the denomination—requiring every minister member and staff of the presbytery participate in an 8-hour, comprehensive, race sensitivity training. The first training took place last November, and this past week we completed the third training session, led by [Baltimore Racial Justice Action](#). My involvement with the task force and the training has been some of the most meaningful work that I've been engaged in in the presbytery. It's painful, intense, exhausting, necessary work as we deal with the past in order to redeem the present, and future. As the great Southern writer, William Faulkner (1897-1962) said, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." For the Christian, however, the past is never destiny. Theologically, we are not merely the products of the past, and we don't have to be trapped in the past. The future can be, will be, *is* something else entirely, by the mercy of God.

How do we strike a balance between being critically honest and real about the present situation without allowing the present to define the future? That precarious place between the present and the future, the now and the not-yet, is the razor's edge where the Christian lives. I often say to people facing challenging, painful times, "Try to stay in the moment." Our fears and worries about what *might* happen are usually fantasies that never come to fruition. We're often wrong when we think about what tomorrow might bring. No one is wise enough to know for sure what will happen in the future. Stay in the moment, I say, stay with what you know. That said, at the same time we have to ensure that we don't get stuck in the present, stuck in the now, because that, too, can be overwhelming. While it's true that all we ever have at any given moment is the present, confidence in the future is a foundation for hope.

Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), the South African anti-apartheid activist, said, "I am not an optimist, but a great believer of hope." There is world of difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is not a theological category, and neither is pessimism. You won't find either words in the Bible. But what you will find are a lot of references to hope. And we need to lean into that hope, lean into the future, and in doing so, take the long view. The problems, issues, and challenges we face, whether individually or together as a society, will not be solved in this generation or the next; they will not be solved by our children or grandchildren or their children, and we need to be okay with this—without being passive or falling into despair. Yes, change and healing are coming, slowly, but they're coming, and their slowness in coming can't be used as an excuse to do nothing. It's been said that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but its bends toward justice."¹ I think this is true. Clarity about where we're going gives us the confidence, and the courage, to live in the present. It's helpful at times to step back and take a long view, for it keeps despair and discouragement at bay.

This is one of the reasons why I love the cathedrals of Europe. Their presence says something profound about the yearnings and aspirations of the human soul, which is probably why it was so painful to watch Notre Dame in flames several weeks ago. We have much to learn from them. For example, consider the enormous amount of creativity, love, work, skill, determination, passion, failure, strength, hope that went into the design and building of those houses of worship. The workers, mostly nameless to us, spent their entire lives working on a task that they never saw completed. These Christians weren't sitting around waiting for Jesus

¹ This statement is attributed to Theodore Parker (1810-1860), the American Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister.

to return or wishing for the end of the world, but actively creating a place of beauty for their Lord when he returned. A favorite cathedral is the one in Strasbourg, France, with its massive façade. Victor Hugo (1802-1885) called it “a gigantic and delicate marvel.” Johann Goethe (1749-1832) said it was “a sublimely towering, wide-spreading tree of God.” These cathedrals were built to last, built to survive fires, built to be around for a very long time. Again, the cathedral builders gave their lives to the creation of something beautiful and awe-inspiring, all for the glory of God, which was never finished in their lifetime.

Where are our cathedrals today? Where are we putting that kind of energy and creativity and imagination into a seemingly impossible task? What is attracting the yearnings and aspirations of the human soul? Where are we engaged in designing and building something beautiful in the world for the Lord?

In John’s vision, found in Revelation 21 and 22, we’re given a glimpse of the future, a new city, a new Jerusalem. While the Bible begins in Genesis in a garden, it ends in a garden-city. God dwells with God’s people in a city. “See the home of God is among mortals” (Rev. 21:3), and that home is an enormous, vast, beautiful city, with streets of gold, walls clear as glass, gates adorned with jewels. Its light comes from God’s presence, God’s glory; its four gates are never shut, they’re always open, because it’s never night. Here death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. You won’t find a church, synagogue, or temple at the center the city; the whole city is the place of worship and meeting with God. Running through the city is a river, flowing with water, the water of life, bright as crystal. The river is the source of life, giving life to the city—flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, the Lamb who is water of life. And on either side of the river are two trees, the trees of life, producing fruit, every month. The leaves of these trees are for the healing of the nations. This is where we’re going. This is God’s vision, this is God’s dream for our future, for *all* God’s children.

The new Jerusalem and Baltimore. The City of Baltimore and the City of God. It’s quite a contrast, isn’t it? Perhaps the two need to be held together in creative tension, with one informing the other. Hearing the vision of Revelation 21 and 22, though, it’s easy to get discouraged. Will we ever get there? Is it all a fantasy? An unreachable ideal? Idealism can be just as oppressive as realism.

It’s easy for the people of the Church and its ministers to get dispirited and depressed. There are days when I feel very dispirited and discouraged. We plant seeds and never really know which ones will take root and grow and which ones will be choked or burned up or blown away by the wind. Sometimes it feels like we’re making no difference in the world.

But then I consider the river, and remember that it’s not up to us. And so I count on the river flowing from the throne of God. What if that river really is flowing right now? What if we lived as if it was already flowing, on the way toward us? We’ve given a glimpse of that world to come, what if we lived as is truly on the way, and that we are already participating in it?

The closing song in the musical *Godspell* captures that vision and calls us toward it:

*Out of the ruins and rubble
Out of the smoke
Out of our night of struggle*

*Can we see a ray of hope?
One pale thin ray reaching for the day...*

*We can build a beautiful city
Yes, we can (Yes, we can)
We can build a beautiful city
Not a city of angels
But we can build a city of man*

*We may not reach the ending
But we can start
Slowly but surely mending
Brick by brick
Heart by heart
Now, maybe now
We start learning how*

*We can build a beautiful city
Yes we can (Yes, we can)
We can build a beautiful city
Not a city of angels
But we can build a city of man.²*

The river is always flowing that brings healing. We can't make the river run, and try as we might, we can't really stop it. It's already flowing. It's on its way toward us, let it come. So, what if we let the river flood our lives? What if we welcomed it with joy? What if we give ourselves over to its flow, get swept up in it, and then go wherever it wants to take us? What if?

I'm always moved and inspired by Carly Simon's song *Let the river run*, from the movie *Working Girl*, from 1989. It might not be the greatest movie, but the song says it all. Simon sings it on the Staten Island Ferry, with the Twin Towers rising up behind her. (Here's a video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv-0mmVnxPA>.)

*Let the river run
Let all the dreamers
Wake the nation
Come, the New Jerusalem*

*Silver cities rise
The morning lights
The streets that meet them
And sirens call them on
With a song*

*It's asking for the taking
Trembling, shaking
Oh, my heart is aching*

² "A Beautiful City" from *Godspell* (1971). Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz.

*We're coming to the edge
Running on the water
Coming through the fog
Your sons and daughters*

*We the great and small
Stand on a star
And blaze a trail of desire
Through the dark'ning dawn*

*It's asking for the taking
Come run with me now
The sky is the color of blue
You've never even seen
In the eyes of your lover*

...

*It's asking for the taking
Trembling, shaking, ...aching.*

...

*Let the river run
Let all the dreamers
Wake the nation
Come, the New Jerusalem.*

May it be so.



West Rose Window, Strasbourg Cathedral (Photo: K Kovacs).