

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

May 9, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: River of Grace,

John 5: 1-9, Acts 16: 9-15, Revelation 21: 10, 22-22:5

For eons people have speculated what the end of our world will be like. Personally, I do not think that any vision of the end of time and what heaven and earth will be like “can compare with the sheer audacity of John’s vision of the ‘new Jerusalem’ that comes down from God to form the center of the ‘new heaven and new earth.’ Imagine: A city laid out, not just as a square, but also as a cube. Each dimension of the city stretching out for 1,500 miles! Such a city would extend from Miami to Montreal to Regina, Saskatchewan, to El Paso, Texas, and back to Miami. And since ‘its length and width and height are equal’ that means that the walls of the city reach 1,500 miles up (more than five times the orbital altitude of the international space station!).” Essentially, this means that this heaven come to earth goes on forever. The colors of the gates and walls are spectacular. “And within those walls the city itself is ‘pure gold.’ So pure that it is ‘clear as glass.’ What ultimately awaits God’s people not only staggers the imagination, it reduces the human imagination to nothing.” “Emphasis,” May/June 2004

“The ‘new Jerusalem’ is heaven because it is the place where God and humanity live in an unhindered relationship with one another.” Here in this heaven come to earth is “the peace that passes all understanding.” (Philippians 4) “In the symbolism of John’s vision, it is a city with ‘no temple ... for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ who are always and everywhere present with its inhabitants. It is a city that ‘has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.’ It is a city that’s ‘gates will never be shut’ because there is no enemy or threat to its people either outside or within its walls. It is a city through which flows ‘the river of the water of life ... from the throne of God’ to nourish the ‘tree of life’ which grows along its banks.” “Emphasis,” May/June 2004

In the light of today’s scriptures, it is this river of life that flows from the throne of God that gets my attention. Rivers are a fascinating and vital part of God’s creation. They can be conduits of precious life supporting water, if we stop polluting them. People fish from them, swim in them, build houses and cities by them, siphon water supplies from them and float many a boat on them. Animals of all kinds depend upon them to live, as well. We also fight over them. In my younger years, I loved watching the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers form the Ohio River in Pittsburgh, PA. Actually, a fourth unnamed underground glacial river comes out at that congruence called the Point. Unfortunately, rivers on earth, as it is now, also flood and cause great death and damage. I imagine that we all have river stories to tell because they are a fascinating and vital part of God’s creation. The River of Life flowing from the throne of God is an essential part of God’s new creation or heaven on earth.

Rivers on our earth have a source or a beginning point that gives them life. It may be a glacier or lake, and quite often they begin with a spring or several springs of water flowing up out of the ground. Even the mighty Mississippi begins with small

springs feeding into Lake Itasca in Northwest Minnesota. Rivers grow in size as many creeks or streams flow into them. As in the case of the Mississippi, rivers flow into rivers causing it to become very large. Every river on earth has a source or beginning point that gives it life.

The heavenly River of Life has a source, too. It is God himself. This River of Life, as well as rivers on earth, reminds me of the flow of God's grace, that precious life-giving love of God. Even though the writer of Revelation pictures this beautiful river as a future creation, it exists today. It is God's River of Grace flowing out to a world in need of healing, peace, redemption and everlasting life—the very essences of heaven on earth. God is the source of this River of Life and Grace that sustains our lives today. We see this in today's scripture passages. Let us listen to the River of Life and Grace stories these scriptures have to tell about its source and flow.

Today's scriptural flow of the River of Life and Grace started as a small pool at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. This pool of water the man lay beside for so many years had a source like that of some rivers. Most likely the source was a spring with thermal vents that stirred the waters. The legend then was that when the waters began to bubble, it was angels stirring them. If someone could get into the waters while they were active, one would be healed, so people said. This man who had been ill for 38 years could not get anyone to put him in the waters so he might be healed. This is not unlike people in our day who have been denied health care when it exists all around them. Talk about stirring the waters.

However, for the man at the pool, the grace of God that heals him was not the water at all. The source of God's grace flowing into his life sprung forth upon him in the person of Jesus. The man makes no recognition or request of Jesus. But in a "demonstration of unprovoked grace," Jesus walks up to the man and asks him if he wishes to get well. The man is so focused on being healed by the water, all he can think about is having someone put him into the water. At first, he misses Jesus' offer of healing and grace. Jesus ignores this man's narrow focus and tells him to stand up, take his mat and walk—and he does. "Nothing in the man's conduct or disposition accounts for the cure that brought to an end nearly four decades of affliction. He becomes a passive recipient of a remarkable gift"—the flow of God's grace into his life at the hand of Jesus. [Texts For Preaching—Year C](#), pg 319.

Like an accumulation of water grows into a river, so has this grace of God. The Apostle Paul, who was once called Saul, the persecutor of Christians, was swept up by the river of God's grace to confess Christ as Lord and Savior; and became the greatest Christian missionary to the Gentiles. This River of Life and Grace caused Paul to have a vision of a man inviting him to come to Macedonia which was just north of Greece. Paul was being swept along to take the Good News to Europe. He took Silas and Timothy with him. As they walked through Macedonia on a Sabbath day, the River of Life and Grace swept them to a place along a river which was a common location for synagogues outside Palestine during that period. There they were likely to meet Jews and other converts to the Jewish religion. The converts then were called "worshippers of God."

Indeed, God's River of Life and Grace led them to a "worshipper of God" named Lydia, who was a Gentile. The Lord had opened her heart in response Paul's preaching to receive Jesus as Lord. She too was swept up by the River of Grace. It is interesting to note that the first European Christian was a Gentile woman. In the days when women were considered second class, Lydia's conversion spoke volumes about the River of Life and Grace that flows through Christ from the throne of God. "Those who would attempt to deny to women full and equal participation in the church—and many of these people are themselves of European extraction— must stand reminded that the pilgrimage in which they are engaged was pioneered by a woman!" All are equal in Christ and the grace of God. [Texts For Preaching—Year C](#), pg. 314.

"Lydia is so warm in her acceptance of Paul and Silas and their message that she insists that they accompany her to her home. In fact, the manner in which she extends the invitation makes of their response a test of their confidence in her. 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' It is a way of saying, 'I have believed what you have said to me; now show me that you believe my response!' Under such circumstances, the disciples had little choice but to accept Lydia's hospitality." [Texts For Preaching—Year C](#), pg. 314.

Today, this River of Life and Grace that flows from the throne of God has grown and journeyed throughout the centuries to you and me. It comes to bring us salvation in Jesus Christ. It has swept us up to cure us of the paralyzing sickness of sin in our lives. There is nothing in our conduct or disposition that causes the grace of God in Jesus Christ to flow into us. The fact that you and I can confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is also a "demonstration of unprovoked grace." In the person of the Holy Spirit, Christ first approaches us and asks us if we "want to be made well." Like the man at the pool, we might be so focused on what we think will make us well that we can initially miss the offer. Our responses might be, "I do not have the right clothes on for a salvation occasion." "I am not good enough to be saved." "I do not know enough about the Bible or theology to be smart enough to be accepted by Christ." "I do not go to church enough to be Holy enough to belong to God." On and on we could go with our narrow thinking and focuses and miss the offer from Jesus like the man at the pool did at first.

The flow of the River of God's Grace in Jesus Christ is such that Jesus forgives our ignorant excuses and heals or saves us anyway. He tells us "to stand up, take up our mats and walk in faith in him." The pools of water or idolatries we lie beside waiting to be saved are meaningless. It is the River of God's Grace alone that flows through Jesus to us that heals and saves us.

If you have not yet experienced Jesus Christ and his grace coming to you with the offer to be healed of the sin that paralyzes you, see him approaching you now. Hear his voice ask if you want to be healed. Watch him ignore your mis-focused excuses and hear him tell you to stand, to take up your mat and experience the flow of God's River of Life and Grace as you follow him as Lord and Savior. Realize as the man at the Sheep Gate pool did that the healing and salvation are not to be found in the waters, but in a "demonstration of unprovoked grace" by Jesus who is God with us. The River of Life and Grace is indeed flowing into us today from God the source.

May this flow of God's grace and the salvation it brings cause us to be as excited and hospitable as was Lydia, not just to those who have invited us into the River of Grace, but to those who are standing along the river bank throughout the world. They are so close to what can heal and save them, yet so far. Let us not just float by, but invite them into the river of life and grace.

Some "high schoolers of a Presbyterian Church in Maryland, as part of their annual mission trip to Brazil" demonstrated a way to invite people into the river of life and grace. They agreed to lead an outdoor worship service at one of the parks in the business district of Sao Paulo. They chose noontime, despite the midday heat, hoping to attract the lunch crowd from the surrounding office buildings. They started with about 20 minutes of rousing hymn singing and when they had assembled a dozen or so people, they began reading from the Bible and sharing some of their own faith stories."

"The few people who had stopped to listen slowly dwindled away. The kids were feeling a little discouraged as they picked up their instruments and sang one final song. When the music was done, the kids were shocked to hear applause. They looked up and saw people with their office windows open leaning out over the sills whistling and clapping for them. The Lord had opened their minds, and their windows." The River of God's "unprovoked" Grace flowed into these people. These youth invited those on the river bank into the waters of healing and salvation with hospitality and excitement, and—they responded. "Emphasis," May/June, 2004

By the power of the Holy Spirit, may the River of Life and Grace from the throne of God through Jesus Christ flow through us like it did through Jesus, Paul, Lydia and these teens from Maryland to a damaged world that needs; healing; peace that passes all understanding; and salvation. May the world join us in jumping into this River of Life and Grace. In all truth, we can tell the world, the waters are just—heavenly!"