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A River in the City
Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5

I want to tell the story of a river in a city, a river with the water of life, which either side containing trees of life. A story, like the one we just heard, of a river that sustains a people. That river is, of course, the Anacostia.

That's probably not the one you were thinking of. For many Washingtonians, the Anacostia is both the symbol and actualization of something gone terribly wrong. For good reason. Going back all the way to the 19th century, there was a period of time when the Anacostia was not even really a river any more, but was classified as not much more than a large open sewer. Early Washington didn't have much in the way of sanitation, and so most everything back then simply washed into the river, or into the canal that used to run down the mall and past the Capitol, and then end up in the Anacostia anyway. Despite the fact that the canal was filled in years ago, and we have more modern sanitation than we had a hundred and fifty years ago, the Anacostia still stands to most as a symbol of something broken and lost.

Of course, that's not how it's always been. The anglicized name Anacostia comes from the small group of Native Americans named the Anacostans who made their home in pre-Columbian times and into the 18th century on the south bank of the river, and in present-day Georgetown. Back then, the Anacostia was an important source of food and a key wildlife habitat, including the iconic bald eagle. Of course, as plantations were built, then the federal government settled on this location, and expanded after the Civil War, the Native Americans were long pushed out, modern industry took over, and the river gradually became silted in, filled in, and polluted, altering the way both wildlife and people interacted with it. No longer could it be a home for birds and a food source for fisherman, but it became a carrier for disease and trash.

Now why would I tell you such a terrible story about our fair city after reading about such a beautiful image of a river in a city in Scripture?

I'm not trying to make us feel bad, but I want to set up a contrast for and consider what it means when the words we hear and the reality we experience seem so distant from one another. Our passage in Revelation today paints a picture of a "river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city." I have a hard time imagining a more vivid contrast between two rivers; one, the polluted Anacostia, and the other, the crystal-clear river in the New Jerusalem.

This contrast speaks directly to the challenge of reading the book of Revelation. In it, John of Patmos has a series of visions - revelations - that he says are visions that he's received from God. They paint a picture throughout the book first of a great conflict between the powers of God and the powers of evil, a conflict that is ultimately resolved in the favor of God and God's people. And the result of that victory of God over sin is encapsulated in an image of a new Jerusalem, a city of God that is redeemed and as it ought to be.

What do we do with this image, one of a beautiful city with a river with trees on its banks that heal people? What good does it do for us today? And don't misunderstand - the river is important, but the central point is not that God likes nice rivers. John describes an entire new world that God brings down from heaven to earth, centered around a great city. In that city, people from all nations live at peace with one another. There is no destruction or sorrow. The point seems to be that everything that Revelation ends with feels distant from our own lived reality. I read about the nations living in harmony, and some of us have a hard time with our own neighbors. I read that every tear will be wiped away, and I think of the millions with tears right now.

And so, we could dismiss Revelation as irrelevant - a nice story, but nothing more. Or we could despair about our own world - Revelation is then just a reminder of our failures. But I don't think either of those options are worthwhile. I'd rather a third way. I think these words give us a practical vision of hope for our own world.

I want you for a moment to think of your office desk, or your kitchen counter, or living room, or wherever you keep pictures. Imagine what they're pictures of. Family, favorite travel spots, treasured keepsakes? Looking around my office, I have a handful of pictures of my wife, a few of family, a bunch of pictures from great outdoor adventures, and some WPA-style images of Washington that highlight its beauty. Maybe your pictures are similar, maybe a bit different.

Most of us don't keep pictures around of the mundane. We keep images of special moments and places and remind us not just about how things are, but how things ought to be. I keep my favorite picture of Katie in my office - she's holding an ice axe climbing almost vertically up a snowy mountain, with a huge smile on her face - because it's a moment that reminds me of a time of joy together. Now, we have lots of wonderful moments, but I'll admit that it's easy to get bogged down day to day by common reality - the dishes that need to get done, the email inbox that seems to grow faster than I can shrink it, or the endless supply of home repair projects. Who really has time for the things we memorialize in our family photos?

But of course, we make time for them. We put those pictures there because they're important. I know that there's a gap between the day-to-day and the special moments we treasure, and I sense that in the pictures I keep in my office. But more than anything, they give me hope, because they give me direction. They remind me of the good life that God intends for us all - to live in the beautiful world that God created for us and to have joy in the presence of one another.

It keeps me moving, but not aimlessly. I think that's the sort of thing that Revelation is trying to inspire, but on a much grander scale. The conclusion of Revelation is a picture of what we take by faith to be a promised reality, something of a postcard from the future. Revelation, if we choose to believe it, is unequivocal about a few things. First, that God's intention for the world is far beyond most of our visions of what is possible - genuinely peace and healing for both people and for the whole created order. And second, that God has no plan to give up on that intention, and will follow through to its completion. It's not a might, or a could be, or if we get things right, but that the world will be redeemed.

We tread a fine line when we interpret the book of Revelation. On the one hand, if it's about someplace in the sky, by-and-by, when we die, it's not much more than an escapist fantasy, and we can give up on what we've got now. No bother changing anything. On the other hand, if just mere metaphor for what the good life looks like, then we can dismiss it as a nice picture that's totally unrealistic and therefore irrelevant. But if it is Scripture, it's something more.

The images in Revelation are signposts that lead in the direction of what will be, and also what is needed right now. And when we help create glimpses of that image of reconciliation and redemption, we live into it as an act of defiant hope. In those moments, we ourselves become the signposts that point a watching world to God and God's healing work.

We don't have to look too far for signposts in our midst. There's a signpost towards that being erected right now along that border that divides "west" from "east of the River." In last twenty years, and even before, people have been working tirelessly to clean up the Anacostia and to advocate for the health of the river. Last year even saw a big win. A massive tunnel alongside the river completed its first stage. Its goal is to ensure that 80% of the trash and sewage that used to go straight into the river stays out of the Anacostia after rain events, and are instead diverted to the Blue Plains treatment facility at the southern tip of the District. It surpassed its first-stage goals, and by the time it's done, it will divert 98% of the trash and sewage for treatment.

There is a time in the not-too-distant future when you'll be able to swim in the Anacostia like people were able to hundreds of years before. Already, people are kayaking and paddle boarding on the sections that wind past the Arboretum and the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. The river that used to be a source of life for whole communities is coming back. To lifelong Washingtonians, that probably sounds like a joke, but it's real.

Yes, it's not the same thing as the crystalline river in the city of God, but the gap is narrowing between the two, and this small corner of the world is healing.

We can't simply accept things as they are - it's not worthy of the people of God called to heal the world. Instead, the gap between what we are and what we shall be is the location of our witness. We never say "good enough" or "this is just the way things are." Instead, we say that God is in our midst, and we have reason for hope.

I don't know precisely how this all works out in the end, and I don't think that's exactly the point of Revelation. It's a sign that points us to God's saving power and asks us to trust God. Trust that what is broken and troubled will not always be that way, and trust that God is indeed powerful enough to bring about the healing that we need. What a joy it is for us to know that, and to not just stand by and wait, but to get our hands dirty and participate in it.

There are acts of hope that we can do every day, signposts of the new world we place with acts of kindness, healing, and restoration. These acts of Resurrection are in defiance of any who would despair or say things are too troubled to ever be right. In our story, God gets the last word.