

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Great Hymns of the Faith
Sermon: Shall We Gather At the River

Revelation 22:1-5 (NIV)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Sermon

Friends, let me tell you a little bit about Brooklyn, New York back in the day. We consider it one of the five boroughs of New York today, but that wasn't always the case - they were their own towns in their own counties. On the edge of Long Island is the municipality of Brooklyn. Imagine you are walking thru the streets of Brooklyn in the 1860's. It is the 3rd most populated city in the US at that time, totally crushing cities like Boston, Chicago, 9 times bigger than DC in it's size and population. It was at the forefront of immigration. Over half of the city was foreign born - and half of those were Irish, and the rest divided up between Germans, Britons, and Eastern European. Said one passerby, the streets were "bad, heavy, and unpaved, so that the smallest amount of rain makes Brooklyn muddy." If you know the movie, Gangs of New York, you've seen the time and place. Prostitution, rampant. Orphans everywhere. Public corruption, a city-wide pastime. Over half of the working population of Brooklyn worked in nearby Manhattan - there's no bridge, no road - and ferries would take you to your workplace across the harbor. 32 million trips in one year alone by the ferries. You had to wait in line hours before the boat could take you across, and you had to wait in line hours before a boat could take you came back home. No Brooklyn Bridge at this time. And there were no rivers in Brooklyn. For decades, everyone got their water from shallow little wells, but surrounded by salt water, they couldn't dig too deep. Where did hundreds of thousands get their drinking water? A 30 mile aqueduct was constructed to get water from a river upstream in New York State. They didn't want Hudson River water - too polluted even by then. And the East River isn't really a river, just a skinny body of water that is part of the harbor that goes in and out with the tide. These people do not know anything about rivers. According to William Thomas, the Sanitary Inspector for the district, the streets were "very filthy" with accumulations of manure from the horses that traversed the area, dead dogs, cats and rats, household and vegetable refuse that in winter accumulated to depths of three feet or more. "Garbage boxes," rarely emptied, overflowed with offal, animal carcasses, and household waste. "Pools" of stagnant water collected in the carcasses of dead animals, and over sewer drains that were generally clogged. "Filth of every kind [were] thrown into the streets, covering their surface, filling the gutters, obstructing the sewer culverts, and sending forth perennial emanations which must generate pestiferous diseases," 1 in 36 adults died each year due to disease in Brooklyn. As a percentage, you had a better chance of surviving on the Oregon trail over living in Brooklyn at that time. With over 100,000 horses in the borough, and each one producing over 20 pounds of manure and quarts of urine a day, there were literally vacant city blocks with manure stacked dozens of feet high, with no where to put the stuff. A cholera epidemic had just went thru the city, killing tens of thousands, especially the little ones.

And this is during the Civil War! Over 30,000 Brooklyn citizens joined the cause, soldiers and sailors, nurses and doctors. The Iron Clad Monitor was built in Brooklyn, and then sunk a month later. The first casualty from Brooklyn was 12 year old Clarence Mackenzie, a drummer boy who killed by a bullet that went thru his tent.

The first national cemetery was created in Brooklyn because of the sheer number of war dead that came from there. In more uppity Manhattan, many folks dodged the new draft because they could buy their way out of it. There were riots in the city throughout the war to protest the inequity of service, of the draft boards. This was a time of riots and burning, looting and violence. If you saw the Greatest Showman, P.T. Barnum's museum was burned to the ground in one of these events. The war wasn't going well for the US at this point. The south had spies and agents in New York, all of them trying to burn down the buildings in coordinated attacks. Look up the Confederate Army of Manhattan for some context.

So out of all of this, out of the despair of the war, of your friends and family dying of disease and dysentery, of squalid conditions, cramped and crowded, rampant crime in a city that stinks, life still happens. People are born, marry, have kids, do their family thing. Life finds a way. And ministry happens. The City Society began, 180 years ago in 1838, when Methodist women saw the need to move outside the comfort of their church buildings to teach children to read. There were no public schools. Didn't need them, the kids were in the factories. They wanted to share the light of Christ with children and then their families. They established the forerunner of the "charity schools" which then became public schools. And it started with a bunch of Old Ladies. Never underestimate the power of old ladies. All the powers of Hell cannot overcome the powers of old ladies! I'm glad we have 1 or two in our congregation. It was in the midst of appalling slum conditions, child labor, pervasive crime and gang fighting that these courageous Methodist women came to this neighborhood and demonstrated the power of their religious faith. Linked with love and compassion, they became a beacon of God's light that helped to transform lives. They ignored the dangers of human violence, contagious health hazards and inconveniences of many kinds to shine their light on the human needs among the least, the last, and the lost. They bought the old Brewery and began to use the building as a lighthouse, a beacon of God's love to the children, their mothers, and then they began to focus the light upon the evils that existed in the area. They saw the need of social reform with taverns and bars, gang activity, poor sanitation, and lack of medical care. On every street they built relationships with families to evangelize and educate children too poor to have access to any other educational facility. Their mission work involved transforming the destructive city environments of families into healthier, positive environments. This still goes on, by the way as a part of the United Methodist City Society.

But in the 1860's, there was a cheerful man with a big beard who was a pastor at the local Baptist church in Brooklyn. Amid the squaller and frightful human conditions going on, he preached. And taught. And sang. Robert Lowry set many of Fanny Crosby's words to music. He wanted to be a preacher more than a musician, but he found that he was better at the hymns than the prose. One of his famous songs that we still sing is (and see if you can finish the line), What Can Wash Away My Sin? Nothing but the Blood Of Jesus. Another one: We're Marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. . .

Of all of his hymns though, one stands out above the rest. It was in July, 1864. The Overland campaign in the Civil War didn't end well, the war was going to continue on for another bloody year. The weather had been hot. Like, hot, hot. A very severe epidemic was raging in Brooklyn, and hundreds were passing over the river of death. It was a river of sewage and garbage that caused this particular epidemic that killed hundreds of kids. He proceeded over too many funerals to count. Dr. Lowry was thinking of the sad scenes all around him when the question arose in his mind, "Shall we meet again? We are parting at the river of death; shall we meet at the river of life?" Now, these people have never seen a river. Brooklyn doesn't have rivers, and what waterways you have you don't want to be in. Imagine the imagery of Revelations 22 in a time like this. You are surrounded by death and sewer, pestilence and disease. Overcrowding and war. Food rationing because of the war. Lack of basic sanitation. Revelations 22: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their

foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Seems impossible, doesn't it? Life will never get better. Life will always be this way. But we have a promise in scripture. Where life can flourish and we can rise out of whatever muck we find ourselves in. Robert Lowry took that image, and answered the question if we will see each other again, Shall we gather at the River? The beautiful, the beautiful river? YES! We shall gather at the River, the wonderful city of God. And the hymn took off. To be sung by denominations and people everywhere. People wanted to hear, needed to hear about clean rivers and laying our burdens down. About happy hearts and melodies of peace. Our pilgrimages will cease, and yes, we shall gather at the river once again, and find joy.

We sing our hymns both new and old, and some even ancient to remind ourselves of the strength and fortitude that is available to us in life's trying days. They help us praise. They help us pray. They help us find the words buried in our hearts when we cannot find the words ourselves. I encourage you to listen to Contemporary Christian Radio, or just do a youtube search for classic hymns - it will do your soul a little bit of good.

In 1865, Shall We Gather At the River was sung in Brooklyn by over 40,000 kids on Children's Day (a forgotten holiday back 100 years), who needed reminding that the world wasn't always, and will not always be a stinking mess. They gathered from the tenement houses, from the orphanages, from the factories (kids 10 and younger were working 10 hour plus days). They gathered together, and in the Brooklyn slums sang, Shall We Gather at the River.

Towards the end of his life, Lowry went to London for a meeting of famous Sunday School teachers from around the world. He writes, "They were present from Europe, Asia, and America. I sat in a rear seat alone. After there had been a number of addresses delivered in various languages, I was preparing to leave, when the chairman of the meeting announced that the author of "Shall We Gather at the River?" was present, and I was requested by name to come forward. Men applauded and women waved their handkerchiefs as I went to the platform. It was a tribute to the hymn; but I felt, when it was over, that, after all, I had perhaps done some little good in the world, and I felt more than ever content to die when God called." Robert Lowry died in 1899, buried in the Scotch Plains of New Jersey.

Is there a sermon in all of this? I don't know. But if you ever find life a little hard to deal with, if you're ever uncertain about the future, if you ever wonder if there is anything after death and our short time on earth, I hope you find yourself humming to yourself, Shall We Gather at the River, because the answer is yes, we shall gather at the River, the beautiful, the beautiful river. Gather with the saints at the river, that flows by the Throne of God. And the family of God said, AMEN.