

It was a good thirty-six years ago that I first sang in the choir at the Ogden Dunes, Indiana, church, the place where I became a Presbyterian, and I know that at least in Florence, I have several times mentioned the choir director, my late friend Dwight Davis. Dwight was so well regarded as a choral director, he was on the faculty of the Gary campus of Indiana University, that when the downtown Methodist Church in Gary succumbed to the blight that unfortunately infested much of that city and closed, choir members followed him to Ogden Dunes. Choir practices were fun, but Dwight was incredibly serious about the need for his selection of music to fit the dates of the church year and the subject of the Lectionary.

This most struck me in the music he chose for that Pentecost — Pentecost is two weeks from today, — when we sang an anthem with the lines from Joel 2 that are repeated in the Acts 2 first Christian Pentecost declaration of Peter, “your old men will dream dreams, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.” It is the memory of that anthem that causes me to regret that I usually hand those readings to the liturgist — sometimes with real reluctance, as Anita VanWagoner will testify; I think her hands are still sore from fighting me off as I tried to rip the pages from her one year.

Of course, today is not Pentecost, but there was an anthem that we must have sung two weeks earlier that also stuck with me, and I do not remember exactly, but it was something like, “There is a river, whose streams make glad, the city of God; God is in the midst of her.” The language is King James-ish, from Psalm 46, but “the city” refers to Jerusalem at some future date, maybe “the end of time” but maybe not in its original use, and the river and streams, well, both words are probably *metaphors*, or *images* with a different meaning, as I’ll explain in a moment.

But first, I assume that anthem was indeed two weeks before Pentecost because I suspect Dwight got his inspiration from today’s reading from Revelation:

*<sup>1</sup> And he showed me a stream of living water, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*

*<sup>2</sup> In the middle, between the street and the stream, far and near, stood the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves on the tree served to heal the nations.*

Just as an aside, what do you think is meant by: *the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit*? As an example of the use of imagery in the Bible in general, allow me to suggest *that the twelve kinds of fruit* refers to the twelve tribes of Israel, and, or perhaps “or,” the twelve disciples of Jesus.

But returning to the Revelation passage, it was actually based on, if not one, a compilation of Old Testament passages, such as Joel 4:18d: *A spring shall issue from the House of the Lord.* or Zechariah 14:8: *On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem;* or from Ezekiel 47:1: *Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of temple toward*

*the east . . . and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold . . . or maybe from Psalm 46:*

*<sup>4</sup> There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. <sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of her. . .*

[and so on]

*Water*, I am pretty sure, as used is an *image* referring largely to people in these passages, an *image* to convey the ideas both that the people of Israel would multiply and — in this case water is flowing the wrong way — people from all directions would flock to Jerusalem and the Temple. *Water* here is a *metaphor*, a verbal *image*, a *word* to symbolize something other than water.

The *imagery* in Revelation, the use of *symbols*, is largely taken from such passages in the Hebrew Bible. More importantly, the usefulness of these *symbols* and why I often use the terms, *imagery*, *metaphor*, *conceit* and *allegory* is that we can *visualize* these *symbols*; we can see them in our minds; we *can* see, but the *images* or *symbols* are often meant to suggest what we in fact *cannot* see.

One of the challenges, I need to say, in reading the Bible is to understand what its writers meant to say through such images at the time they wrote the books they wrote; that is a large part of the goal for the Bible Study class, “The Bible Is *Not* for Dummies.”

And *river* in Revelation and in those other passages is chosen as a *symbol* in part because, well, as in Arizona, the Holy Land is in an arid area; *water* is something scarce but necessary; without water we cannot have life, and water *represents* the opportunity for life; water is a *symbol* of life.

Which takes me to today’s Gospel lesson, in which, again, we encounter *water*, water in which some believed was to be found a cure for what ailed them. By the way, while it is not in the translation we used, in some earlier Bibles, including the King James Version, we find what commentators suggest was the belief at the time the story was first told, that when the water was disturbed, it was because it was touched by an angel of God, and that the first person then to go into the water was the one cured. But the man in our story waiting to be cured was never going to get to that water, let alone be the first person to get there — and he never *did* get to the water, — yet he was cured! *It could not have been the water!*

In a different Gospel story than that we read today but also from the Gospel of John is the story you might recall in which Jesus offers the woman at the well “living water,” referring to what flows from hearing his words and having faith in him. Again, water is a *symbol*. Clearly a *symbol* not of wet water, but of something else, but in this use of water as a symbol, the Bible’s use of symbolism does not stop simply with *life*, but asks us to look beyond *life*, to ask from what — from *whom* — life comes.

What I want to suggest, with a great deal of literary and theological license, is that in looking at images and symbols as we read from the Bible, we need to look not only *at* but sometimes *beyond* what the

symbols represent. As one specific, the water in the river, the *living* water — I believe is meant to point not merely toward the water or even to people or to life, but toward the *source* of the water: the water flows *from God*, which says more importantly, *life* flows from *God*, we flow from God. It is not from the water, but from God, that *all good* comes — including the cure of the man by the pool, who never enters it, but is cured by the word of God from the capital W Word of God, Jesus.

As I mentioned last week, the Book of Revelation, our last encounter with which for the time being will be next Sunday, is a somewhat controversial and certainly a puzzling book for which the symbols in the visions are too often and easily taken literally and the symbolism ignored because of fascination with the visions themselves: four horsemen and all that. So I suggest that while symbols — imagery, whether in the form of metaphors or similes or allegories — while imagery and symbols are meant to help us understand God's Word for us, sometimes we focus so hard on the symbols and imagery *that we fail to look through them to the truths God wants us to see*, to the truths Jesus sought to teach.

And I think this can even be true for symbols in the Sacraments, whether water in baptism, or bread and wine or whatever in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I should say that as a Calvinist when it suits me, I depart from our Catholic brothers and sisters and to an extent even from the Lutherans among us in that I accept that they are and remain symbols: water remains water; bread remains bread; wine remains wine.

Indeed, while we are into my shallow heresy for some, allow me to be so bold as to suggest that as we gather around the Lord's Table, we miss something if we only focus on the stated and readily understood ideas that the bread is a *symbol* of Christ's body and the cup a *symbol* of Christ's blood, for *our gathering itself is the real symbol*. Our gathering here at the table *symbolizes* Jesus' disciples gathering with Him, and *it is His presence* here with us *that is the most important idea symbolized! His being here* that is the most important image to plant in our minds and souls as we share the table. Just as the words of prophets and the psalmist incorporated by John of Patmos said about the city, that "God is in the midst of her," so the central truth of our observance of the Sacrament is that *whenever* we gather, *Christ is "in the midst" of us! Present with us*, as we share it or share Him.

It is neither the water nor the wine nor the bread that matters; they are mere *symbols*. It is that life flows from God, and that when we gather, God — the Son of God — is in the midst of our gatherings.

And as we depart, it is God as the Holy Spirit that goes with us and continues to bind us, not only to God, but to each other, and to all believers in all times and places.

The Holy Spirit whom, as we shall read at the closing of worship, Jesus promised he and His Father would send.

And in Jesus' name, Amen.