

"The River Of God"

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My mom grew up in the little town of Grayling, Michigan. Grayling isn't known for much, though it is the home town of Jim Harrison our modern day Ernest Hemingway and the world famous bow hunter Fred Bear, it is more famous for being the home of the AuSable river. The AuSable is arguably one of the greatest fly-fishing rivers in the nation, it is the home of Trout Unlimited and many fishermen travel from all around to wet their flies on the banks of this little river.

While I myself have not fished in the AuSable yet, the river has deep roots in my own family. My great-grandma had a house on the river when I was little. I still remember stepping off her old wooden dock into that icy cold water, or throwing Wonder bread to the rising trout. My great-grandpa was a fly-fishing guide on the AuSable and my great-aunt and uncle still have a canoe livery on the river. The AuSable is a place that holds meaning in our family and it brings joy and a bit of comfort when I get to visit the river.

Our text today, verses 4-5 of Psalm 46, is talking about a river that has so much more to offer than the AuSable; a river whose streams make glad the city of God. Not a river known for its fishing, though the Bible has its fair share of fishing stories, rather this river is known for what it brings to the city of God. This river brings gladness to the city of God, it makes the city joyful.

But this begs the question where is this river and where is this city of God? When we hear of the city of God in the Bible we tend to think of Jerusalem, the city of King David in Judah. That would make sense, except that there has never been a river that runs through the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem sits on top of a hill with no river anywhere close. So where is this river and where is the city? We know what the river does, it makes the city of God glad, but that still leaves us with a lot of questions.

The book of Psalms can be hard to understand at times because they don't exactly speak literally all the time, but what they are good at doing is giving us word pictures to help show us what God does in our lives. By describing what God does through these pictures, the Psalmist is helping us see what God does for us, what God brings to us. Now we know that a river always brings something to a city. When establishing a city, it was usually a good idea to put the city near a river if you could, because you knew that the river could help bring in goods and services. Our Psalmist knew that his readers would understand this, so he gives us the picture of a river that bringing gladness to the city of God, a city that our Psalmist describes as the holy habitation of God the Most High.

In this river we find the gifts of God, all that God has to offer flows to the city of God, the place where God our Father dwells. These gifts are more than we could ever imagine or deserve. In this river we receive God's grace, His very Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, the promise of eternal life, the Holy Spirit, His forgiveness all given to us out of the immense love that our heavenly Father has for us. In the river we find life itself given to the city of God by the heavenly Father. And that city of God is not without inhabitants. The city of God is His Church, the family of God where our heavenly Father promises to dwell. That's here, right now in this place with you and me.

It can often be hard to understand how God brings to us His gifts of grace and love. We know that we have them, but we don't always visually see them working and they aren't exactly gifts that we can pick up and touch. So the Psalmist gives us this beautiful picture of the river flowing into the Church of God.

Remember the AuSable river we talked about earlier? The AuSable is a calm, cool, crystal clear river. The type of river that you could lay next to and feel the relaxation drift over you as you fall asleep. That's the type of river our Psalmist is talking about here. The gifts of God are what bring joy and gladness to His Church. They come through the calm, constant, reliable, current of His river. A river that we need in the midst of our troubled world.

While the river in our Psalm is similar to the calm AuSable, the river of our world is more like a raging river used for white water rafting. You know what that looks like, what it feels like. One moment life is flowing nice and easy and the next you're hitting raging rapids that are trying to throw you out of your raft. Our world today can often feel like that raging river. Always constantly on the move, wondering what's next on the schedule, what's next on the to-do list. And if we're not physically on the move, our minds are always moving. Full of worry and stress, wondering what the next step is, wondering how the latest tragedy will affect my life, my kid's life. With all the worry and stress in our troubled world today we forget to make the time put it all aside and see what God brings to our lives. See how the river, God's grace and mercy, is flowing and working in our lives.

So we are called to gather in the city of God, His Church, the place where the river flows. The place where we receive the gifts of God, the place where God has promised to dwell. Listen to these words again, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved." God's Church is His holy habitation. Again our Psalmist gives us a picture. The city of God is the place where the great and awesome, Most High, God dwells. Where He makes His presence known, where we grow in our faith and are shaped and molded as the children of the heavenly Father.

But often times, we don't make room for this place, for God's holy habitation, in our busy lives. Sometimes the raging white water rapids of this world can seem more attractive than the calm and constant river of God's promises. Because Church, the place where God's river flows, can often seem kind of repetitious. It can seem mundane and unexciting compared to the rest of the world. It can be easy to overlook because the rest of the world has all the gadgets and gizmos, yet God calls us here. The place where a simple river flows.

When I first came to the Seminary, all the students were gathered together to hear from the president during our orientation week. The very first sentence that I ever heard from President Dale Meyer was simple, yet it made you think. President Meyer stood up in front of all of us fresh new seminarians, and in his deep booming voice said, "It's a great time to be the Church!"

Now, the first time I heard President Meyer say that, I was all excited, but as I started to think about it I began to wonder. What do you mean it's a great time to be the Church? It looks like it's the worst time to be the Church. More and more people are leaving the Church. Church buildings are closing and being remodeled into craft breweries

and restaurants. For what could be the first time in America, the Church is an institution that can be openly mocked not just by individuals but by the media. How can this be a great time to be the Church?

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.”

In the midst of our crazy troubled world, now certainly is a great time to be the Church, because it is here, in God’s house that our Father has promised to be. It is here in the city of God where the gifts of God flow to each of us and give us the nourishment we need, the calm and joy that we need. It is here in the dwelling place of Jesus Christ, that we receive the blessed gift of the body and blood of our crucified and risen Savior.

We gather here because we need God’s Church and because it is God’s Church, not some institution made by man. This is the Church for which God sent His Son to die for. Jesus Christ was physically present on this earth for you and me. To do what we fail to do over and over. He lived the perfect life for an imperfect people, so that we can become the body of Christ, the Church of God. It truly is a great time to be the Church because our risen Savior, Jesus Christ is the head of the Church.

Because Christ is the head of the Church, we know that God is here where He promises to be. Not only does God promise to be here with you, but He promises to be active in your life, to help you, the Psalmist says, “when morning dawns.” This is another constant of the river. The river of God’s gifts are with you every morning, they will never fade away.

Every morning you are the Church and every morning God’s promises still ring true, that His help will come. The help of God comes through that river. The constant and calm river of His gifts. The gifts of His grace, love, and eternal life given to an undeserving people, yet gifts that are given freely. In the midst of our troubled world we can fail to trust in the gifts of God, we can fail to trust in the presence of our living Savior and we fall to the temptations of the raging rapids of the world. We become distracted by the lies of the devil and we wander away from the calmness of the river that brings gladness to the city of God. But our God is still in our midst. No matter what stress is in your life, no matter what troubles you face, God promises to be with you, right in the midst of this troubled world and to be your help when morning after morning.

So we gather here. We gather in the place where God promises to be and where the river of God’s gifts flows freely. Where God calls us out of the chaos of our troubled world and where He gathers us to the banks of the river where the gifts of our baptism continue to flow continually. In the midst of our troubled world, it is a great time to be the Church, because we live in a world that desperately needs the Church.

We live in a world that needs the know of the message of our loving and forgiving Father who calls us to be His family, His Church. The place where He is in our midst and promises to be our help morning after morning. We live in a world that needs to be gathered along the banks of the river of God, a river that holds meaning in our family, that holds the perfect and amazing gifts of God that bring nothing but gladness to us, His city.