

Witness the river
John 5:1-9, Rev. 21:10, 22, 22:5
May 5th 2013

Recently I happened to be at my cabin near Bancroft during the height of the spring flood. The icy surface of a multitude of northern lakes was rapidly changing from ice to water. The snow in the forests was finally melting and all of this combined with heavier than normal rain sent much more water than normal rushing through the well worn channels of streams and rivers. From rivulets to creeks to streams to rivers, over dams and waterfalls and through narrow channels between slabs of granite – water poured powerfully – seeking a new level for its volume.

As I hiked along a riverside trail, I noted that the power of the moving water was both exhilarating and frightening. It was exhilarating because of the sheer power, volume, speed and sound of it as it plummeted through a rock cavern. It was frightening because a normally jolly river that in summer bounced and skipped over rocks now roared over them and overflowed frequently onto the hiking path itself, sending me seeking other places higher up in the snow and ice of the forest in order to make my way along it.

I experienced a strange attraction to the water. I wanted to get as close as I could to its beauty and power. I also experienced what I hoped was a wise caution because much of the bank of the river above the high water mark was still ice and snow.

Now the water in our scriptures for today is of an entirely different nature is it not? Let's see. We have the pool of Bethesda which sits completely still except when its healing properties are stirred up by a whiff of the Spirit. And then there is the river in Revelation flowing through the middle of the street of the city.

In his vision the angel showed John the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

In my own mind, I've never pictured this water in the street in the middle of the city as a spring flood with the power to move dirt and trees and even rocks in its path, but it is flowing and if water is flowing it can be a powerful source of life and healing.

In each of these scriptures water is closely associated with healing. First, in John 5 a paralyzed man who sits beside a pool known for its healing properties needs healing for paralysis. Unfortunately, this man cannot get his body into the healing waters ahead of anyone else. He is the weakest of the weak. And yet he waits. For 38 years he waits. Trees grow from saplings to sturdy shade trees in that amount of time. Water wears rocks smooth in that amount of time. Ben gave us some glimpses into the ebb and flow of the man's feelings throughout that time. And yet the man waits for something to change. The man waits for healing.

What is it that needs healing in the Revelation to John? Here, the nations need healing. John's vision reveals a time when the heavenly city descends upon the earth, heals the nations and transforms the earth. And we along with John's community await the fulfillment of that vision. As we wait, trees grow, are cut down and grow again. Water wears away mountains. Our feelings of despair and hope about a healed and transformed future ebb and flow. And yet we wait for things to change. We wait for healing.

When I discussed this service and these texts with Luis, he shared with me a bit about how he sees the Revelations passage. He shared with me that he loves the verse in chapter “22:5 where it describes the healed earth and heaven in this way. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” Luis imagines the healing in this way, “announcing that there will be no more night means **no more fear, no more ignorance, no more slavery, no isolation.**” Thank you Luis for putting words to the image of a healed reality.

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And both passages reveal the source of that kind of healing.

The man in our story of the pool with healing properties never actually gets in the water. Jesus who in the previous chapter has revealed himself to the Samaritan woman at the well as the source of living water, now heals the man with a question and a command. “Do you want to be made well? Jesus asks. The paralyzed man doesn’t even answer with a clear yes or no, but simply explains why he hasn’t been able to get into the pool.

Despite this ambiguous response Jesus tells him to get up, take up his mat and walk, which he does. Shortly after this encounter the religious authorities ask him who healed him on the Sabbath and he doesn't even know who it was until he encounters Jesus again later in the temple. In this encounter Jesus tells him "to sin no more," or in more colloquial terms Jesus tells the man to "smarten up or something worse will happen to him." So the man goes to tell the religious authorities that it was Jesus who healed him. When confronted by them, Jesus tells them that he needs to heal or work on the Sabbath just as God his Father does and of course Jesus is in trouble again for making himself equal with God. In a union with each other, God through the work of Jesus is the source of the living water. And this living water heals the paralyzed man despite the ambiguous nature of his desire.

The living water in Revelation is the river in the middle of the city that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The work of God through Jesus has begun a work of healing that will one day complete itself in a transformed heaven and earth where there will be

no more paralysis, no more fear, no more ignorance, no more slavery,
no isolation.

And is that healing already happening here in this community, despite
the clarity of our desire at times?

We live in hope.

How is the healing power of the work of Christ evident among us?

Let's go through the list of words and images that Luis has provided for
us

Have we or are we as a community being healed from our fear? Here we
at least try to name what our fears are and allow the honesty of our
inquiry and the power of the Spirit help us to move through them or rise
above them. I remember a couple of weeks ago we named our fears
around the degradation of the earth but of course there are others.

Have we or are we as a community being healed from our ignorance?

Again we try to be intellectually honest with each other. Here we take
seriously the stories and witness of this book in front of me, the Bible.

We wrestle with what it says, but do so with all of our God given

faculties and ways of knowing asking that the power of the Spirit will reveal to us the wisdom contained within its pages.

Have we or are we as a community being healed from our slavery? Here is a place where we can acknowledge our slavery to systems and powers in our society that are death dealing instead of life giving (I can think of ways that our identities are defined by our culture that have the power to enslave us – but most of us can identify for ourselves the things that bind us.)

and as a community we pray for deliverance.

Have we or are we as a community being healed from our isolation?

The very fact that we gather as a community to worship is already the most profound witness there is against the isolating influences all around.

In all the ways that we are healing and being healed – is it possible for us to become like the one who heals us and be so connected with the divine source that our witness becomes like the water flowing away from the throne of God and the Lamb.

Let me unpack the word witness for a moment. To be a witness is simply to tell it like it is from our perspective. Expanding that a bit - to be a witness is to let the integration of what we do and say give some evidence of what we have seen and experienced. If there is anything about this place that is healing us from isolation, fear, ignorance or slavery then we might do well to “smarten up” as Jesus tells the man who used to be paralyzed and live into the reality of our healing.

In all the ways that we are healing and being healed – is it possible for us to become like the one who heals us and be so connected with the divine source that our witness becomes like the water flowing away from the throne of God and the Lamb.

Can our witness provide the life giving water that supports the growth of the trees with healing leaves that are for the nations?

Can our witness be so powerful that it wears grooves in rocks by its persistently moving presence over time, or even occasionally gather enough momentum that it can move dirt and rocks and trees – like a spring flood?

Am I getting carried away?

If our witness to the healing among us can be this powerful, then our community will be both attractive and exhilarating. As articulated in our Vision for Youth ministry, we identified the metaphor of “orbit”, and say that “Families will be encouraged and helped to make the church the centre of gravity in their lives.”

With that image in mind we are saying that there’s something important going on here and that it’s valuable enough for youth and their families and everyone else to make the centre out of which all other choices and activities flow or are affected. Our families, our communities, our city, and the nations need an experience of the healing and the hope that flows from our experience here. And this cannot mean being a closed insular community like we have sometimes been culturally as Mennonites in the past, that’s simply not “us” anymore. But all that we experience in community – in and of itself transformative and counter-cultural - has the potential to be an outward focused flow just like the river from the throne of God and from the Lamb. I picture all the small healings that we experience, and all the great ones gathering like the spring rains and the melting ice into well worn grooves, but so carried by the gathered-together power of their source that they inevitably

overflow their banks – moving stuff and getting everything soggy – with their ultimately life-giving power. This kind of power is both exhilarating and frightening to draw near to and be part of. Let it be so. Amen.