

## **Shall We Gather at the River?**

The Rev. Anne B. Bonnyman  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
First Sunday after Epiphany  
January 7, 2007

This morning as we recall the Baptism of Jesus, the words of an old song are playing in my head. Perhaps you know it and will recognize this verse:

*Shall we gather at the river,  
Where bright angel feet have trod,  
With its crystal tide forever  
Flowing by the throne of God?*

Shall We Gather at the River: this beloved old American hymn was written in July 1864 on a hot day in Brooklyn. The Civil War was in its third brutal year. The dead and dying lay scattered across American fields that had once been farms.

A church pastor dozed off in the afternoon heat in New York as he hummed bits of popular church music to himself. These songs were filled with apocalyptic images of death. And the preacher wondered *why the hymn writers had said so much about the "river of death" and so little about the "pure water of life, clear as crystal..."* That pure water of life was a delicious thought, and soon words and music began to form in Robert Lowry's mind: *Shall we gather at the river, the beautiful, beautiful river?* And so a classic American hymn was born from a reverie of heat, and war, and water. It yearns for life and it ends with a call for peace.

Shall we gather at the river? Today there are millions of people gathering at rivers around the world. In India this month Hindus gather at the Ganges River for their annual purification ritual. It is estimated that 70 million people will submerge themselves in the Ganges by mid-February. And in Christian churches across the United States, we gather at the river symbolically today to hear the story of the baptism of Jesus.

This story comes as a surprise for many of us. It is the first Sunday of January and we have barely finished packing up our Christmas decorations. Pine needles still scatter across the doorstep even though the wreath is gone. The crèche with its manger and Baby Jesus has gone back into its box for another year. If you look closely here today, you will see glitter in the church as sparkling reminders of our children's Christmas Pageant.

The 12 days of Christmas ended yesterday and now, here comes a grown up Jesus, wading into the Jordan River. This is one of the most defining moments of his life. Jesus will go down into that water like so many others have and he will come up with a new identity and a new mission for his life. There are some, but perhaps not everyone, who will hear the voice of God claim Jesus as God's own beloved Son. In him, God is well pleased. And when Jesus emerges from the river, he walks a new path.

From now on, his job is to continue to please God. He will live and act as someone who is tethered to God.

Shall we gather at the river? Today the church stands at that same place, poised for a new identity and mission. Some, but perhaps not everyone, will recognize the opportunity. We stand on that riverbank with the mud between our toes and feel the smooth stones under our feet. Will we go in? We will dare to enter the water and hold our breath as we listen for God's voice? Who will we be when we come back up? Will there be a new path for us?

As I move around Trinity Church, I often hear questions about our mission and our identity as the Church in the City of Boston. We have a corporate longing for clarity and focus that is a sign of the Holy Spirit working in this place. We are ready to go, to move forward in mission and ministry. You will be hearing later this winter from me and the vestry about short and long term planning for Trinity Church. It will involve all of us. The time is ripe.

But first we gather at the river. We linger at the scene when the time was ripe for Jesus. His baptism was the day and the moment that would shape his future. And today we learn what Jesus learned. It is this: we are God's own beloved ones and our job is to please God. We are tethered to One who loves us, who desires to take pleasure in us. We are loved by God and we must please God. This sounds both simple and strange to us. In that sense it is like the river: the water is familiar but its depths are unknown.

Today as we lean into this New Year, I invite you to receive the lesson of Jesus' baptism and apply it to your own life. First, let God's love wash over you. Drink deeply of the love that God has for you. For some reason this is really hard for many of us. We don't trust it, we don't believe it, and we don't think we have done enough to earn it. But do you know what? It is not about us, it is about God. It is the mystery of God's generosity and abundance that we will never fully understand. The late William Sloane Coffin once wrote, *God's love doesn't seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.* You and I are the beloved, we are valuable to God. This is who we are, ready or not.

Then take the next step: think about your call, your life's work as being a source of pleasure to God. As you get up and move through your day, as you work and live with others, ask yourself, "Am I pleasing God?" Did that business decision, did that conflict resolution, did that action I took please God? Does God take pleasure in how I relate to my family and my friends? Is God pleased with how I relate to the rest of creation, to people and creatures that I may never see? Am I pleasing the One who loves me so much?

This is a big issue because our temptation is to please everyone else. Sometimes we become so busy pleasing other people we forget that our first obligation is to please God. If we are clear about pleasing God first, then we will always act generously toward others. If we are clear about pleasing God, then we find strength and take risks.

Our lives are shaped by our faith.

And it is faith that brings us to the riverbank. It is faith that leads us to slip over the edge, down into the water to be carried into the current behind Christ. It takes faith to offer our hearts to the world as Jesus does. He asks us to care so much for others, especially those who are vulnerable and in need. It is a powerful current which pulls us towards Christ. Are we ready?

The riverbank has had more than enough spectators over the centuries. The Christian Church has had too many tailgate parties and not enough trips down into the water in its long history. Jesus did not look for an audience; he looked for people to build the Kingdom of God. In baptism we cast our lot with this Jesus, the beloved one. He went down into the Jordan River and came back up with a heart full of God's love. Then he spent the rest of his life giving it away. This is the Christ we follow. Are we ready?

Listen to the song's answer: Yes!

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.*

AMEN