

Nation Healing

May 25, 2025

Based on Revelation 22:1-2. The River of the Water of Life.

In the beginning there is only water.

Water in the womb, where we gestate in the grace of all things provided, while we form and unfurl, not by effort but by design — soft tissue woven, heartbeat sparked, lungs preparing for a world they have never known.

Water in the ocean, from which, our scientists tell us, all life on earth emerged — microbial and mysterious, a slow unfolding of life from brine and tide and ancient breath.

Water in the Potomac and the Shenandoah and our own Town Run right here in Shepherdstown, where we come to bathe and drink and play and ponder — an interconnected web of wonder giving life to all that breathes in this place.

In the beginning there is only water in the turbulent deep, from which the first chapter of Genesis tells us, all things were created, as God's very Spirit swept and swooped and hovered and brooded — like a midwife leaning close, whispering the world into being.

Water in the garden, from which the second chapter of Genesis tells us a human was created from the humus, from earth softened by mist — earth and water together, breath and body mingled, sacred clay animated with holy longing.

Water in the font, where we remember and rehearse that we are nothing less than beautiful, whole, deeply connected to one universal soul.

As biblical scholar Barbara A Rossing reminds us *The whole Bible tells the story of God's mystical river flowing out through the world and through people's lives, bringing life and healing to all that it touches.* And a tree of life grows alongside it, with roots and fruits and leaves that love us into liberation. This culminating vision of the Bible, Rossing says, becomes *the picture of our life together on earth in a renewed world ... leading us on an exodus out of the heat of empire, out of the heart of addiction to violence, greed, fear, an unjust lifestyle or whatever holds each of us most captive ... gathering us beside God's riverside, to drink of its water of life, to find shelter beside God's majestic tree of life with its healing leaves. You are safe at last. You are beloved. You need not fear death any longer, nor economic insecurity nor oppression nor any terror.*

This river, biblically and bodily, ecological and emotional, is not some by in the sky by and by fantasy vision of rapture into ecstasy beyond this world. It is instead, as Rossing insists, *a present reality that is breaking into our world even now* calling us to live on its terms, even as we wait and work for its fullness.

This river flows still. It flowed through through us through our Community Work Day yesterday in the digging and the weed-pulling and the hauling of limbs — the worms, saved by young Adalynn Norman to aerate the soil, the leaves and the weeds falling like quiet prayers. Eleven of us — with Jesus as our unspoken twelfth and you as a spirit of grace surrounding us — were bringing this vision to life in our midst, hands in the humus, making room for the roots of a new kind of world in these old, hard times.

As our own expert on West Virginia Rivers, Than Hitt, reminds us, the vision of a new kind of world in these old, hard times is already with us in the rivers themselves. Just hold out your arm, with its veins and its capillaries flowing with your own lifeblood from your own heart of grace. The river system, Than says, is just like that. Veins, arteries, capillaries of rivers and creeks and streams all flowing with the lifeblood of our mother earth, each part affecting every other part, as one small cut upstream sends tremors downstream. As one healed section strengthens the whole.

This is quantum entanglement at its most basic. Everything and everyone once connected remains connected, our fates woven tighter than any policy, tighter than any border wall, tighter than any illusion of separation, no matter how gated and cruel the people in power want to believe they have become.

In his first letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul insists, *If one member suffers, all suffer with it*, not as a metaphor but as a quantum reality. The river pulses with that same holy logic. When we show up to accompany immigrant families, when we hold space for grief and resilience in that sanctuary down the road, we are not merely tending to *them*. We are tending to *us*. To *all of us*. The river does not discriminate.

In our tending of the river that is our own selves, we learn a second truth pointed out by Than: *the river is always flowing. Always changing. It never stays the same*. Even when the river looks still, it is moving. Shaping. Shifting. Carrying something forward. The horror of the momentary storm — as terrible as it is — will pass. The sunny glory of a summer day — as delightful as it is — will pass. The river does not freeze some perfect moment in amber; it carves new paths through every part of our lives, as we rest and trust in its current. The river does not resist change. The river *is* change, made visible. Not chaos, but choreography. Not erosion, but evolution. And we, if we are wise, learn to flow with it.

It turns out, we are not the only ones floating in the river, as Than also reminds us, in a call to humility. A limb, a branch, a boulder, a more than human creature swimming alongside us may obstruct our flow. It is only natural to shrink back in fear. But if we do, we capsize. If we want to stay afloat, Than says, we must lean downstream right into it.

This one hit me in the chest. Do not avoid the obstacle. Do not attack it head-on. Enter it. Flow toward it. Let it teach you. Which is exactly what Jesus does. Stepping right into the machinery of tyranny, not with swords but with tears and truth. Which is exactly what Moses does. Facing the waters of entrapment with nothing but a staff and a promise and watching them flow open to set the people free.

Which is what John of Patmos does. Casting a vision for a small, resilient community of faith that becomes by grace the concluding image of the entire Bible.

Which is what we must do now, into the obstacles, downstream, together, facing tyrannical power not with domination but with depth, insisting this dam will not hold. The river is rising. And so are we, not with rage alone but with a love that moves mountains and melts borders and mends what cruelty has broken.

The angel shows us the river of the water of life — not *someday*, when everything is fixed, but now. Already. Always. Already. Bright as a crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb — in us and through us but not controlled by us, as we wade in and flow on and move together with hands open, hearts attuned, feet steady.

Because the healing has already begun.