

RIVER ME

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In the United States, in the year 1844, a Thanksgiving poem was written by Lydia Marie Child that was later adapted into a song. The opening stanza is very familiar to many of us:

Over the river and through the wood
To grandfather's house we go
The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh
Through the white and drifted snow

The poem was written from the perspective of a child on his way to visit his grandparent's house for Thanksgiving. Over the river and through the wood. As I thought about this poem, I began to think about rivers. How they've played a part in my life. And the spiritual lessons I've learned from them.

Rivers are fascinating bodies of water. Rarely do they go in a straight line. They twist and turn. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow. They can be wide and meandering like the Mississippi or narrow and fast like the Colorado as it snakes its way through the Grand Canyon.

I grew up in a house that overlooked the Monongahela River. A river in western Pennsylvania. The Monongahela meets the Allegheny and merges to make the Ohio River. Where these three rivers converge, today you'll find the city of Pittsburgh, and at this exact point, Three Rivers Stadium, the home of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

In the 70s, Western PA was known for coal mining. Long, flat barges full of coal were constantly going down the Monongahela River. And the river wasn't all one level. So at various stages on the river, you would find locks. A barge would navigate into a lock, the gates would close behind it, water would be pumped out, and the barge would drop to the next level of the river without mishap.

When all my relatives from Indiana came to visit, we would take them to see Lock #3 which was just down the hill from our church. These were farm people from Middle America. Coal barges and locks were a sight to see! And sometimes, after a hard rain which made the current stronger and swifter, it took the barge captains a lot more finesse to guide their barge into the lock. If the barge was swept down river without going through the lock, it would usually spill its precious cargo.

Our lives are sometimes like a river. Rarely do they go in a straight line. Full of twists and turns, some parts seem to go fast, others drag by. Sometimes there seems to be a lot of space in which to navigate, other times the canyon walls loom super close. And there are obstacles. Rocks. Tree limbs. We're going along, everything is fine, and wham, the water level drops and tips our barge over. Everything we've learned, saved up, safely tucked into place, gets spilled and ends up on the bottom of the river.

Unless we learn to navigate in and out of the Lock. A secure place that will readjust us to the change in water levels.

In the book of Isaiah 40:4, there is a passage that speaks about the coming of the Messiah. The person God would send to save the people from their sins. And this verse says:

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.

It made me think about a Lock on a River. Raise the low areas. Make the high places navigable. Level the rough terrain. Smooth out the rugged spots. That's what God promised the Messiah would come and do. And through that process of readjusting our lives, the glory of the Lord would be revealed.

Isaiah is a book in the Old Testament. If we jump into the New Testament of the Bible, we discover that Jesus is this promised Messiah. He's the one God sent to teach us what it means to walk with God. He's the one who was sent to become our security, our Lock, as we traverse the River of Life.

But what does it mean to walk with this Jesus? What kind of people is he looking for? What kind of people chose to follow him?

In the book of Mark, we discover Jesus choosing his followers. Men that he will teach and live with in order to spread the message of God's love. And the first four men he picks are fishermen.

Fishermen. Men of the water. Not priests, not bakers, not construction workers, housewives or teachers, not small-business owners, not even tax collectors—although he chooses one of those later, but four fishermen.

I don't know how many of you have ever gone fishing, but as I married a fisherman, I was destined to go fishing at least once or twice in my life! The first time I went was

when we lived in Alaska. We had friends that lived on the Kenai River who invited us to come down and go salmon fishing.

The Kenai River is an indescribable blue-green color. In places, the mountains come right down to its edges, and it's breathtaking. And this particular afternoon is one of those snapshot memories . . . the kind that gets etched so vividly on your heart that you never forget it.

. . . I can see David's bright red Northface jacket as he baits my hook. I see glimpses of the silver salmon as they leap out of the water. The river bank is muddy black in contrast to the brilliant green waist high grass behind me. The water is leaping and dancing in this spot. Occasionally, I catch some spray in my face.

David shows me how to cast. I try it. Get the feel of the rod. Learn how to set the hook. Cast again. It's mesmerizing. And it's also almost impossible not to catch anything! The river is teeming with fish. On my third cast, I hook a fish. The line zings. The rod bends with the tension. I begin to reel it in. David shouting encouragement, till the fish lies quivering at my feet, flopping on the bank.

I rebait the hook and cast again. There is a rhythm. The cast. The river. The fish. After a while, it doesn't matter if I catch anything. There is simply a beauty of repeated motion, sound, color, taste--all my senses are engaged with God's creation.

So Jesus chose four fishermen. Peter, Andrew, James and John. Men who knew the rhythm of the seasons, the tides, the currents, the winds. Men who had been mesmerized by the casting of a net, the weight of fish as they hauled it in. Men who had practiced an unpredictable craft. Fish are usually never in the same place twice. Some days they might not catch anything at all. The weather might change at a moment's notice and challenge their return to shore. And then, there were the mundane chores of mending nets or scraping the bottom of their boats clean. Fishermen.

And Jesus told them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Have you ever thought about the parallels between fishing for fish, and fishing for people? You can't be in a hurry to rush people into the Kingdom of God. You have to learn the rhythms of a person's life. Some days a person might leap into Jesus' arms, but another person might always be the one who got away. Like fishing, inviting people to meet Jesus isn't always exciting. Some times it's mundane, like mending a net. Some days don't seem to see any progress. Even Peter, who became an outstanding preacher, didn't always succeed. After one sermon, over 3000 people wanted to meet Jesus. After another sermon, he was thrown in prison.

Being a fisherman is a walk of trust. There's a huge trust factor that God is going to provide the fish, calm the storm, guide you to the next fishing hole on the lake. It takes courage to trust a God like that.

Hebrews 10:31 says "Placing yourself in the hands of a living God is a dreadful thing." Not dreadful in the sense of awful, but dreadful in the sense of awe-inspiring.

Do you want to walk with Jesus? Do you want to walk *more closely* with Jesus? Study the lives of the first four disciples of Jesus. The fishermen. They teach us a lot about what it means to follow God.

One more thing about rivers, or any body of water for that matter, is that if you're near them, and especially if you're riding on them—whether it's a kayak, a panga, or a sailboat—you're going to get wet. The spray of the water will catch you in the face. It might even entice you enough that you'll jump into the water and immerse yourself.

I ran across a song that describes God's passion like a river. Listen to these particular stanzas: (1999. Star Song Records. Experiencing God.)

God's passion is an endless river
White water running wild
In a restless rushing fury
To see souls reconciled
It reaches wide across forever
It's dangerous and deep
And while some venture
To the shoreline
Some even dare to leap

And though the current
Takes you places
Where you learn to lose control
And if you think you're
Going under
He'll never let you go
Never let you go.

God is passionate about us.
He cares about our hearts.
But it also means losing ourselves in His current.

Letting him direct our lives.

Letting him lead us to the people we're supposed to share God's love with.

Letting him still the wind and waves in our storms.

Letting him lower our barge up and down through the lock so our lives are less difficult.

And like the song says: He'll never let you go. Never let you go.

In the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, in the last chapter, twenty-two, we read about the River of the Water of Life. We're told that the River of the Water of Life is crystal clear. It flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stands the tree of life. And the leaves of this tree are for the healing of the nations.

When we immerse ourselves in the river of God, we are jumping into the waters of life. Waters that flow from the very throne of God himself. A river that will lead us to the city of God. A city where there will be no night, we will see God face to face, and we will reign forever and ever. This is God's promise to us.

And so we can say with confidence:

God, I step into your Living Water

Come, river me

God, I let myself be swept away by your currents

Come, river me

God, I will let you make the adjustments in my life

Come, river me

God, I will trust you to lead me to where I need to go

Come, river me

God, I will place myself in your living hands

Come, river me

God, I believe you care about my heart

Come, river me.

God, I jump, I leap, I dance into your Living Water

Come, river me.

Jesus said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way." (John 7:38, The Message)

Amen.