

A River Runs Through It  
Ezekiel 47:6-9, 11-12; Psalm 46; John 15:26-27; 16:12-15  
May 25, 2012 Order of Elders Day Apart Buckhannon, WV

In her memoir *Between the River and Me: Living Beyond Cancer*, **Carrie Host** tells about a post graduate seminar she attended on writing poetry and prose. Allen Ginsburg was one of the visiting teachers. One day he gave the students this assignment:

**5:30 a.m. is your starting point. Write any dialogue, but the dialogue cannot talk about what is really going on. Everything has to have something to do with 5:30 a.m. Begin writing now.**

By the end of the class, and after everyone else had gone, Ginsburg saw that Carrie had gotten nowhere in the assignment. He came, stood by her, and said: **“Just write the end.”**

She responded, **“What?! How do I do that? I don’t even have a beginning.”**

**“I know,”** he said. **“Just write an ending, and I’ll look at it tomorrow morning before class.”**

So this thirty-something woman stayed up half the night writing the **“ending to beat all endings”** to the story. She went in the next morning an hour early, to get his personal attention to her masterful paragraph.

He took the paper, barely looked at it, and handed it back to her, and said: **“Oh, good. So now come up with all the ways that you can get there, and you’ll have your beginning, or at least, you’ll have your middle.”**

She was crestfallen. After all that work, she had wanted more. But, finally, she realized: there isn’t anything more to say.

She said, after it was over, that she learned one of the most important lessons she could ever learn about writing, and (as she later found out) about life itself.

That lesson appearing in the beginning of her book, in which Carrie Host had to look into her life in order to write meaning into its suffering, reminded me of a wonderful serendipitous afternoon I spent with **theologian, church historian, and author Justo Gonzalez.**

It was during seminary. Dr. Gonzalez came and lectured (or preached – it’s sometimes hard to separate the two in seminary – but it was in the chapel service.) Then

he stayed for lunch, and a few of us students were invited to share with him and some faculty members. Then, suddenly, lunch was over; everyone was off to their places to be. Dr. Gonzalez would not be doing any structured activity for another two hours, but someone had forgotten to schedule any activity for him in the interim – or even any place to be. My advisor asked me if I could just “hang out” with him. And that was my blessing – to just “hang out” with this man, whose work really enamored me.”

In our time together, Dr. Gonzalez told about how his father-in-law read a lot of mystery books. He had a strange habit, however. He would read the first two or three chapters – to get a notion of the gist of the plot and identification of the main characters. Then he would turn to the end and read the last chapter – to discover the solution to the mystery. That way – his father-in-law said – he didn’t have to divert his attention to trying to figure out the answer, and he could focus on the character development and plot elaboration.

It seemed pretty strange to me. Gonzalez said it did to him, too – that is, until he figured out that this is the purpose of the Book of Revelation. Once we read how it turns out, then we don’t have to trouble ourselves of how it all ends. God wins. We want to be with God. Now, let’s look at the character development and plot elaboration.

Not bad, I thought.

**Find out the ending. Then figure out all the ways to get there, and we will have our beginning, or, at least, the middle.**

Recently I came across the 1976 Ministers Directory used in making the slide show. It was given me by one of my clergy widows in Saint Marks. I remembered a similar thin black hardback book, of an earlier vintage. My grandmother had it. Must have been from the 60’s. *I remember looking at it as a child – thinking of these people as kind of heroes of the faith – in ways that only children are so good at thinking of pastors.*

I pulled the 1976 book off the shelf and looked through it. Many of the people are no longer among us. I put into the video presentation just ones who are still among us (with just one exception.)

I wonder if you had the same reaction I had. You see, all of those folks that were pictured – these are pictures from much nearer their beginning than the pictures with which I am now familiar in my present mind’s eye.

Some of them I know the middle of their stories – between that picture flashed on the screen and that which lives in my present image.

Others, I have to write the middle of life details. But it helps to see how it comes together 36 years later.

Then there were the names of the 96 people upon whose head I have laid my hands in ordination during my twelve years as Chair of the Order of Elders.

What will be their ending? What will be their middle?

Of those 96 persons over the past 12 years – 15 of them are no longer with us, no longer under appointment in the local church.

Probably nobody would have seen that on the day of their ordination.

I don't know. Maybe I'm just weird. But it seems strange when you can see beyond the moment of now, and see the dots connected.

I read this week from one of the spiritual masters that **TOMORROW IS IMBEDDED IN TODAY. IF WE LIVE TODAY WELL, THAT'S THE MOST WE ARE ABLE TO DO TO TAKE CARE OF TOMORROW.** Certainly it is more effective than the highly overpracticed art of worrying.

**Tomorrow is imbedded in today. The best way to assure a better tomorrow is to live today the best we can.**

*Psalm 46* talks about times of uncertainty – when we long for help, some kind of help. We find in the psalmist's affirmation of faith that God is a very present help. And more. After the "selah" we find that ***there is this river.***

I ***didn't quite understand what that meant*** – ***the river that makes glad the city of God*** – but when my daughter had had multiple suicide attempts and was undergoing very radical treatment, I went wandering around the dry and barren land of the great northern plains, staying at the Assumption Abbey. I ***dwelt on this Psalm.*** It ***became my daily bread.*** I **didn't know where my daughter's situation was going to go.** But I knew that ***there was this river that had something to do with it.***

That was over a dozen years ago. She has gotten much better. She is getting married this coming September. And that river is still running through it.

**It's the river God showed Ezekiel.**

It's the river by which **Psalm 1** tells us those who choose not to sit in the scoffer's seat can be nurtured.

It's the river that Justo Gonzalez told me was the final chapter – in **Revelation 21** – that still runs through it – bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb – right through the middle of it all. And its leaves provide healing for the nations.

Saint John's remembrance of Jesus telling about the coming of the Holy Spirit tells the disciples that this Spirit is going to come bearing witness to the truth. At the time of His telling them, they could not yet understand it. But later – after the crucifixion and the resurrection and the ascension – then they could receive it.

Jesus did that quite often – telling the disciples things that they would only be able to understand later – not now.

**Bishop John V. Taylor** writes that **this Holy Spirit is the bond that holds history, current experience, and future hope altogether.** The office of the Holy Spirit is the **“go between God”** that connects past, present, and future all together with meaning – even when we are not able to understand it in the moment of now.

**When we know the ending,** we **can go back** and **write in the beginning,** or, **at least, the middle.**

The **river of the Spirit runs through it.**

**When we live today in the best way we can, we give birth to tomorrow.**

I don't know what the future will hold – specifically. But I do know that the Spirit runs through it – with Truth that I often can only realize when I look into the rear view mirror.

- That's walking by faith, not by present sight.
- But it's faith that a river runs through it.
- And I stand in that river.
- You stand in that river.
- We know how it ends. We just don't know when and where it ends.

Now we just need to WRITE IN THE MIDDLE – giving each day the best we can, trusting in the One Who loves us more than we can ask or even imagine.

Those people whose pictures we saw are still with us. But they don't quite look the same.

- They have grown;
- they have had disappointments;
- they have had successes.
- Some of them are in this very room today.
- They are all wiser than they were then.

Knowing what they know now, they can REinterpret the middle – the days between those pictures and today.

They **CAN SEE TODAY** that there are truths in those middle days that they **COULD NOT RECOGNIZE IN THE MOMENT OF THEIR HAPPENING**. And today, they can write the story of those middle days with greater clarity.

A river runs through each of our lives.

And it's a river that we share together.

We are elders.

We have a special relationship.

Our definitions may change from one General Conference to another – but not our DNA. Not our calling. Not our identity. Not our bond together. We share a river.

The river runs on. We run with it. And we share.

The Past, the Present, the Future – Jesus announced the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand now.

It was then. It is now. And it's coming tomorrow.

And, WE are in it.

What a privilege we share – as we share the Good News:

- with some who have never heard,
- with those who sometimes forget, and
- with those who are yet to come.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.