

## THE GENERATION AHEAD

*Psalm 79.13*

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### GATHERING

We keep our choir in mind this morning as more than 40 of them are away on retreat preparing for this historic 150th year of our life together.

Today is another historic moment. 400 years ago today the first enslaved Africans arrived in English-occupied North America. You can read more about this in the bulletin insert but churches across the country are being asked to ring bells at the same hour to remember the beginning of 246 years of slavery and the devastation it has caused the generations since. So, at noon, at the close of this service, we will be ringing bells.

A couple weeks ago, I was “at the river” for our annual camping trip. I love the river. And when I’m there, I can’t help but think about that other old Baptist preacher, Robert Lowry, who wrote the hymn “Shall we gather at the river.” It was hot that summer of 1864 in Brooklyn, NY and the Civil War was still raging on. Lowry was hot and tired and he started to daydream about that image in Revelations about a “cool, clear river of life” coming out from the throne of God - a vision not only of renewed life but a gathering of all kinds of people eating together and singing together and celebrating together.

That’s the thing about being at the river, for me. It isn’t just the beauty of the trees and the peace of that river. It’s the space to daydream. It’s the chance to remember that different vision of the world.

And every time we sing that old hymn, we ask again: Shall we gather at that river? Shall we hold on to that vision of a new way of life and gathering of all people? And every time we gather here, we say “YES!” Yes, we’ll gather at the river.

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One of the things I did “at the river” was begin reading Rachel Held Evans’ last book, *Inspired*. And I am. I am inspired by this young woman who came from an evangelical background like I did and asked challenging questions and came to a whole new vision of her life and faith. She is creative and funny and powerful.

How many of you remember when Rachel was here as our Romney Lecturer? It was 2014 and the place was packed with young people – especially young women. But *Inspired* is her last book because this year – May 4 - at age 37 she died suddenly of an infection that ravaged her brain. She leaves behind her shocked and broken-hearted husband, her two young daughters, and those of us who had come to love her at a distance. She died too soon. But maybe one of the things she teaches us is that a life doesn’t have to be long to leave a legacy.

Sitting out at that river, Rachel, in that generation ahead, continues to inspire me.

And, if you take the time to pay attention, think about all those next generation people who inspire us. There are our young people here.

- There are our Diverse Harmony kids, still singing in the country’s first gay-straight alliance youth chorus, teaching us about gender and orientation what it means to be human.
- There are the young people of Black Lives Matter who are helping us reframe the way we think about race.
- There are the “Dreamers” who help us to re-think what it means to be an American.
- There are the young people of Parkland, FL who are still, persistently working against gun violence.
- There is the 15-year old Swede Greta Thunberg who is on her way to us right now on a sailing ship with a message that the climate crisis is now and we can’t play by the rules anymore.
- There are young people in our own schools who are part of a national climate strike to demand action now.
- Make your own list. REALLY! Make your own list of the people in that generation ahead who are helping, shaping, caring, teaching, engaging us to move forward.

Psalm 79.13 says:

Then we your people, the flock of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

Can there even be a spiritual community in the biblical tradition that is not intergenerational? Deut. 6 says: “teach them to your children” – these stories and laws about life in God. Luke 9.48: Jesus says: “blessed is anyone who welcomes a child in my name.”

And in the interest of full disclosure, if you read Psalm 79, you will see a lot of failure of the past generation; a lot of anger about what happened because of it; and requests for God to avenge for it.

The passage makes me wonder what the generation ahead will say about those of us in my generation. What kind of avenging will they cry out for? Can we climb out of the failures to care for the environment and the economy and our sisters and brothers of color in order to have some vision for the future?

Every time I think about this, I am drawn back to a story Scott Russell Sanders tells about a trip to the mountains with his teenage son, Jesse. The trip had its challenges and things finally explode:

You’re so out of touch, Jesse says.

With what?

With my whole world. You hate everything that’s fun. You hate television and movies and video games. You hate my music.

I like some of your music. I just don’t like it so loud.

You hate advertising – he was on a roll – you hate billboards, lotteries, developers, logging companies, and big corporations. You hate snowmobiles and jet-skis. You hate malls and fashions and cars.

You’re still on my case because I won’t buy a Jeep?

Forget Jeeps. You look at any car, and all you think is pollution, traffic, roadside crap. You say fast food’s poisoning our bodies and TV’s poisoning our minds. You think the Internet is just another scam for selling stuff. You think business is a conspiracy to rape the Earth.

None of that bothers you?

Of course it does. But that's the world. That's where we've got to live. It's not going to go away just because you don't approve. What's the good of spiting on it?

I don't spit on it. I grieve over it.

Jesse was still for a moment, then said ... What's the good of grieving if you can't change anything?

Who says you can't change anything?

You do. Maybe not with your mouth but with your eyes ... Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out ... what's the point? Why study, why work, why do anything if it's all going to hell?

I don't think we're doomed. It's just that nearly everything I care about is under assault.

See, that's what I mean. You're so worried about the fate of the Earth you can't enjoy anything. We come to these mountains, and you bring the shadows with you. You've got me seeing nothing but shadows.

Before leaving for Colorado, Sanders says, I had imagined that Jesse would be able to meet the Rockies with clear eyes, with the freshness of his green age. So long as he was in my company, however, he would see the land through the weather of my moods. And if despair had so darkened my vision that I was casting a shadow over Jesse's world – even here among these magnificent mountains and tumultuous rivers – then I would have to change. I would have to learn to see differently.

Beloved ones, I am haunted by those lines: "... if despair had so darkened my vision that I was casting a shadow over Jesse's world ... then I would have to change. I would have to see differently."

When I think about the generations ahead, I have to learn to see differently. I have to be honest about our failures – my failures – and I have to hold on to that vision of renewed life and people of all kinds eating together and singing together

and celebrating together. I have to learn to believe that promise we claim every Advent that “a little child shall lead them.” I have to hold on to that vision because it’s so easy for it to just slip through my fingers. It’s so easy for fear and despair to strip it all away.

So, in these days, I find myself praying:  
Be now my vision, O God of my heart;  
Nothing surpasses the love you impart.

Let’s sing together ...

NOTES

Scott Russell Sanders, “Mountain Music,” in Paul Rogat Loeb’s collection, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While* (Basic Books, 2004), pp. 99-105.