

Second Sunday of Christmas (c)
John 1:1-18
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
January 2, 2022

In my hometown, Moline IL, there's a nice little state park near where the Rock River flows into the Mississippi. Blackhawk State Park. For a long time after I left Moline, nearly every time I went back to visit, I used to go to the park. There's a path that winds along the shore of the river. You follow it for a quarter-mile till you come to a big sandstone wall, which had been carved out by the river. And at the foot of this wall is this big jumble of boulders, as big as cars. It used to be, you'd have to scramble around the boulders if you wanted to keep going on the path. But the boulders were also a good place to sit. I used to love to sit on one of those boulders, and watch the Rock River roll past below me.

There was something about that place that always put me in a kind of trance. I always got the feeling that God was close, trying to tell me something very important through the river and the trees and the sunlight. "In the beginning was the Word...," all things came into being through the Word. It was one of those places in nature, where I could almost hear the Word speaking to me. Maybe you've had that feeling—when the world is so full of God's mystery that it feels like it's going to burst.

But it wasn't just about the natural beauty of the place. For me there were also a lot of *people memories* attached to Blackhawk State Park, too. The first time I went there was with my sister. I had to have been about 10, so she would have been 17. She brought me and two of her friends to the picnic area, which was near those boulders, for breakfast on the portable grill one summer morning. Now my sister went to a camp in Minnesota every summer, so she loved nature and she knew all about the outdoors; she knew all the bugs and funguses you could eat to survive in the wild. So she was kind of in her glory that morning, happily and lovingly taking us out to breakfast in the woods, pointing out all the flora and fauna you normally wouldn't notice.

I don't remember how it happened, but while we were eating, someone upset a hive of hornets. We all scattered in opposite directions. But some hornets got in my sister's shirt. She ran screaming down the path, swatting at herself getting stung several times. I wanted to help her, but...that was a lot of hornets. I can't repeat in church what my sister was screaming. But the gist of it was: "nature is not always great."

Another memory was from high school. At the end of summer after our senior year, just a few days before we all went off to our own colleges, three of my best friends and I sat on those boulders. We talked about all the good times we'd shared. Of course we were all going to get together the next summer. But it turned out that was the last time in our lives the gang—the four of us—were together at one time.

So *real things* had happened to me in that place. It made it all the more meaningful when I sat alone there in later years, watching the river flow past. Kind of like a worldly place

that used to hold the past and the future together for me. The river kept going, always different, always changing. But it always was the same river. Things were always sinking down into the flow out of sight. But there was a continuity to it all.

Now, it makes me a little sad to say, I rarely go back to Blackhawk State Park anymore when I go home to Moline, for the simple reason that, like everything else in this world, it has passed away for me, down the river. I don't need to go to that particular spot to take my spiritual bearings anymore. But I definitely need to know what holds my life together. As a human being, God built me to look for him. I need to know what remains constant, while everything else is passing away. Because when you don't know the river that flows through it all, connecting everything together into a larger picture, then what meaning are you going to find in all those goodbyes you have to say? What has it all been for? How do you make sense of all the little deaths you've had to experience in your life? Death of friendships, death of certain dreams, death of loved ones. How will we make sense of our own death, when we face it? How does it all fit together? If you haven't asked that yet, then well...you will. After getting stung by life a number of times, you will start to wonder about the reasons for all the stinging.

Today's gospel lesson brings it all together. John chapter 1. These words, when we hear them and trust them, establish us on the Rock, Jesus Christ. First they teach us something we might take for granted but shouldn't: God is the source of all things. But what's God's character? What's his nature? Well, he's a good and loving God. Everything flows out of his Word. There's a good and loving and intelligent purpose underlying all of creation and everything that happens. I might not see it when I'm getting stung by hornets. I might not see God's good and loving and intelligent purpose when I'm listening to today's news. But I can have faith in God's Word. Praise God, I can stand on the Rock. I can have faith that God's intentions are loving and good, no matter how many times I get stung, no matter how many goodbyes I say.

But most amazing of all: the awesome God who created this universe, vast beyond comprehension, has also entered personally and completely into our lives here. As a Christian, when I'm looking into that river, remembering all my stuff, I know John chapter one. I know that all of my stories, all of my losses and victories and stings and joys and confusions and questions...it all begins and ends in God. He's always there, trying to reach through to each of us personally with his grace and truth.

And no story of love is greater than the Word becoming one of us in Jesus. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. He pours his own life into it all—even if it means dying on a cross. Another way of putting it: He's put himself into the hornets' nest, so that you and I can hold on to him when we're there.

All of our stories have a that kind of sting to them. We want certain things to last forever. You hold on to memories and certain people and ideas. But they pass away. Promises are broken. Even the best things die. We feel the sting.

God in Jesus Christ jumps into it all. He gets rejected, his heart is broken. He gets nailed

to a cross and buried dead in the ground. But it doesn't stop there. At Easter, with Christ's resurrection, God showed us that no power in this world, not even death, can stop his River from flowing. You and I are living in the Word together. We're all living very different lives here, with different challenges, but we're all flowing together in Christ. God is gathering all the small streams up in Jesus. Through Jesus, all the little tributaries are flowing towards the great River now.

So, Christians are not people who spend their lives trying to escape, trying to get away from it all. We should definitely treasure those times we can sit by the river and watch it all go by. But the beautiful thing is—the big message of Christmas—is that God is close to us, even in the bad stuff we'd rather not deal with: the stings, the goodbyes, the illnesses, the controversies, confusions and irritations. God has come at Christmas to make all of it holy. Your life, as it is today—whatever problem or crisis you're dealing with—is what God means to transform through his cross and resurrection. As a Christian, I can actually hope and trust that even my sufferings will become another means by which I can glorify my loving God. I don't have to run away. He's given me his life to live.

John chapter one ultimately is what God is always trying to tell me, when I'm taking in the river that's flowing past. Not only is he the source and end of everything: not only is he so far above and beyond me that I could never comprehend his mystery on my own. He's also given himself, in the Word. We can actually speak it and share it right now. Stuff as normal and familiar as bread and wine—he puts all of himself into it, so that you and I can take it into ourselves and become part of his life today. We all have our pasts, but in Christ we wake up each day knowing that the future is a beautiful gift that we have received for free, because he so loved us. It's a victory. And we can live by it.