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Introduction

Eduard R. Riegert

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Introduction

1 *We are used to making journeys.*

Trips, we call them: motor trips, train trips, ship trips, canoe trips. The vehicle we use determines the major character of the trip: a trip by car is quite different than a trip by train; a trip by airplane or boat is utterly different again. We are used to making journeys in different vehicles.

We are also used to saying that *life is a journey*. As people of faith we often say that life is a *faith journey*. That's helpful, but vague. Faith in what? Our own smarts? Our connections? The market? An ideology? A religious system? A superior power?

So we are specifying that our life journey is not just a vague "faith journey", but a *baptismal journey*, that is, a journey initiated by Baptism and shaped and directed by Baptism. Baptism, if you will, is the vehicle in which we make the journey. Baptism gives our journey a unique character; Baptism provides a number of unique adventures; and baptism guarantees a journey rich in promise and destination.

How do we begin to talk of a baptismal journey? Well, Baptism is a watery event, and so we are imagining the baptismal journey as a trip on the river of life. Hugh MacLennan, one of Canada's finest authors, writes, "The analogy between rivers and lives has been overworked, but only because it is unavoidable."¹ And if so, then perhaps a river trip in the vehicle of Baptism is also an appropriate metaphor.

It is a congenial one for me personally. I grew up on a farm North of Saskatoon, about four or five miles from the North Saskatchewan River. Every spring my father would hitch the horses to our rubber tired "Bennett" wagon² and we would make a leisurely trip to the river so that he could roll a hoop net into the water. Then we had to go back every couple of days, draw it out and bag the fish caught in it. A river of life! And in July we would go back to the river banks to pick saskatoon berries, and in

August to pick choke cherries. A river of life! And sometimes, during the dry and dusty and heart-breaking Thirties, we hauled barrels of water home to try to save something in the garden. I loved the river. In a dry and thirsty land it seemed such an oasis – a veritable source of life – and in a flat and undifferentiated land it opened a way to tantalizing distances and realms of mystery.

Indeed, I love rivers. Up until a few years ago I went white-water canoeing on Ontario rivers every spring: Mattawa and French (famous fur-trade canoe route from the Ottawa to the Great Lakes), Spanish and Saugeen, Moon and Moira.... Great adrenalin rushes! I learned to respect rivers.

Rivers were the entries into Canada: the St. John, the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Winnipeg, the Red, the Saskatchewan, the Mackenzie, the Fraser. They shaped the routes of exploration and commerce, they shaped the way the nation developed. They flow in us and through us.

Rivers offer an astonishing parallel to the human journey through life. A river starts small – a mere trickle. It grows, fed by many tributaries, as do we. It crashes through violent reaches and loses itself in languid meanders. It encounters placid meadows and dark canyons. It companies with creatures large and small. It is blocked here and there, and swirls and probes for new routes. It is used and abused. It is fed by tiny streams and joins with equal tributaries. And finally it crosses the bar into the infinity of sea.... A river is an apt metaphor for life, and a river journey an apt parallel to the human journey through life. Simon Fraser's mad run down the river that now bears his name reveals that vividly.

In 1808 he entered the upper waters of a river he thought was the Columbia, and when he got past Fort George (now Prince George) the savage river whirled the tiny canoes on and when they got into the canyon and stared up thousands of feet of dark rock walls they knew there was no turning back. Deafened by the roar of the turbulent waters, giddy from the twist of whirlpools, terrified of each new bend, they were dashed helplessly along until backwashes swept them to the shore. Portaging over stark cliffs they finally reached Hell's Gate, and Simon Fraser wrote in his journal:

I have been for a long period in the Rocky Mountains, but have never seen anything like this country. It is so wild I cannot find words to describe it at times. We had to pass where no human being should

venture; yet in those places there is a regular pathway impressed, or rather indented on the very rocks by frequent travelling.³

These were Indian pathways. Fraser and his men spidered their way along the cliffs and somehow got through. Lower down they bought Indian dugouts and so reached the ocean.

Life is a river. How apt a metaphor! Swept along willy-nilly, whirled and dashed about, our hearts in our throats, into dark and roaring canyons where there is no turning back and seemingly no help at all...only to find that someone has gone before us, and made a pathway that leads, finally, to the still waters and the green pastures and the illimitable sea...

2. The baptismal journey offers distinctive ways in which to negotiate these life adventures.

Simon Fraser's journey on the river that now bears his name was dominated by the purpose of conquest. "He believed it was the Columbia, and he...entered it with the specific mission of exploring it to the mouth in order to establish British rights to the entire Columbia region."⁴ But Baptism drowns us in a flood! After him came those greedy for gold, but Baptism leads us into the supportive fellowship of a distinctive community. Then came those greedy for salmon and timber and minerals, but Baptism transforms our riches into rags and sets a new world before us. Then came farmers and ranchers and fruit growers with more benign aims, but equally capable of greed, but Baptism dumps us into the drink of stewardship and service. And then came the pleasure seekers who thirsted to be carried through thrills of whitewater and fresh powder and hot springs, but Baptism carries us around the bend into the profound joy of celebration.

For on the river of life the baptismal journey is determined by that sacrament.

In our few days together we want to experience the adventures of this baptismal journey, using as a map the "Flood Prayer" from the baptismal liturgy, noting as landmarks the riverine references in it:

Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father: We give you thanks, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and you created heaven and earth. By the gift of water you nourish and sustain us and all living things.

By the waters of the flood you condemned the wicked and saved those whom you had chosen, Noah and his family. You led Israel by the pillar of cloud and fire through the sea, out of slavery into the freedom of the promised land. In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit...He made water a sign of the kingdom and of cleansing and rebirth...Wash away the sin of all those who are cleansed by this water and bring them forth as inheritors of your glorious kingdom.⁵

So we meditate on Covenant with the help of the story of the Flood; on Incorporation with the help of the story of the Exodus; on Transformation with the help of the story of the crossing of the Jordan; on Discipleship with the help of the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan; and on Celebration with the help of the stories of the Creation and the eternal River of Life in Revelations.

And even as every Canadian river explorer encountered the peoples of the First Nations, so we will also encounter them. For in our diverse culture, it is both seemly and necessary – especially for those who plan worship – to be in conversation with at least one other culture, one other “faith tradition” as we say today.

We turn now to the first characteristic of the baptismal journey on the river of life, Covenant. But we start at a point *diametrically opposed* to Covenant!

Notes

- ¹ Hugh MacLennan, *Seven Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1961; Laurentian Library ed, 1977) 127.
- ² The “Bennett wagon” was a phenomenon of the Depression of the 1930s on the Great Plains of Western Canada. It was the chassis of an automobile upon which a box was built and converted into a horse-drawn vehicle. Sometimes the whole body of the car was retained, with only the engine removed. It was named, derisively, after the hapless Tory leader, Richard Bedford Bennett, Prime Minister from 1930 to 1935. See Bruce Hutchison. *Mr. Prime Minister 1867-1964* (Don Mills, ON: Longmans Canada Ltd., 1964) chap. 13.
- ³ MacLennan, *Seven Rivers*, 149-150.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* 149.
- ⁵ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), “Holy Baptism”, p. 122.