

Down to the River to Pray

Acts 16:11-15, Revelation 22:1-2

Camp Asto Wamah; Center Church, Hartford

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Did you ever notice how often water appears in important places in the Bible? The very beginning of creation talks about God organizing the waters of the earth. And we heard today the very end of the Bible, in a vision of a new earth, the center is a shining river. When we are baptized and enter into the church, we are touched by water. In the Bible there are lots of stories happening in and around water, including the story of Lydia meeting Paul today, outside the city gate by the river, where there was a place to pray.

Now I love our Meeting House, with its beautiful windows and organ, but I have to tell you a true story, that I did not come to know God nor did I first pray inside a Meeting House like ours, or inside any church building for that matter. The first time in my life I remember really praying, really talking to God from my heart and not just saying a prayer with someone else's words, was by water, a lake, much like the lake out the windows there.

Here's how it happened. I was a Girl Scout for many years, and every summer I went to camp. I loved everything about camp: sleeping in tents or cabins, campfires, s'mores, hiking, the songs, and, most of all, being in and around water, lakes and rivers, swimming and in canoes. In fact, fifty years ago this summer, when astronauts first walked on the moon, I was at Girl Scout camp and we watched it on a small TV! Some of my best memories from childhood happened at camp.

One year, when I was about 11 or 12 years old, I spent two weeks at camp. It had been a tough year in my life for a whole set of reasons. My parents and I were fighting constantly. At the end of the two weeks, I was not looking forward to going back home. On

the last night of camp, we had a very special ritual that we did. That day, we had cut thin pieces of wood from our firewood pile. We took a candle and burned some wax from it to stick it onto that piece of wood. It looked kind of like this. After it got dark, we all walked down to the lake. We sang our evening song (Day is done, gone the sun, from the lake, from the hills, from the sky. All is well, safely rest. God is nigh.) "God is nigh" means "God is near, God is close by." Then we lit our candles and floated the wood in the lake. That night I felt God near me, and as I put my candle in the lake, I asked God to help me after I went back home. That's all, nothing fancy, but for the first time I felt like God **was** near, and did hear me and love me. Sort of like Lydia in that story we heard, I felt my heart open. From that day on, I began to talk to God often, and in all sorts of places. Still, for me, one of the places I always pray is when I am near water, like a lake or a river or the ocean. I just talk with God. And it makes a difference in my life for good.

That's what praying is. Sometimes if you don't have words of your own, it helps to have someone else's words, like when Jesus gave his disciples the words we say as the Lord's Prayer. One writer I like says she often prays in just three words: Help, Thanks, Wow! But you don't need fancy words, or even a lot of words, or even words said out loud at all. Mostly, praying is about opening your heart, believing, or trying to believe, that God is near and cares about what's going on with you. It can be little things. It can be big things, and everything in between. Whatever is on your mind you can share with God.

We're going to do a couple more parts of our service in here, and then we are all going to go down to the lake to pray together. Start thinking about what you need to share with God, whether it is Help, Thanks, or Wow or all three. And if you have gone for a while without talking with God, from now on, let water remind you! Water in a lake, a river, the ocean, a pond or a fountain in a park, even the water coming out of your sink at home! Every time you see or taste or touch water, remember how deeply you are loved by God, and how God wants to know what's on your mind and heart. Pray.