
Lent Along the Chattahoochee River

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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We had a heap of storms last Friday night, and I pray for those who suffered from the tornadoes and from the stiff winds and just from the plain old fear that this season annually brings upon us. I know some families who were hunkering down in their basements last Friday night. Even for those who escaped misfortune, the experience of tornadoes in their neighborhood is just scary.

However, after the cold front and fierce winds had come through, I knew on Saturday morning what I had to do. I had to get out and walk along the Chattahoochee River. We hadn't had that much rain in the Atlanta area for a while, and I knew the river would be filled and flowing mightily.

And it was beautiful. The river was a deep clay-red, and foamy, like some kind of chocolate froth that they serve in our local coffee shops. I saw none of the bare rocks out in the river, rocks where the Canadian geese usually laze about. Those rocks were completely covered, creating dips and lifts, eddies and waves, which would have been great fun if I were in a canoe. Huge limbs, and even a tree trunk or two, were careening down river at the same speed as the water; they would not have been fun if I were in a canoe.

I walked my usual routes, watching hawks of all shapes circling over the water. A great blue heron loped its wings upwind. I saw, but didn't hear, the distinctive pileated woodpecker dashing through the woods. And cardinals. I couldn't believe how many pairs of cardinals were flirting in the bushes. Despite the cooler morning, it really was close to a Spring day; the birds are coupling up!

As most of you know, the word "Chattahoochee" means "painted river" in the native Muskogean language of this area. The "paint" or "marks" may refer to all the granite outcroppings. But I suggest that there are various ways in which our major river is painted. On Saturday of the First Week of Lent, I saw some furious painting. Obviously, the storms and rain began the fury. But the river itself then seemed to consist of paint, that lovely Georgia clay type of paint that sticks to your shoes and jeans. The high river was painting the banks again, leaving traces of trash, of course, but also leaving traces of nourishment and reinvigoration. The birds were enjoying that reinvigoration.

Sometimes our Lenten journeys are furious; they are forced upon us by winds beyond our control: loss or betrayal or pain. Sometimes we take on disciplines, like fasting or abstaining from alcohol or certain foods, and they produce furious conflict in us. But they also take out the trash.

Every one of our Lenten journeys begins with paint; we paint our foreheads with the ashes that remind us we are dust. And to dust we shall return. Maybe Lent along the Chattahoochee River doesn't use ashes, but uses Georgia red clay instead. "Remember that you are clay and to clay you shall return." And if you do anything interesting at all in Georgia, anything that is truly down-to-earth, you are going to have clay all over you.

If my Lenten journey is as faithful as my walk along the Chattahoochee River after a major storm, then I will see some

trash, but I will also see some new life. I will see some furious waves, but I will also see birds pairing up for Spring. I will get dirty, painted with red clay, but I will also be nourished by that same dirt. My soul will grow.

Storms always hit the Southeast during Lent. They are scary and wild, sort of like a forty-day wilderness experience. But they also cause new water to flow. That water paints us with old clay and new soul.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Reverend Sam Candler

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