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Shall we gather at the river? Where bright angel feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God.

There are a number of stories in the Bible that take place at the river. When God first creates the earth, he nestles the garden of Eden amongst four strong rivers that provide habitat for fish and birds, and lush green plants and vibrant flowers. It's at the Jordan River where God proves his faithfulness to Joshua and the Israelites by stopping up the water so they can cross into the promised land. It's at that same river that God blesses Jesus in baptism, and tells everyone to listen to him. The river is a sign of life, of new life that is nourished physically and spiritually by the one who created it.

The river was certainly a big part of Ann's life. The pictures Andrea and Deb put together show that – most of them are of her two favorite things: her boat, and her loved ones. She was never so happy as when she was out on the water, spending time with friends staying up late telling stories and having fun.

For Ann, life on the river means appreciating the beauty of creation around you. Sometimes they'd head south, pull up in little towns along the way. Sometimes they'd just put in off the dock in Winona, watch the birds, go fishing and enjoy the sun. Andrea and Deb remember whole summers spent on the family boat ... which was fitting, since the boat practically was a member of the family. Odin and Ann took care of their boat like it was another child. It was always in tip-top shape.

They appreciated the world off the river, too. There were lots of family outings when they'd get in the car and explore southeastern Minnesota. When she got older, the road trips got longer – to Portland, and Florida. And they could always count on her good sense of direction to get them where they wanted to go.

And life on the river means living simply. But that suited Ann. She never needed the biggest and best – it was more important to her to have fun, spend time with the people she loved, know that what she had was bought and paid for instead of worrying about debt. Still, she also knew that sometimes you've got to be a little savvy to get what you want ... so she'd save the change from trips to the grocery store and stash it away in her gloves. Even though Odin would have given her whatever she asked for, she told the girls sometimes you just don't want to negotiate.

Life on the river also means going with the flow ... even when that flow takes you to unexpected places. Shortly after college Andrea was living and working in Brazil. That meant she couldn't come home for Christmas. So Ann told Odin that she was going to go down there. Was he coming or not? They'd never done anything like this before. Brazil was an awful long distance away. But Ann could be pretty persuasive. So that's what they did: The whole family spent Christmas in Brazil that year. They even brought down the artificial Christmas tree, set it up on the sand dunes and sang carols under the stars.

Still, life on the river means facing storms and strong currents that can make things. Ann faced her share of hard times as well. When she was just a girl, her mother died, so she was raised by her dad, but he passed away at a fairly young age as well. It was hard for Ann and her brothers, and taught them the importance of taking care of family. Later in life, she had lots of struggles with her health over the years. Skin cancer, breast cancer, falls, brain tumors. Her body saw a lot of trauma, but she always had a good doctor at Mayo and the determination to bounce back. She had to learn to let others take care of her. And, of course, she had to bear the death of her husband, and her son. Like Joshua and the Israelites, she had to learn to trust God to lead her through the raging water. Yet God got her to the other side. He surrounded her with good friends, determination, and a sense of humor. I don't know how these challenges affected her faith, but no matter what, God never gave up on Ann.

You know, there's one more river in the Bible. It shows up in the book of Revelation. John is writing of a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. All the old things have passed away. There are no more tears, no more pain, no more suffering. The water in this river is bright as crystal. It flows strong and clear straight from the throne of God. And because of Christ's great love for us and for all creation, we trust that God's faithful people will live by its banks forever. And so even as we say goodbye to Ann, and know how much we'll miss her, we can have hope that she is at home with God, and that she's still where she loves to be.

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.