Context:

Last week we read of how the city of New Jerusalem came from the Heavens without the Temple. Today the image goes back to the celestial city with an angel who points to a river that shines like a crystal. Like most rivers, the water gives nourishment to the trees that grow on either side. The leaves that come from the trees give healing to the nations and curses are lifted. As a result, the people will have the Lord’s names on them and they will no longer be in darkness. Because of this nourishment, these people will be able to live and continue on in their lives. As it comes to the end of the text, the angel assures the author that everything for the future is in these visions and that these scrolls tell all the early followers what they need to hear.

As the writer records these words, he is giving the early church the knowledge that they have everything they need to carry on in life. The description of the celestial city, the river, the tree of life, the fruits, and the refrain of the God and the Lamb is to remind the early church that they belong to something greater than themselves. And no matter what happens, they are called to trust God and to be healers in their own mist.

As the book made its way around the ancient world, early Christians would have heard that their future is promising and everything they need comes Jesus and the example set before them.

Application:

As I read this rich imagery, I could not help but see the allusion of the crystal river to our own baptisms. Whether we were baptized as children or adults, baptism reminds us that we are part of the body of Christ. The gift that comes from those waters reminds us that we belong to God, and we join a large body of believers who also belong to God. People from all over the world are baptized into the family of Christ and with that identity we are reminded that God works through people from every nation, tribe, and background. Just as the river bears different fruit with different leaves, we are reminded that our chief identity is rooted in Christ. No more divisions and no more wandering in the dark.

I especially think this lesson is appropriate as we find ourselves in a season of thanksgiving. While it may be hard to believe, we have come to the time of the year where we celebrate all our many blessings. Many of us have been blessed to have many things in our life that give us cause to celebrate: nice homes, solid jobs, family, friends, and our churches. All of those things bring us life.

One of my favorite traditions at Thanksgiving involves the opportunity to go around the table and share what we are thankful for in our lives. Whenever our family would travel to visit extended relatives, there would always be the opportunity to share about those blessings and remind ourselves that we have been given so much. Some years we had more blessings to name than others. Nonetheless, we were reminded that giving thanks was a spiritual discipline. Gratitude reminds us to see the positive things around us.
But what we hear in the text is that all the things we are given should also empower us to be something in our world. As servants of the Lord, all the nourishment from this crystal water is meant to transform who we are as people. What do you do with your blessings? Do you share them or hoard them? Do you give fully back to all those blessings you have received? How do you see and treat people who are different from you? How do treat those who may not be as fortunate as you? As we are given abundant life, we are called to share that with others.

In this season of thanksgiving and in preparing for season of Advent, we are called to think about how we have been given so much and how we are called to use those blessings to bless others. What do you look for in this coming season as a way to honor and serve our Lord?