

# ON THE RIVER



Eight days in the Amazon taught me that God uses our meager, imperfect offerings to bless and restore his people.

BY JANET TANG



**D**

espite growing up in a middle-class, second-generation immigrant family, I knew that we stood, according to the world's standards, quite firmly among the privileged. Since my youth, Luke 12:48 has haunted me: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (NASB). I would often wonder, *What is God going to require of me? Will I be too engrossed in my own interests to discern any calling on my life?*



Over the years, however, I have relaxed in wondering whether I would miss God’s call. I trusted he would let me know what was required in due time.

One such time came last summer when I had an opportunity to travel to Brazil to join a medical team serving villages along the Amazon River that are only accessible by boat. Though I initially planned to go with our home church, circumstances led me to join a different church, Rejoice! Community Church in Le Mars, Iowa. Since the trip was geared toward the youth group, my teenage son, Corin, was also able to join.

As we traveled the river, the scenery was always changing, and I never tired of looking at the water. Homes on stilts, along with canoes and boats of various sizes, dotted the land—that is, whatever land surfaced above the high waters. The rainy season had just ended, so the water line was found among the branches of large trees. It was a type of paradise, but not the manicured



📷 In addition to providing medical care, the team helped with VBS, painted houses, and worked with a local pastor to share the gospel.

kind. It was more rustic and felt more authentic. We frequently caught sight of dolphins and other tropical animals.

The sunsets were mesmerizing, and the moonrises breathtaking, especially amid a magnificent array of constellations.



We traveled daily to different villages on the *J. J. Mesquita*, the medical boat run by the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPManaus, in Portuguese), one of RCA Global Mission's partners. The city of Manaus, with its more than 2 million people, sits at the juncture of the Rio Negro and the Amazon River. IPManaus has long shared the gospel with people both in Manaus and along the rivers.

We accompanied 20 Brazilians on the boat, offering medical and dental care and teaching basic public health practices. In addition, our team painted houses, organized vacation Bible school, and visited homes. We concluded our time in each village with a worship service.

On our third day, before entering the village of Amandio, we were introduced to Berenice, an older woman. More than 19 years earlier, she had met Pastor Djard, with whom we were traveling.

They had met at the closing worship service the day the medical boat made its first visit to her village. Though the villagers were hearing the gospel for the first time, Berenice knew God was speaking to her. At the end of the service, she proclaimed to the people she would no longer practice sorcery and would follow Jesus. She learned the tenets of the Christian life from local missionary leaders and soon asked for opportunities to share the

Much was given to those whom we met in the Amazon, and they were faithful in responding to what God required of them.



📷 José Brasil, left, initially opposed his wife's faith. He now rows Berenice, pictured second from right, to other villages on the river so she can share the good news.

message with other villages down the river.

But it was not easy. She was persecuted by the local religious authorities and by her husband, José. He threatened her, spread lies about her, and did everything in his power to stop her from sharing God's message.

The Holy Spirit, however, continued to strengthen and sustain Berenice. One

day, when her husband came to her with violent threats, she gathered the children, ran into another room, and prayed. As he tried to stop her, he saw a powerful light emanating from the room, specifically from their youngest child. He left, visibly shaken. This marked his turning point. Eventually, José came to know Jesus.

After enrolling at IPManaus's missionary training center, Berenice

became the pastor of the community. José became her canoeist, rowing her to the villages so she could continue to do Christ's ministry.

As I heard their story, I was so moved by the humility of Berenice and José. Through her tears, Berenice kept thanking us for coming. I skeptically thought, "We are nobody. How can we be agents of such hope?"

God showed me, however, that he accepts our meager, imperfect, and tainted offerings and uses them to bless, heal, and restore his people. In listening to Berenice and José, I realized that because of Christ, we are more than we think. We came from a far distance, bringing tangible care. Our partners at IPManaus helped us understand that, to people like Berenice and José, our physical presence was a sign that God had not forgotten them. We embodied God in the flesh, just by showing up. Hardly faultless, not always efficient, but it was enough.

It was a tremendous gift to do meaningful work in such a beautiful part of God's creation like the Amazon. As Corin and I served alongside the group from Rejoice! Community Church, Le Mars, Iowa, became more than just a dot on the map. It now represents a community of genuine friends, whose lives and stories have literally reshaped our own. I also recently found out this congregation raised enough money to fully fund a needed eye surgery for José, who has become blind.

Working with the 20 Brazilians on

the boat—captain, sailors, cooks, medical professionals, translators, and staff—was phenomenal. Though I will not likely see most of them again, I carry the joy of serving with them and look forward to seeing them in heaven someday!

As I settle back home and continue in the work God has prepared for me, I am regularly reminded of how much God has given me, and I wonder what will be required in the future. For now, some parts are clear: as a homeschooling mom, I have lessons to prepare, places to drive, and kids to raise. But I also realize that I was not alone in receiving God’s lavishness. Much was given to those whom we met in the Amazon, and they were faithful in responding to what God required of them. We were recipients and witnesses of their gifts.

So maybe I do not need to worry about “the more” God will ask of me. Not only can I trust him to direct me when it is time, I am also learning that simple obedience is what he requires, and he will quite capably and amply take care of the rest. ■

## GO

Does Janet’s experience stir up excitement in you? Bob Oliveira, the RCA’s missionary project leader in Brazil, would love to help you and your church plan a trip to the Amazon. Email him at [roliveira@rca.org](mailto:roliveira@rca.org) to get started.

## GIVE

The Presbyterian Church in Manaus is obediently following God and doing great work, and the congregation can use financial assistance to make its work possible. Give to IPManaus at [www.rca.org/give/ipmanaus](http://www.rca.org/give/ipmanaus).



Janet Tang, pictured with her son Corin, attends Grace Ann Arbor in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with her family.



# ways

## to grow in faith with people of all abilities

God made each of us with different gifts, strengths, and needs. Often, people with disabilities find that other people decide for them how they can and cannot participate in the life of their church community. Here are a few tips to help you think about working together in growing God’s kingdom!

1. Build a social ramp, not just a wheelchair ramp.
2. Help everyone see and hear better.
3. Ask and listen—and be prepared to follow through.

Find more ways at [www.rca.org/tenways](http://www.rca.org/tenways).

Questions? Want to learn more?

Visit [www.rca.org/disability](http://www.rca.org/disability) or contact Terry: [tdeyoung@rca.org](mailto:tdeyoung@rca.org).

Disability Concerns fosters communities where everybody belongs and everybody serves.

