

Sermon – “Thirsting”

Sunday, February 28, 2016

Scripture Readings – Psalm 63:1-8, Luke 13:1-9

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

We are delighted to present a portion of Handel’s *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Lent. Today’s presentation is the Air for Alto based on one of the Suffering Servant songs, Isaiah 53:3a: *He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.* This musical presentation reminds us of the extent to which God embraced our humanity in Christ, who experienced the depth of human suffering and grief. Dr. Carol Bechtel, who wrote the Kerygma Study on this oratorio, explains that the ancient Hebrew’s understanding of suffering changed during the Babylonian exile, when this portion of Isaiah was written. Prior to this experience, they believed suffering was a punishment for one’s sin. During the transformation of the exile, they began to understand there was a redemptive aspect to suffering, a belief that is at the heart of our Judea-Christian faith.

Before this musical presentation, we turn to our first scripture reading, Psalm 63:1-8 where one’s longing for God finds expression in the metaphor of thirsting. Psalm 63 cannot be boxed into a single category of psalm. Its stanzas have elements of lament, thanksgiving, trust and praise blended together. At its core is the understanding that life relies on God’s presence. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of God’s Holy Word.

*1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. 2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. 3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. 4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. 5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips 6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; 7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 13:1-9. Luke balances the warnings of God’s judgment with promises of God’s mercy. Luke also dismisses the popular, but unworthy, theology of retribution... If human beings die by the sword, by accident, or by natural disaster, it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins while sparing others. The bright side of the warnings is that Jesus affirms these calamities are not God’s doing. On the other hand, they stand as graphic reminders that life is fragile, and any of us may stand before our Maker without a moment’s notice. Hear now God’s Word to each of us. (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, pg 271-272, R. Alan Culpepper)

*1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" 8 He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."*

The title of the sermon – “Thirsting”

*The text: “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my life thirsts for you.” Psalm 63:1*

Let us pray: Holy God, we thank you for the gift of second chances, for those who care enough to advocate on our behalf, and for those who tend to us and nourish us in the time we are given to live loving and productive lives. Loving God, we thank you for filling our cup and quenching our thirst when we find ourselves in a dry and weary land. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I hesitate to begin with a story around the theme of manure, however since it was popularized by one of our more popular presidents, and in light of the current political climate, please indulge me.

The story concerns twin boys of five or six. Worried that the boys had developed extreme personalities — one was a total pessimist, the other a total optimist — their parents took them to a psychiatrist.

First the psychiatrist treated the pessimist. Trying to brighten his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with brand-new toys. But instead of yelping with delight, the little boy burst into tears. “What’s the matter?” the psychiatrist asked, baffled. “Don’t you want to play with any of the toys?” “Yes,” the little boy bawled, “but if I did I’d only break them.”

Next the psychiatrist treated the optimist. Trying to dampen his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with horse manure. But instead of wrinkling his nose in disgust, the optimist emitted just the yelp of delight the psychiatrist had been hoping to hear from his brother, the pessimist. Then he clambered to the top of the pile, dropped to his knees, and began gleefully digging out scoop after scoop with his bare hands. “What do you think you’re doing?” the psychiatrist asked, just as baffled by the optimist as he had been by the pessimist. “With all this manure,” the little boy replied, “there must be a pony in here somewhere!”

Edwin Meese, who served as counselor to President Reagan said, “Reagan told this joke so often that it got to be kind of a joke with the rest of the staff. Whenever something would go wrong, somebody would be sure to say, “There must be a pony in here somewhere.”

Regardless of our political persuasion, it is fair to say from time to time within the circumstances of our individual and corporate lives, each of us feels like we have been presented with a room full of horse manure.

The psalmist uses a different metaphor to compare times of despair, loneliness and hopelessness in one’s life. Rather than looking for a pony in a pile of manure, desolate times are likened to living in a dry and weary land where there is no water. The psalmist uses the image of thirsting...as a deer longs for flowing streams, so our spirits long for God.

Water is a rich metaphor for the refreshing and life-giving presence of God in our lives. When the psalmist talks about thirsting for the living God, it is understood that life itself depends on God. The body cannot live without water and the human spirit cannot survive without God. Each of us experiences the thirst that disturbs and drives our living, the longing to be at peace within ourselves, in our relationships with one another and with our Creator, but do not understand its

origin. Too often we try to fill the emptiness, the dryness of our spirit in all sorts of ways, many which are unhealthy and unfulfilling.

In a world filled with competition for our affections, allegiance, energy, and love, Psalm 63 invites us to cultivate our relationship with God... to measure our lives not by how well we care for others, our gifts or our responsibilities but by what goes on in our deepest being... until we discover as did St. Augustine, that *our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.*

Hafiz, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian mystic, encourages us not to quench that thirst or abandon that longing too quickly in his poem entitled "Absolutely Clear."

Don't surrender your loneliness  
so quickly  
let it cut more deep.

Let it ferment and season you  
as few human  
or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart  
tonight  
has made my eyes so soft  
my voice so tender.

My need for God  
absolutely  
clear.

The psalmist's need for God led him into God's sanctuary where he beholds God's power and glory and affirms that the steadfast love of God is better than life itself.

As I reflected on these words this week, my mind's eye pictured one of the most magnificent sanctuaries I have had the privilege of entering. It is the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Barcelona, the masterpiece of Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi and the most visited monument in Spain. Gaudi's architecture reflects his passions in life: nature and religion, earning him the nickname *God's Architect.*

Construction on the Sagrade Familia began in 1882, with Gaudi blending classical art, cubist elements, daring architecture, numerology, nature and incredible light. The cathedral is a work in progress and will be the tallest cathedral in the world when it is complete in 2026, on the hundred year anniversary of Gaudi's death.

When I entered the sanctuary, it literally took my breath away. I felt as though I had left the dry and weary land where there was no water and was entering a rich, lush forest. Gaudi transformed the stone pillars into a grove of soaring trees arching toward the heavens intermingled with colorful light from glorious stained glass windows...reminding us that God's greatest sanctuary is nature. Within the walls of this cathedral, Gaudi empowers us to contemplate trees, with deep and sustaining roots, nourished and enriched by water rolling down like justice and an ever flowing stream of righteousness. Through our eyes so soft, we can envision the divine Shepherd leading us

beside the still waters. We can hear Yahweh summoning us to draw water from the wells of salvation and Christ's voice so tender inviting us to draw the living water from the Samaritan well.

As we continue our Lenten journey into Holy Week and find strength in the prayers of an ancient Hebrew, may we not surrender our loneliness too quickly but allow it to ferment and season our lives. May we embrace our humanity, the frailty of our days and find peace knowing that life's suffering is not retribution for our sin. May we find sustenance in the generous gardener who gives the fig tree a second chance, who tends its roots with nourishment and who gives us a glimpse into the loving kindness and mercy of God...a God who joined us in our humanity to redeem the suffering of the world. Last but not least, may our need for God be absolutely clear. Amen.