

Obey Your Thirst

Psalm 42; John 4: 1-14

Rev. Eunice T. McGarrahan

Sunday, July 20, 2003

Most of you are pretty alert people and you have probably noticed that the scripture on the front of the bulletin is the same as last week's scripture. This is not a mistake. It is the theme of this two sermon series: Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Last week we talked about how our hunger can be satisfied with Bread from Heaven and that bread is Jesus himself.

This week we want to reflect a bit on thirst. Now, I imagine you've seen the Sprite commercials. The tag line is Image is nothing. Obey your thirst. Of course their goal is to get you to buy their product, but commerce aside, there is some truth in what they are saying. When you are thirsty, the point is not to look good. The point is to assuage your thirst.

Before we get started, I want to suggest that you open your Bible to Psalm 42. You will see that Psalm 42 continues right through to the end of Psalm 43 and you will see that after every lament, the psalmist reminds himself that no matter what is in his present, he knows that his future will be filled with the praise of God.

The opening verse of Psalm 42 is often portrayed in paintings in gentle and calm motifs - a beautiful deer has stopped beside a gentle mountain stream or forest brook and is being refreshed by cool waters in a quiet wood. But the psalm as a whole will not let us hold onto that image for very long. This deer is, in other translations, panting. She is on the run, most likely because a hunter is pursuing her. Because she has been running so fast and so hard, she is dying of thirst. But, if she stops to drink, she will most certainly be killed. This deer is not just trying to figure out what kind of beverage will taste good on a hot summer afternoon. She is trying to figure out how she can stay alive. I have been told that deer in this region of the world emit a mournful sound when they are desperate for water. This is a life or death situation.

It is clear. The psalmist feels much like that deer. He longs for - he pants for God because he feels cut off from God, who is his life. In fact the only thing that sustains him is his sorrow and instead of water being poured out for his relief, his soul is poured out - emptied - wasted.

As we look at this psalm (and Psalm 43 as well) we see that the writer is not just talking to God. He's talking to himself and it's an interesting conversation. His Sunday self is talking to his weekday self. It's the kind of conversation we have when what we believe when we're sitting in this sanctuary collides with what happens when we get to work or walk in the front door of our home. He had been a high profile believer. So much so that when things go wrong, people notice his circumstances and mock him by questioning the reality of his God.

He keeps talking to himself. He remembers that he used to be surrounded, not by mockers and doubters but by crowds of the joyous faithful that he, in fact, was leading into worship. Then, it was obvious: God had blessed him and he was part of a company. Can't he be content with past memories? Well, no. In fact, the memory of the good times just makes his present misery even more painful. He is almost outside of his body, looking down on himself and his life and he says that it is because he remembers God's goodness that he is very sad. This is a man who feels that his pain would be lessened if he could just forget God and all of God's good gifts in the past. After all, isn't it clear that God has forgotten him?

But he knows that what is going on now is not the way it will be. Even though enemies are assaulting him from all sides and even though the enemy is also within his own soul, he will not let that assault have the last word. His last words, to himself, at the end of every mournful cry are "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

As bad as things are and as abandoned as he feels, he knows that his only hope is in the God he cannot see. At every turn in this psalm, things seem to get worse. He longs for the water of life, but the waters that come are the waters that drown. His life is filled with nothing but chaos that overwhelms him. And in all of that, he still believes that his hope and his future lie in the hands of the God that, for the moment, he can only remember. He refuses to trust in appearances and he will not allow his realistic analysis of his circumstances to trump what he knows to be permanently and ultimately true - that God's love is present and steadfast.

As he continues his lament in Psalm 43, we see a remarkable thing occur. He knows he cannot save himself. He does not develop a plan to get himself into a better place. He doesn't try to find his own way back. No. He asks God to send His light and truth to him so that he can be brought back to God's holy hill, to where God can be seen and worshiped. The psalmist had been dying of thirst, but he knows that life-giving, thirst-quenching water is on its way. The remembrances of God's good times, which sharpen his pain, now become the way back to the water that will bring life.

And living water is also on its way to a Samaritan woman. She's not looking for it, and doesn't even know such a thing exists, but it comes to her anyway, when Jesus invades her lowly but soon-to-be-transformed life. The Samaritan woman, like our psalmist lives a life of isolation. The psalmist is isolated and alone because of his enemies. The Samaritan woman is isolated by her own sin.

Jesus starts simply enough - he just asks her for a drink of water. Simple, but radical. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, but Jesus went out of his way to begin a conversation with her. She can't believe what he's doing and tries to get Jesus to get back in line with the accepted social order. But Jesus presses on, saying that not only can he ask her for a drink, if she knew who He really was, she could have living water. Now he's got her attention. She doesn't have a clue that Jesus is offering her eternal life. She just thinking about water - and wouldn't you if you lived in an arid land? In someplace like, say, Phoenix?

You see, she's used to this water from a well, a cistern, and, let's face it, cistern water can be pretty scarce and pretty foul. I know a little about this, having grown up in Key West, Florida. Since Key West has no fresh water source of its own, before the pipeline delivered water from the mainland, people used cisterns to catch rainwater. Even after the pipeline, folks used cisterns as back-up water sources. I often thought that I would rather die of thirst than drink water from a cistern. You see, stuff - green, slimy stuff - grew in those cisterns, so fresh, flowing water was very welcome.

And that's what the woman thought Jesus was offering because he shifted his vocabulary from using words which spoke of flat cistern or well water to words which spoke of bubbling water, like an artesian well. But she just can't see that happening. She hears what Jesus is promising and looks around at the available resources and concludes there's a major technological challenge here - Jesus doesn't have a bucket, so how in the world can he give her water? But where Jesus is going, you don't need buckets.

It's at this point that Jesus explains to her that the water he is giving her is the water of eternal life and it is in this moment that we realize that the Samaritan woman is as thirsty as the psalmist. She just didn't know it. And, as the story unfolds, we see that her thirst is quenched as she drinks of the water that creates and sustains life.

Now what do the lives of these two very thirsty people have to do with us? What can we learn about the times in our lives when we, too, seem to be dying of thirst for the living God?

The first thing we learn is that there will be times of spiritual dehydration. We should not think that we are somehow insulated from these dry and dark times. They will come and they will come because of circumstances over which we have no control or they will come because of our own sin. Don't be surprised that they show up, but be attentive to them and do what the Samaritan and the psalmist did - talk honestly and without fear to the Lord.

The second thing we learn is that Jesus can give the water that quenches our thirst and restores us. He is not technologically challenged or limited by the resources we can see. He can give what He promises. And he does so with elements available to us all. When the Bible speaks of living water, it is a way of speaking

about the Word of God, which is both Jesus himself and the scriptures, which tell us about Jesus. And, living water is also a way of speaking about the Holy Spirit. And here's the good news - we don't have to choose between the Word or the Spirit when we're talking about living water, because it's both. Just as hydrogen and oxygen combine to give us water, Word and Spirit combine to give us living water.

Do you notice how we pray at the reading and the preaching of the Word? We will often pray, "O Lord, without your Word we have nothing to say and without your Spirit, we have no way to say it." This prayer is recognition that the living water that revives us is Jesus coming into our lives through the powerful work of the Word and Spirit together. So, if you are dying of thirst, I encourage you to immerse yourself in the water that is the word of God, asking the Holy Spirit to make it come to life for you.

Now I know that many of you are reading your Bibles every day, using the Daily Prayer readings listed on the back of the bulletin. This is a good thing to do. But if you are not reading your Bible and those readings seem to be too much at this point in your life, I encourage you to just start reading in the Psalms. You may be intimidated by other parts of the Bible, but you don't have to read very far in the Psalms to realize that you are in a world you recognize: a world of bewilderment, envy, rage, betrayal, joy, praise, complaint, thanksgiving, confession of sin. Any experience or emotion that you have had will be found in the Psalms and the Psalms will teach what to do with those emotions, especially the frightening ones. You do what all the psalmists did - you place them in the hands of God who will know what to do with them.

And here's the great thing - by reading about these things in the psalms, you are praying, for the psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. And the more you read the psalms, the more you yourself will learn how to pray. And in the reading and the praying of the Psalms, you will drink deeply of living water and you will be restored.

One last thing - the poet of the 42nd and 43rd Psalm knows that there is a place he can go to recover his life and his joy when he is dying of thirst. He goes to the altar of God. He returns to the symbols of the faith. As heirs of the Reformation we don't like to think that mere material symbols have much value, but even John Calvin asks us to consider this. If for our restoration we were to go to some spectacular place of natural beauty, what would we learn of God and ourselves? Well, we might see that God is an awesome creator as we straddle the Continental Divide on some clear starry night, but what kind of God? Powerful, but is that power good or not? And we ourselves would seem to be just cosmic specks. In that vast universe of beauty and mystery, what tells us about the meaning and purpose of our lives? No, nature can bring us to the point of tears in its majestic beauty and to despair in its destructive power and we would long for - we would thirst for more.

And so, we must go to the house of God. The psalmist knows this and we see later in chapter four of John, that the Samaritan woman knew that there was some connection between living water and worship of the true God. So, when we go into the house of God, what will we find there? We will find a baptismal font that tells us that we are people who are joined to Christ and to one another. We discover who we are and we learn that we are not abandoned or alone. We will find a cross that tells us that Jesus was dying to love us. We will find a table that tells us that we need never go hungry again. And thus, like the psalmist we can put the contemplation of God above the indulgences of self-pity, knowing that even if our grief is real - even if we feel as if we are in wild and distant lands, we can remember and know God in this sanctuary.

Are you parched and living in a dry and dusty place? There is water to restore and refresh and it is a spring that will just bubble up and overflow with eternal life. You remember that when you come to worship as you see reminders of the faithful acts of God all around you: the font, the altar, the cross and yes, maybe even the person sitting next to you. You remember that Jesus brings living water to you by the Spirit through the Word. Dive in! Drink up! May your thirst be quenched as you drink deeply of Him with all the means of grace you have been given: word, Spirit, sacraments and fellowship. Indeed, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.