

Thirst

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 55:1-13**

Hear again the first verse of Psalm 63: O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.

O God, you are my God, my soul thirsts for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.

I don't know about you, but in recent weeks I have been struggling with the news. I seek to be an informed person, locally and nationally and globally. We are old school in our home, still receiving a print version of the newspaper every morning, which I read diligently. I am on several news websites a day, hoping to learn what is going on. Yet I struggle, and perhaps you do as well.

Locally, it feels as if there is just one shooting after another, or one stabbing after another, or more economic bad news, or more education bad news.

Or nationally...please...regardless of your political preferences you must admit that the campaign itself, its tone and its content, has been questionable. I hope that at some point we can have a campaign that it about ideas and vision, but evidently that will not be this campaign.

And, again, hasn't it been difficult even this week to track large-scale shootings, in Kalamazoo, in Kansas.

I don't know about you, but I have been struggling with the news. And yet I keep going back, not for morbid reasons, but, rather, for reasons of my faith. God calls us into the world, not out of it, not above it, not apart from it, but into it, to work with God for its transformation. That is to say, it would be easier to avoid the news altogether, perhaps better for our mental health, for our emotional health. But God calls us into the world, not out of it.

Still, and even so, I cannot imagine the news from Flint, Michigan, the water crisis in Flint, an epic political failure with economic and racial overtones that are hard to fathom. I turn on the tap in our house and expect water to come out, safe and plentiful. We take our water for granted. Not in Flint. Not in Flint.

The Israelite people were in exile, as the Babylonians had control of their land. Some had made peace with exile. Some not. The role of the Hebrew prophet therefore was complex – to encourage the people where they were living, to remind them of God and God's covenantal promises, and at the same time not to allow them to become too complacent or comfortable.

At that point thirst hits on two levels: physical thirst, the actual craving of our bodies for water; and spiritual thirst, the actual craving of our souls for water that quenches the thirst of our spirit. We try to make it all about one or all about the other, and the Bible, as it does so many times, will not allow that false split to happen. The Bible will not allow us to split faith and culture, spirituality and social responsibility, into two distinct universes. Rather, they feed each other, and so we must pay attention to the physical needs of our neighbors and their, and our, spiritual needs. Worship draws us in, and then it sends it out. We seek that which quenches the thirst of our bodies; we seek that which quenches the thirst of our souls.

Therefore the prophet Isaiah, writing both to comfort and challenge his people, offers up an extraordinary poetic vision. "...everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." A beautiful and poignant invitation to remind them, and us, that even when we are in exile that the God of abundance provides for us.

But the people, then and now, do not always understand. They make bad choices. They enter into misguided allegiances. They consume without thought and therefore are not satisfied. They forget where they have been and where they are going. Their spirits are parched. So the prophet reminds them: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Why indeed? Why did they, why do we, do what we do, choose what we choose, forget what we forget? Why? So again, and thank God, the prophet reminds us. "...eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."

We understand at that point that Isaiah is engaging us at so many levels – how we live in community with one another, how we feed our bodies and meet our physical hunger and thirst, how we address the hunger and thirst of our spirits, our soul wanderings, particular at those moments and seasons when we wander away from God and God's abundance, and seek satisfaction elsewhere. It will not satisfy.

Here is what will satisfy: "...come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant..." An everlasting covenant that will provide all that is needed, for the world about which God cares so much, and for each us, children of God.

Walter Brueggemann writes: "(Isaiah) calls his listeners to make a clear choice. He offers them an option of the generous self-giving of...the God of covenant. This God has in times past given Israel manna-bread and water in the wilderness, and will now generously give all that is needed for life...free water, free milk, and free wine, all gifts of God. But reception of these free gifts in faith requires his listeners to choose against the quid-pro-quo economy of Babylon. In that imperial economy of demand-production, these deported Jews had to do work that was not satisfying; they had to buy consumer goods that had no sustaining value. The quid-pro-quo of production ("labor for that which does not satisfy") and consumption ("that which is not bread") is in fact a dead-end project that only results in fatigue, disappointment, and despair. The summons of the poem is that, because of the living God, an alternative way is possible. That alternative way is a homecoming that will be enacted because of God's fidelity to the covenant with David."

Of that covenant, Alastair Roberts writes that: "As (God) once placed the rainbow in the sky as the sign that he would never again destroy the world in a flood, so God now establishes a covenant of peace with his people. The judgment has passed and a new season of divine pleasure arrives, their old slate wiped clean by the retreating waters. Wrath having been assuaged, the nation is summoned to the sweet waters of blessing once again. The gift they once rejected God bestows again, more richly and freely than ever before....This passage," Roberts writes, "confounds the logic of our capitalist economies. As if the owner of a great market, God summons his people to buy, yet 'without money and without price.' Wealthy or penniless, all are called to the waters in the same manner, invited to share in the Promised Land's riches, its wine and its milk. Those who have been weighing out silver for things that do not sustain them and expending their wages on items that do not satisfy are called to delight in God's abundance and to feast on the good things that he offers...To put a price on God's waters would be to fail to recognize their true value, to fail to appreciate their uniqueness."

That is why we must think about Flint, and places like Flint, where water, real, H₂O water, is unavailable, unsafe, for our poorest neighbors. Or where those living near to us but economically far from us hunger and thirst for real jobs, for educational equity, for a feeling of true and deep safety and security. When God, through Isaiah, issues an invitation for having thirst quenched, that is a call to justice.

And it is also a call for a satisfied spiritual thirst. We know what that looks like as well, that spiritual thirst, a parched soul, in our own lives, in the lives of those we love.

Now for the obligatory Bruce Springsteen reference. In the song "The River," Springsteen lays out a narrative of a young man living in a northern industrial town: "I come from down in the valley/where mister when you're young/They bring you up to do like your daddy done/" He continues: "Me and Mary we met in high school/when she was just seventeen/We'd ride out of this valley down to where the fields were green." Mary becomes pregnant, the two are quickly married and suddenly life enters a cycle of unhappy work and faded love. And yet the chorus, repeated, hauntingly..."Down to the river." Down to the river. Down to the river. Even when the river is dry and satisfies no thirst, we'd go down to the river, in hope, seeking abundance.

So we think about Flint, and every Flint where physical thirst is not being met, because the God of the covenant calls us to engage the world and care for our neighbors. And we think about our own parched souls because God's call is inward as well, and the God of the covenant, made known to us in Jesus Christ, fills our thirsty souls.

O God, my souls thirsts for you. Let all who have thirst, come to the waters.

It is an ethical demand. It is a hopeful invitation. It is a grace-filled promise. May we serve the world so that it thirsts no more, and may our parched souls be quenched with the water that satisfies, living water, in abundance. Amen.