

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

March 7, 2010

Our Thirst for God

**Ps 63:1-8 & Luke 13:1-9
(Hymns – 198, 37, 534, 556)**

Our Psalm this morning
focuses on the ways in which God
nourishes in us a flourishing life.

The author of the Psalm
begins by describing
the experience of being in a dry and weary land,
a land without water or food,
a land in which death by dehydration and starvation threatens.

I searched this week for a parallel
in our contemporary North American society
to this experience of being in a dry and weary land
where dehydration and starvation threatens.

For the Psalmist,
with the deserts of the Middle East all around,
the image is one of immediate power.

In the context of the Jewish faith,
the image would suggest the experience of the Exodus,
when Israel escaped slavery in Egypt
and wandered in the wilderness for forty years,
guided and sustained by God,
fed by manna from heaven.

And we, in our day, can certainly imagine ourselves in such a place.
But to find a parallel in ordinary day-to-day life is a bit harder.
Few of us actually go without water and food for any length of time.

But then I realizes that many of us,
and our fellow Burnabyites,
go without spiritual nourishment for great periods of time.
In many ways, we live in a spiritual desert,
a dry and parched land
without strong faith and the disciplines of life that flow from it.
Many of our neighbours
make up their own gods and systems of meaning.

They take a little bit of this and a little bit of that
and create a system of belief and meaning
that suits them, makes sense to them, and makes them comfortable.

Many more just don't think of faith at all.
Their experiences of religious faith,
if they have any at all,
have been negative and abusive.
They have been told what to believe and what to do
in ways that have stifled thought and creativity.
They have experienced religion itself
as a dry and arid land,
devoid of anything that is nourishing to a flourishing life.

Even those who claim to be strong in their faith,
those whose certainty about their faith is unshakeable,
are feeding themselves on a very limited diet.
They fail to open themselves to the rich feast of insights
offered in the witness of Scripture
to what God did for all the creation in Jesus Christ.
They are stuck at one oasis in the desert,
being nourished by a limiting perspective on the faith,
afraid to move on in their pilgrimage
to discover what God really has in mind for his beloved people.

For me, and I think for the Psalmist,
the proper stance of faith
is an openness to being fed by God
in a way that invited constant growth in wisdom and benefit.

The focus of the Psalmist's joy and praise in this Psalm
is the rich feast with which the soul is satisfied.
It is not on us creating our own faith,
but on us being drawn into a relationship with the God of the Exodus,
who calls a people to witness to his power and glory,
the God of Abraham and Sarah,
who calls people to be a blessing,
the God of Jesus Christ,
in whom and through whom people are reconciled
finally and fully
as beloved friends of God.
As such friends, they are constantly being
educated and equipped
to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit
to show forth God's love in the world.
They are constantly being fed and nourished

to model love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness and self-discipline
into the spiritual deserts of our contemporary world.

I have commented before on the strong parallels I find
between Paul's list of the gifts of the Spirit
and the qualities of flourishing identified by positive psychologists
over the past 20 years.

They have come to call their work the 'science of flourishing'
and I think there is much wisdom there.

They have identified 10 forms of positivity to cultivate.

They are joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope,
self-respect, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love.

If, as the early church father Irenaeus suggested,
the glory of God is humanity fully alive,
then this parallel between the witness of Scripture
and the emerging wisdom of psychology is worth more serious consideration.

In the parable we read from Luke this morning,
Jesus told the story of the fig tree the owner wanted cut down.

It's not bearing fruit, the owner reasoned,
so get rid of it.

The gardener pleaded for more time to nourish it,
more time to feed and water it,
more time to help it flourish.

We all need more time
to become the people God is calling us to be,
to be fed and watered by the Spirit
in living life as Christ's beloved friends.
And God graciously gives us that time.
May we use it wisely.

Perhaps the things that Paul speaks of
prior to this list of the gifts of the Spirit in Galatians 5
give us another way of thinking
about the deserts of our contemporary world.
They are qualities and ways of being that ignore God and harm humans,
things like fornication, impurity, licentiousness,
idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy,
anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,
drunkenness, and carousing.
At their core, acting in these ways
shows great disrespect for ourselves, for others, and for God.
Just think about what politics or international relationships,
or our personal relationships,

would look like if we more intentionally and consistently removed these negatives and gratefully implemented these positives in our dealings with others.

Imagine a world fed and nourished by the gifts of the Spirit.
As the prophet Isaiah wrote:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
(Isaiah 35:1-2a)*

That is the kind of world the Psalmist celebrates and finds in relationship with God.

That relationship is nourished in worship, where the Psalmist beholds God's power and glory, praises God in response to this revelation, and sings for joy at the protection and strength offered by God's graceful love.

God, for the Psalmist, is the only reliable source of a flourishing and beneficial life.

This morning we gather yet again at the Lord's Table to be fed by God.

"Here," as the old Horatius Bonar hymn says,
"would we feed upon the bread of God,
here drink with thee the royal wine of heaven;
here would we lay aside each earthly load,
here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven."

Jesus Christ quenches our thirst for salvation and fills us with the rich food of heaven at this table.

Come, all you who hunger.
Gather gladly and be fed by our Lord.

May these words and the insights they provoke be acceptable in your sight and applicable in our lives, O Lord, our inner strength and steadfast friend. Amen.

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