

“Feeling the God-Thirst”

Rev. David Gregory

October 6, 2019

17th Sunday after Pentecost



First Reading

Psalm 42:1, 6-8 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse everything I know of you, from Jordan depths to Hermon Heights. Chaos calls to chaos, to the tune of whitewater rapids. Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers crash and crush me. Then God promises to love me all day, sing songs all through the night! My life is God’s prayer.

Second Reading

from *The Four Elements* by John O’Donohue

Metaphorically, thirst functions as a profound metaphor for spiritual need. It is a constant theme in the Bible. “Like as the deer yearns for the running streams so does my soul yearn for you my God” (Psalm 42). Time and again, there is the image of the stream in dry land, an image of refreshment and the return of the flow of life. Take away water, and the land hardens and splits Where there is no water, everything is scorched. Where there is water, everything is green and flourishing. Water is the difference between life and death.

I like surprises, especially pleasant ones, like when you put on an old jacket and find a five-dollar bill in the pocket. Some would call it found money. I would call it Starbucks money. For me Celtic consciousness has many of those “found” blessings. When I began incorporating these ideas and practices, I’m not sure what I was thinking, exactly. I was seeing a spiritual director, a woman who has a religious vocation as an avowed solitary, dwelling in the Catskill Mountains in her hermitage with her cats, her books, and her constant artwork, except when she’s making her regular pilgrimages to Iona Abbey in Scotland. On a bright autumn morning about three years ago, I drove to the top of the mountain to see her, and on her desk was John Philip Newell’s book *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*. I found the title intriguing, and I asked her to read me something from it. I cannot tell you which passage it was, but I remember feeling quite taken with how an ancient wisdom could bring refreshment to my present moment, and do so in a way that felt like

streams in the desert—cool, clear water on a parched earth. There was something in it that I was longing for. We might call it a God-thirst that was being quenched in a way that my traditional theological background could never quite match. The found blessing of it has become the beautiful connection of heaven and earth, and the discovery that what seemed like a far-off deity was present in ways that had never occurred to me. It was a river that flushed away every last vestige of original sin, and replaced it with an experience of the innate goodness of every aspect of creation, including myself. For a soul that had been trapped for a lifetime in familiar cycles of shame and guilt, it was an open door to a new way of being, one filled with love, with power, with light. I think that my morning in the Catskill Mountains was probably the beginning of my journey here to this place, and from my first click on ccctiburon.org, I recognized this as a place I was being called to be. Perhaps it was the water view.

Water has been my constant and obsessive little companion ever since May when I asked my physician the best ways to avoid another massive kidney stone. He was emphatic that I stay hydrated, not so much to sit down with the ritual six to eight glasses a day, but rather to sip a little bit all day long. And the found blessing of this whole process has been the heightened awareness of thirst. My water bottle has become a security blanket. I look for it more than I look for my cell phone. If I leave it at home when I go to work, or if I leave it at work when I go home, I can go into a little panic. When you get used to a constant feeling of refreshment, you notice its absence more than you ever have before. Like the psalmist's white-tailed deer, I hydrate. And when he speaks of wanting to drink God, I get it. When I look at my own God-thirst, suddenly this hydration of my own soul becomes less of an obsession, and more like my way of life. So my question for you today is: *What do you long for? What is your thirst? Can you describe the parched deserts in your life?* If you cannot, then you may be experiencing a soul dehydration.

As we read in John O'Donohue's *The Four Elements*, thirst functions as a profound metaphor for spiritual need. Throughout the scriptures we read of the water of life, the streams in the dry land, the calling back of everything that can be called life. It's like in the movie *Biggest Little Farm*, when a piece of land that was dead and forbidding became filled with a whole new ecosystem, quite literally a resurrection of what was dead becoming fully alive. Water, says O'Donohue, is the difference between life and death. It is what we call the divine flow, and if you're having trouble following whether I'm speaking metaphorically or not—GOOD. This is one of those times when I don't know when I'm speaking literally or metaphorically. What's even more fun is that I don't care.

I can tell you where some of my parched ground is today, and I'm just going to name it out loud. My sensation of a scorched earth has to do with the wild firestorm of words emanating from the White House these days. If you ever wanted the experience of a lifeless desert, just listen to what is happening. My little Quaker grandma, Esther Starbuck, was horrified in 1973 to learn that the Quaker president, Richard Nixon, was on tape using profanity in the oval office. Thankfully, she did not live in a Twitter age. I'm torn these days as to whether to give any attention at all to what is happening, but of late, things have risen to a level that cannot be ignored.

I do not know what kind of torture goes on in the soul of a human being so filled with hate and rancor. John Dean was the one who said that there was a cancer on the presidency all those decades ago. Today it could only be described as a wildfire, leaving behind a scorched and lifeless democracy that will only be revived with water. We do not dare to lose our sense of hydration in all of this, not cloistered up here on the hill, waiting it out and hoping for the best, hoping that the fire just burns out on its own. It won't. We have to be more active than that. We have to be fire-fighters. And that is why our spiritual practices must be ramped up. Back in the day, contemplative spiritual practices might have seemed like a great path toward self-help, a way to greater consciousness, and a fascination with something new. Today, contemplation has become a radically important thing. If humankind is waiting for a Jesus to return and take us out of this mess, it is going to be an awfully long wait. But if the flow of Divine Spirit can be felt by more and more of us, if more of us realize that the earth is our divine mother, suffering at the hands of bullies whose agenda is a drying, splitting, lifeless landscape; if more of us can find ourselves grounded deep in the earth, where beautiful streams of water nourish and hydrate our roots; if more of us can get in a room together and dream of an outcome different from the current dire situation; if we can continually quench the God-thirst we all have, then there is a river of life that will begin to flow, enough water to contain the fires and bring us back to life. Let's spend some time at the water's edge, sipping a little all day long from the waters of life. It will make you realize how thirsty you really are, and that is a really good thing.

