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Preaching: Rev. Jim Best

“Life-Giving Water”

There has been a lot of talk recently about Mars. In the last month, NASA's mars rovers have found strong evidence that the planet Mars once had water on or near the surface. In an interview on my favorite semi-reputable news program, the Daily show, a scientist was asked "Doesn't the presence of water mean that there is also life?" And the scientist replied, "No, but it is one of the minimum requirements."

A minimum requirement for life. Water. Is it any wonder then that God's Love and God's grace is so often referred to as water in the Bible? Verses nine and ten in today's Psalm read, "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth."

Now, I am a fan of the Psalms, and if I am going to turn to a part of the Bible for comfort or inspiration, that is usually the first book I turn to. I am often amazed that I continue to find new things in the Psalms, new ways of interpreting the words. And this one is no different.

When looked at alone, it is a Psalm that talks of God's majesty and wonder. It is a Psalm that speaks of God's power over nature and the bounty of the harvest. In this Psalm, the Lord is the provider, giving the people flocks and grain, and the land that can sustain them.

When taken by itself, this Psalm seems pretty simple and straightforward. But when I was preparing for this sermon, I suddenly saw Psalm 65 in a different light.

Here at Baker Memorial Church we follow the Lectionary. The Lectionary is a three year program that gives readings for every week of the year in an attempt to hit all the main points of the Bible. This week's readings paired the 65th Psalm with the very familiar story of the sower and the seeds.

We've all probably heard this parable before. There is a sower, a farmer, scattering his seeds in a very diverse stretch of land. There are rocks and thorns and a path with birds, and somewhere mixed in among all of that, there is some good soil. Of course, in the parable, only the seeds scattered on the good soil flourish.

Jesus used a lot of parables with seeds and crops because he was often speaking to farmers. Farmers knew what would happen to seeds scattered on a path, and knew the dangers of thorny weeds to crops. But when his disciples, many of whom were fishermen, came to Jesus and said, "We don't get it. Explain this to us!" I picture Jesus shaking his head and laying it out for them plain.

Jesus explained to them that the seeds were the word of God, and that the good soil were people who heard the word and responded to it. A person who understood the word of God, and acted upon it. Again, a common, and fairly simple story.

Yet when we put these two readings together; when we compare Psalm 65 with the Book of Matthew's account of the parable of the seeds, we can suddenly see things in a new way.

If we take Jesus' parable and say that WE are the earth, the good soil, and the words of God are the seeds of grain, all of a sudden, verse nine of the Psalm means so much more when the Psalmist says to God:

"You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it."

The meaning is completely different now, isn't it? Now the verse is saying, "Lord, you visit us and your water enriches our lives. You have prepared and provided the Gospels for our growth."

With this outlook, the Psalm stops becoming a lesson of God's power over nature, and becomes a story of the power of God's grace in our lives. Now the Psalm becomes a lesson of the importance of the scriptures and the word of God, that they are not simply a history of our religion, but divinely inspired scriptures,

sent to us to speak to our needs. Prepared by God to help guide our minds and our faith as the river of living water enriches and empowers our lives.

So what is the water? What is that item, that minimum requirement for life?

For me, I see it as the Holy Spirit. That part of the trinity that is meant to be the connection between God and ourselves. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples, " If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,* to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth..."

Jesus is talking here of the Holy Spirit, that self-same Spirit that came down as tongues of fire on Pentecost, and like a dove when Jesus was baptized. Two places in the Bible where there is definite life and growth. Mark signifies Jesus' baptism as the beginning of his ministry, and on Pentecost, the words of Jesus had fallen upon the disciples like seeds on good soil, and once they were fed by the Holy Spirit, they went out and spoke in tongues, and preached and spread the word and three thousand people were baptized that day.

But stories like this aren't always helpful, are they? It is easy for us to feel like our experiences and our achievements are insignificant when compared with the stories from the Gospels, isn't it? I mean, I don't know about the rest of you, but swooping doves and tongues of flame descending from above are rare in my life. And while people have often told me that they have enjoyed my sermons, none of them ever ended with a three thousand person altar call. So when we hear today's readings, do you feel like your life might be a bit dry? Do you ever feel like the river of living water has flowed past you and you are left sitting high and dry on the bank? Because maybe you don't have those major moments of insight and connection that the disciples and the prophets of the scriptures felt. I know there are times when I have felt that way.

But you see, my wife, Beth, and I are not what anyone would call gardeners. She laughs that we have brown thumbs. Now maybe six, seven years ago, I was given a present of an aloe plant by a congregation member. The aloe plant sits in my office at home in front of the window, and we are fortunate if we remember to water it two or three times a year. Luckily, it is a desert plant, so it really doesn't need a lot of water from us. It is able to draw the water right out of the air to sustain its life.

I feel that there is a wonderful lesson that we can learn from this. I think that when we hear these big stories of the Holy Spirit, it is easy to forget that God's presence is all around us, all the time. We don't need to wait for those miraculous

moments or feel left out because the heavens never opened over our heads. Instead, we can take comfort in the fact that God is all around us and constantly sending us forgiveness and love. Like the aloe plant, all we have to do is be open and receptive, and let God's life giving water soak into us.

This act of God's life giving water, of God's Holy Spirit, flowing into us is symbolized in our faith through the sacrament of Baptism. Through the service of baptism, we are accepting Christ as our savior and accepting our place within the body of the church. We say that we receive salvation and new life through water and the Spirit, and that all this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

Baptism is the act that draws us all together, that makes us all joined. As Paul says, "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Through the Spirit, through the water, we are made one. As Paul says, we are made one body in Christ's church, and it is the river of God, the Holy Spirit, flowing around us that helps us grow and gives the body life! And if you feel that you are untouched by that water, if you feel that nothing miraculous or flashy has happened for you to see the Spirit moving in your life, I want to lift up the story of Elijah on the mountain. God told the prophet Elijah to go up on the mountain and God would be there. And Elijah went up on the mountain and there was a terrible wind that shook the trees and the rocks, but God wasn't in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God wasn't in the Earthquake. Next there was a great fire that raged on the mountain, but God wasn't in the fire, either. And then, after all of those, comes the still small voice of God. Now many scholars translate that to mean that God's voice wasn't in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the silence. So maybe, instead of looking for God in the flash and the noise, we should instead listen for the Holy Spirit in the quiet flow of our lives.

For the Holy Spirit is all around us, all the time. And unlike my wife and I, God is a gardener with a green thumb and won't let us wither and die. God has prepared his words for us, and knows to water those seeds and we the soil with his presence, with his love, and with his forgiving grace.

Amen.