

When the Drought Gets Really Bad

Isaiah 55:1-9

In a book titled God's Little Devotional Book there is a delightful story of a great drought that struck Baghdad during the reign of Abdullah the Third. Moslem leaders in the land issued a decree that all the faithful should offer prayers for rain. Still, the drought continued.

The Jews were then permitted to add their prayers to those of the Moslems. Their prayers didn't seem to do the job either.

Finally, when the drought resulted in widespread famine, the Christians in the land were asked to pray. Almost immediately, the heavens opened and rain began falling.

The leaders of the Moslem Conclave were alarmed that the rain started when it did. Feeling that some explanation was necessary, they issued this statement to the masses: "The God of our Prophet was highly gratified by the prayers of the faithful which were as sweet smelling savors to Him. He refused their requests to prolong the pleasure of listening to their prayers; but the prayers of those Christian infidels were an abomination to Him, and He granted their petitions to be rid of their loathsome prayers." That's one explanation, I suppose.

Droughts will always be with us. Our nation has been afflicted by droughts almost every year and climatologists have told us that it is only the beginning of many more weather-related adverse events which we would, and have, experienced.

The people of Israel knew about droughts. They lived in a land where water was a precious commodity. In our scripture lesson today, Isaiah spoke to a receptive audience when he wrote, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.

Isaiah is speaking to Israel on behalf of God. He's not writing about physical thirst. He is writing about spiritual thirst, and he gives the people some clues why their lives are spiritually parched.

Author Joseph Campbell once said about his friends, that they were living what he called "Waste Land lives . . . that they are baffled; they're wandering in the Waste Land without any sense of where the water is the source that makes things green." Spiritual thirst didn't end in Isaiah's time. It is still with us today.

Isaiah says that people become spiritually thirsty, when they have misplaced values. That's true of people in every generation.

Parents neglect their children in search of the almighty dollar. Spouses neglect one another. We trade our health, we trade our integrity, we lose our souls searching for that which can never really satisfy. People become spiritually thirsty when they have misplaced values.

People also become spiritually parched when they betray their values. The Bible's way of saying this is that people become spiritually thirsty when they sin. Further on in this passage Isaiah says, "Seek the Lord while God may be found; call on God while God is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and God will have mercy on them, and to our God, for God will freely pardon . . ."

We don't use the word "wicked" much anymore or the word, "unrighteous." That doesn't mean that people no longer do wicked or unrighteous things, we just use different words to describe them. In today's vernacular, "mistakes were made" or people "were confused." It might help us during this Lenten season to acknowledge that what we are doing is "transgressing" against our family, perhaps, transgressing against our neighbor, or against ourselves, and ultimately transgressing against God.

People are thirsty because of misplaced values. People are thirsty because they have betrayed their values.

Finally, people are spiritually parched because they depend on their own resources. Listen again to the words of Isaiah: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

The resources of God are available to all of us, regardless of who we are or what we've done. They are available and they are free. All we have to do is ask.

There is an old story about a ship that was sailing and it floundered in a hurricane on the coast of South America. The crew began to run out of water. All around was water, but it was salt water and drinking it could be fatal to them. One-by-one they died. The tragedy of this situation was that unknown to them they had travelled into the region of the mouth of the Amazon river. The Amazon River is the largest river in the world. The mouth is 90 miles across. There is more water flowing out of the Amazon than the Yangtze, Mississippi and Nile Rivers combined. So much water comes from the Amazon that they can detect its currents 200 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean. All around these unsuspecting sailors there was fresh water. All they had to do was reach down and drink all they needed.

My friend, does that describe your situation? Is your life materially rich but spiritually parched? "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost," writes Isaiah. "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare." You will live in a Waste Land no more. Amen.