

Thirst Isaiah 12

Last month I spent some time over in Eastern Montana near a little town called Columbus. I talked to an old rancher friend of mine about how it was going this year and he said, “Not so good. It is a drought year.” He told of how his family had come to that country in the late 1800’s and homesteaded that land. They were one of the first. It was a tough go in those early years, and long after most of their neighbors went back to St. Louis, his family stayed and some years they even prospered. Besides a lot of hard work, their secret to success was a little spring creek called White Beaver Creek. No matter how bad it got, White Beaver Creek ran clear and cool every year, sometimes bank full, sometimes a little shallow, but the cattle always had water. This year for the first time, the little creek went dry. Now my friend has a deep well on his land, and he pumps water from the well and trucks it to the many large water troughs he has scattered around. Its pretty much a full-time job just hauling water, not to mention all the other stuff he has to do, but he’ll make it this year. Who knows? Next year the rains might come, and it will be really good.

We live in a part of the country that pays a lot of attention to how much rain is falling. On our side of the mountains, it is as much about forest fires as wheat, but rain is still nothing we take for granted.

It is like that in much of the rest of the world, especially the Middle East. Water is not something to take for granted there either. And they do not. The modern nation of Israel has fought wars over what happens to the water coming off Mount Herman which is the main source of the Jordan River. In ancient times, wells were capped with large rocks that took several people to move. The idea was if it took

enough people to move the rock, there would always be enough people to make sure someone didn't take more than their fair share.

I was reading in the twelfth chapter of Isaiah about the well of salvation. I thought what an appropriate term to describe salvation; as a well from which we draw not water but the water of life, and what a valuable well that would be.

Let me tell you a bit about the book of Isaiah. It is actually the work of several prophets beginning during the height of the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE, then into the Babylonian Exile and the return of the exiles to Judah and Israel with the fall of the Babylonian Empire at the hands of Cyrus the Persian, sometime in the 6th century BCE. Yet for as long as the book is and the vast sweep of history that it chronicles, its message is consistent. Basically, the prophet Isaiah would say is that actions have consequences, both physical and spiritual. When people and nations lose a sense of what is right and wrong, when they lose their ethical core, when the rich exploit the poor, when the people begin to worship gods that are mere idols, or when religion becomes more important than compassion, then that nation is in trouble. Isaiah believed that God sent the Assyrians and the Babylonians in their turn as a punishment to the nations of Israel and Judah, because they had turned their backs on God. If they would but change their ways, and seek to follow God once more, it would be different. But alas, they did not. And indeed, it came to pass, that the Jewish nations suffered a great defeat in which the people of Israel and Judah were taken from their land and exiled to Babylon for 50 years during which time they nearly lost who they were.

But Isaiah also said there would come a time when God would have compassion on his people again, and not just bring them home, but bring them into a new world, a world of peace and hope, a time of joy and thanksgiving. This is what Christians believe happened and

continues to happen through the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the one prophesied by Isaiah and other prophets. Speaking of that new age Isaiah writes, “You will say in that day; I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation.”

That image of the well of salvation caught my imagination. What would it look like to draw our spirituality from the well of salvation?

I think the first thing would be to know where to look. They say that the Aborigines in Australia live in this incredible desolate desert and have thrived there for millenia. They thrive because they know where the water is. They will stop in the middle of the desert, announce this is the spot, dig down about 8 feet, and the water will begin to pool. Early white travelers in the outback believed the aborigines had magical powers or that they smell water from miles away. It is not true. A major part of the education of each child in the tribe is a ritual game of learning where the water is. It is an ancient knowledge passed on generation to generation. To lose this knowledge of where the water is found, is to die.

Part of the reason we do church is to pass on the ancient knowledge of where the water is, the living water that brings life. We pass it on to our children in the hopes that at least some of them will get it, so that when they and their families, and even their society needs to find this living water, somebody will remember where it is, and that it can be found in places that looks very much like this.

The second thing you need to know is that if you want living water, you need to dig deep. Like I say, my friend, the rancher, has another well on his place. It is very deep well but thank goodness it is there. Now that the creek is dry that is their only source of water. All of

a sudden this well became really important, and not just for the cattle, but the humans as well.

That is what Isaiah is saying here. Living water doesn't come from shallow wells. What Isaiah cries out to the people of Judah is that the gods of Assyria, and of Egypt, and the Baals of the ancient Canaanites are nothing but idols made with human hands, shallow gods at best. In the same way, he calls out against religion that worships God in ceremony but not in practice; again, it is a shallow well and it goes dry when you need it the most.

The whole idea of a well of salvation is something that causes us to dig deep, to look deep within our souls to see what really matters in life, to see a spirituality deep enough to change our lives, not just our words. I think a lot of what passes for spirituality in our age isn't very deep, but rather a mishmash of Christian Nationalism, radical politics, and TV preachers until we come up with a religion we like, and one in which what God wants is interestingly enough just what we want. It seems a shallow well. God is looking for something deeper from us than this.

Maybe one more thing, a good well is a place one goes back to again and again. If you should ever visit Israel, it is a big thing for many people to stand in the place where Jesus stood. Not as easy to do as you would think, so many places in Jesus' life are what are known as the "traditional" site, for example, the last supper, the traditional site is in a building built in the 3rd century, so probably not the real place. No, if you want to really stand where Jesus stood, it most likely will not be in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, but interestingly in Nazareth right beside the ancient community well. Here with his mother Mary, the young Jesus came twice a day to help her draw water from the well. When you stand beside the well, you stand where Jesus stood.

It is a good image for us too. We come to church because every now and again we get thirsty, thirsty for something that makes a

difference in our lives and so we go to the well, the place where you come and find your soul refreshed and enlivened once more. This is where that new world that Isaiah prophesied will come from, the well of salvation.

We are the people of God, called to the well of salvation. We come to God and to church not because we are better than other people, or that God loves us more, or because we deserve God's love more. No, we come because we are thirsty, and because we know this is where the water that gives life can be found; and we want to share that water with others. We come to God not because it is easy, but because we want to dig deep, to really find out not just who God is, but who were meant to be, to find the life that God meant for us. And each time we come before God, we find ourselves refreshed and renewed so that, who knows, we might make a difference for God in some way this next week. That's why we are here.