

The Very Rev. Timothy E. Kimbrough
Christ Church Cathedral
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Proper 7, Year C (RCL)

Have you ever spent any time in a desert? It's a place of great extremes—cold by night, hot by day. It's a place of mystery. The threat of death pervades the environment. The threat is real but complemented by an extraordinary eco-system that thrives in the most extreme of circumstances. I remember driving through parts of Arizona years ago and being astounded at the vastness of that desert there—mile after mile after mile of cacti, big sky, and seemingly endless sand. At night the stars were brilliant and thick, far away from the light pollution of cities and town. I also remember a feeling of isolation that in time yielded a longing for companionship. My stamina and skill was never challenged (I was driving) but for some the desert can become a place where endurance and wisdom is keenly tested. Think *Outward Bound*. The desert is not often a holiday destination.

In the Bible, desert and wilderness are places of exile, banishment, discernment, and seeking the face of God. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. John the Baptist made the wilderness his home. Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days before beginning his public ministry.

The Desert Fathers, third century ascetics and monastics, left the relative comfort of city life for the Egyptian desert and its solitude, its inspiration, and its focusing of the soul on the glory of God. One story recorded in a Coptic collection of Desert Father sayings indicates that on Saturday evenings, Abba Arsenius would prepare for the glory of Sunday and the celebration of the resurrection by turning his back on the sun and stretching out his hands in prayer towards the heavens, till once again the sun shone on his face. Then he would sit down and say, “Eagerly, I seek you.”

When the Psalmist writes, “Be not far away, O LORD; you are my strength; hasten to help me” (Ps. 22:18) or in another place “my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water” (Ps 42:1), he writes as one who knows what it means to be weak and in need of strengthening. He writes as one who knows what it means to be without water in the desert. He knows what it means to leave one oasis for another only to have misjudged the distance and now wonder if his parched lips, dry throat, and weakening, dehydrated body would ever taste water again. There's a pleading in his voice as he describes this thirst—a desperate pleading that goes beyond mere desire.

In his thirst the Psalmist comes to recognize that there is no strength or contentment or rest to be found in the desert if he is left to his own devices. If not for the trial of the desert (or the sword or the lion's mouth), he might still be resting comfortably under the illusion that **he** has the strength within himself to survive and thrive. How this cuts against the great myth of our independence and prosperity. We would rather believe that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, that our fate is in our hands, that we are a self-made people. We would rather believe that if our children can only dream it then they can become anything their hearts desire—primarily because they choose it, because they will it. None of this standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before, none of this raising the barn together. There's no need for anyone else's help. There's no need for communal accountability. We **want** our children to embrace

this myth. We **need** our politicians and reformers to run on this dream. We **insist** that our neighbors (and neighbors to be—read immigrants) learn the vocabulary and imagery of this dream. We will not be weak or vulnerable or dependent. Yet, to speak with such *hubris* is to forsake our membership in the People of God and to live the lie that prompted our estrangement from God in the first place. The Psalmist would prefer the desert, he would prefer the trial, if it means he will learn the meaning of thirst and dependence on God.

The Psalmist also recognizes, however, that it's not enough simply to be thirsty. It's not enough simply to yearn. To long without direction, to long without discernment, may lead you to anything that will distract you or fill the void. It could lead you to reach for that third whisky on a night when your head should be clear. It could lead you into the arms of a woman, not your wife. It could lead you down the path of addiction, the addiction of your choice—from drugs to work to Internet pornography. We will reach for any vice masquerading as pleasure, thinking that it will satisfy our longing and thirst. But the Psalmist writes that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.” (Ps. 22:26). God is the one in whom all our longing will be fulfilled. No one else. No action, no accomplishment, no pleasure, no trial. Only God.

Jesus when encountering the woman at the well said, “Everyone who drinks of this water [in this well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (Jn 4:13-14). It's not enough simply to be thirsty. Recognizing our need for some strength outside of ourselves, we must come to realize that our strength is in the Lord and in the Living Water that Jesus will provide us.

It may not be readily apparent, let's say at first reading, but at the second, third, and fourth reading of this morning's Gospel lesson, I begin to see this thirst in the Geresene demoniac. Scripture says that he lived among the tombstones refusing the comfort and protection of a home. He was naked refusing the comfort and protection of any clothing. The thirst of his life had led to become reclusive almost as if death had become his only friend. The contrast of verses 27 and 28 always strikes me. “He did not live in a house but in the tombs”—verse 27 [but] “when he saw Jesus, he fell down before him—verse 28. Oh, there's much in this passage to explore: the exchange between demons and Jesus, the healing or exorcism, the fate of the swine, the fear of the locals when they see the re-formed and re-newed man, the resultant banishment of Jesus from the region of the Geresenes, and the evangelical thanksgiving of the healed man. There's much to explore, but this morning I focus narrowly on the man's recognition of his weakness in the presence of Jesus.

“When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him...” somehow in spite of his possession, perhaps because of his weakness he recognizes Jesus as the strength who will renew him. Jesus is the Living Water to the possessed man's thirst! And he throws himself at Jesus' feet in recognition of his Master. He comes in from the desert of his life to the well of Living Water. Doubt persists, uncertainty. What will I become without these demons? What will a life with an uninterrupted access to Living Water look like? Will I find I prefer the thirst and hunger to a cup of cool water and bread?

For Paul, the Law functioned in the way that the Psalmist experiences the desert. The Law taught us of our need for Christ. The Law taught us to long for the Messiah. And the Law fulfilled in Christ teaches us to conform to the mind of Christ.

Twice a year or so here at Christ Church (I hope this will become more frequent) we take a moment as a community to invite the newcomers and visitors, who have been exploring life at

Christ Church during the preceding months, to come together for a reception and learn a bit about one another and the ministry and mission of the Cathedral. We introduce ourselves to one another. We share the fellowship of a meal. We survey briefly our common life together. Then, at least this last time, I offered a few words about a vision for ministry at Christ Church. There are many things we do, many risks we take, many ministries to describe and we highlighted a couple—with the near obligatory appeal on the part of a few for new volunteers to this ministry or that. But I first sought to describe this congregation as one inhabited by people who come to church on Sunday morning expecting to meet God—eager in their desire to meet the One who saves them and offers salvation to the world. Such a description came as much by hope as by experience.

I pray, nevertheless, that this will be no society church where one shows up at Christmas and Easter because it's the thing to do. I pray that this will be no church that blindly repeats known platitudes for the sake of the institution. We must be no church that trades catholicity for autonomy in the presumed service of justice (or purity). Rather we must be a church where the people and clergy gather together believing they will encounter God in Christ and by that encounter will be made new.

We come together from the desert of our lives, having learned of thirst, believing that God will offer us the Living Water of his Word, the Living Water of his Son, the Living Water that never fails to refresh. This encounter strengthens us for the work of mission, the work of Christian Education and Formation, the work of servanthood, and the work of confronting the powers and principalities set against the Kingdom of God and the work of mentoring our children and other adults seeking baptism in the Faith.

The movement from oasis to oasis through the desert to the Promised Land can be complex and disorienting. It can also be quite simple with the proper guide. We must make this trek knowing that by our lives and actions, the world will be led—the world that God already loves and has redeemed—by our thirst and by our longing the world will be led into a yearning for the Triune God.

Do you remember when Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth”? Do you remember that great saying? “You are the salt of the earth.” (Mt. 5:13). It's not that Jesus meant for his followers to be simply spice or seasoning—the BAM on the baked ziti of life. No. We are to be spice, seasoning, preservative, mineral, and nutrition—*of the very essence of life*.

There is, I believe, a great missionary principle, a great evangelical principle, here that must not be overlooked. Even the most modest amount of salt will make you thirsty. Surely, we must include among the implications of Jesus' saying on salt and discipleship, the vocation to spread, sprinkle, and shake salt—faithful disciples of Christ—throughout the world in such a way that leads the world to thirst for God, that leads the world to long for the Messiah, that leads the world to say with the Psalmist:

The poor shall eat and be satisfied and those who seek the LORD shall praise him: “May your heart live for ever!” Be not far away, O LORD; you are my strength; hasten to help me.