

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
"Being Led to Life Giving Water"
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 12, 2019

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,

*'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honour*

and power and might

be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,*

nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,

*and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

Let us pray. Gracious God, we ask your spirit to do its work among us and within us and through us. We pray that the words that all of us have rolling around inside of us, the words that we hear from scripture and we offer in song and in prayer, as well as those words that you've laid upon my heart to share this day, that somehow by the power of your spirit you would take all that and give to each of us as we have need your word, good news, a word of hope and peace, a word of comfort and presence. Or if we need it, a word of challenge. But let it be your word, not mine. Let it be the word of Christ and let that word dwell in our hearts richly and produce fruit that we can offer to our neighbors and to those we love. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Last week I had the privilege of spending some time in the desert of Northwest New Mexico very close to the Presbyterian camp named Ghost Ranch. It is the landscape of Georgia O'Keeffe. Beautiful masas that have strata of different colors, pinyon trees that dot the landscape with shades of green. But mostly, it's desert. The air is clean, the altitude is high, and for some reason, the place just fills my soul with peace. And I've made it a habit over the last several years to try to spend some time after Easter at or near Ghost Ranch. This past week, I didn't stay at the ranch itself because I was part of a program that I stepped out of and the tickets that I had were the same time that the program group would be there and I didn't want to interfere with them so I went on

Airbnb and found a home that I thought was going to be absolutely perfect.

I'm a visual person. So the listing showed a picture through a big living room window of branches, of kind of dead trees almost is what it looked like, right around the edge of the picture. And out in the distance, this beautiful mesa. And I thought that's the place. And so I went and for the first time in a long time, I decided to check a bag. And my flight route was supposed to be St. Louis to Chicago, Chicago to Albuquerque but it ended up being St. Louis to Chicago, Chicago to Kansas City, Kansas City to Albuquerque. So I arrived about four hours later than I had expected and my bag was nowhere to be seen. So as I tried to figure out what to do, do I stay in Albuquerque or do I go north, kind of two hours of chaos. I finally got a call, said, "Your bag's here, come get it." So I went back to the airport, picked it up and decided I'm just going to drive up to this house. I got there right [around?] around 11:30. It was pitch dark. The directions were go down this dirt road through the trees that are growing over the road for 0.2 miles and hang a left when you get to a brick wall. They were very specific. Thankfully, they were so specific that I found the place. I drug my luggage into the house, I was so exhausted I just crashed and I slept great and way beyond the time that I normally do. So I woke up, I look out this beautiful window as I'm heading to the kitchen to make coffee expecting to see this beautiful desert landscape that's going to just fill my soul and I see trees that are covered with leaves, rich, beautiful, green and yellow and then a Japanese maple that has that dark red. And in between and around you can sort of tell that out there somewhere the landscape is still there. And I thought, "What is going on?" I was so flummoxed I sent a message to the person that owns the place, can I trim the trees [laughter]? Apparently, you're not supposed to ask that when you do Airbnb. I didn't know that. No, came the answer. Just breath, everything will be fine.

So when I settled down I went back and I read the description which I hadn't done at all until that point. And it said something like at the end of the canyon when the pavement turns to gravel and the gravel turns to dirt, you'll find our house. And one of the blessings of [Popolitos?], the name of this house, is that it has an abundance of water. And as I read that and later went outside and saw the little stream that was kind of meandering all over the property and even later when I drove from that house into the desert to spend some time there, I realized that this stream flowed all the way through the bottom of this canyon and the entire canyon was as if you were in Kirkwood. There was green grass and flowering trees and green trees. There were so many trees and flowers it was unbelievably beautiful. It just wasn't exactly what my soul was craving. At one point I noticed that there were even some trees that had fallen down or been cut down and I looked and I realized that a beaver had eaten around it and it fell over. And in the middle of the desert, there's so much water that beavers could build a dam and live there.

And the reason that I'm sharing this story about water and the power of water to bring life is first because it is found in this passage that we have heard from the book of Revelation. I remember in seminary, I took a class on the book of Revelation, I didn't understand it then and I still don't understand it. But had an experience this week of talking to a couple of elders in the church and one of them asked me, "What did you do when you went out on this retreat into the desert? Did you take a course or did you read some books?" And I told them, "No. I took one verse and I spent a week with that one verse. Stand at the crossroads and look and ask for the ancient paths where the good way lies and walk in it and you will find rest for your soul." It's from the book of Jeremiah. And when I shared that it was from the book of Jeremiah, the person said, "Jeremiah? You mean the Old Testament?" I said, "Yeah. Every now and then you can find some nuggets of beauty in the Old Testament. You have a lot of stuff but you find these great little pieces of wisdom and to me, just like Jeremiah's, one of those life-giving pieces of scripture that I can hang onto.

I want to offer this last part of Revelation as a nugget of scripture that you can hang onto because to me, it speaks about the God who at Easter time we celebrate with all these triumphant songs and we have sort of really high energy and now in the weeks after in this time of Easter this offers us a different glimpse into the nature of who God is. The other thing that intrigued me about this passage from Revelation is I remember is a seminarian one of the verses that I translated was Jesus sitting with a woman at the well and they're having this conversation about being thirsty and getting water and Jesus says to her that he's going to give her water that's full of life or something like that. And when I translated it from the Greek I learned that the water was dancing with life water. It was such an abundance of water and it would give her eternal life and just sort of fill her with this appreciation for God's goodness and to me I think that so often in life we have this sort of one to one relationship with God. We have a need and we say a prayer and we expect God to answer that prayer and God doesn't work that way. God answers us and addresses our needs with an overabundance of grace and mercy in a sense with water that leaps for life if you will. And I saw the effect that in this desolate arid environment that shouldn't have flowers and flowering trees the power of water is unbelievable. And I think about us. Us who are facing challenges or the loss of a loved one. I think about us who are worried about kids or grandkids as they graduate or begin to go out in life on their own. We need that sense of the spirit that is living water and we need to look at life through that lens because to me it's how God is looking at us and if we can wrap our heads and hearts around that I just think there's a better chance for us to do good in the world and especially to bless those who are near us. So I want to offer this passage again not all of it from Revelation but the latter part. And

I want to offer it with some of the pronouns just switched a little bit so that we can hear it different. Then one of the elders addressed me saying, "Who are those robbed in white and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you're the one that knows," and then he said to me, "We are they who have come out of the great ordeal. We have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. For this reason, we are before the throne of God and we worship God day and night within God's temple and the one who was seated on the throne will shelter us. We will no longer hunger and thirst no more. The sun will not strike us nor any scorching heat touch us for the lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd and the lamb will guide us to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes."

As a staff, one of the things that we've noticed and have been talking about is the rate of memorial services that we're doing now in the life of the church and I think about those situations especially on Mother's Day where maybe some of you don't have good relationships with your mom or your kids are somehow a little bitter or completely estranged from you. I think about those folks who are struggling with cancer treatments and wondering what the future may hold and to be honest, I think about myself and then I hear these words differently that the one who is on the throne is going to shelter us. That we no longer hunger. We don't thirst. The sun is not going to get us. No scorching heat is going to touch us. The lamb at the center of the throne is our shepherd, my shepherd, your shepherd and will guide us to the springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. On Easter, we celebrate the triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Today we celebrate the tender care of our Lord. Happy Mother's Day. Amen.