

Proper 18 C 2016

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

In a dry country,
You can see where the water is.

From far away,
You can see the trees
Growing tall and strong
With their roots reaching down
Deep into the water.

A ribbon of green,
The trees signal the presence
And the power
Of the life-giving water.

Happy – blessed –
Are those who walk in the way of God,
says the psalm we sing today.
They are like trees
Planted by streams of water.
They bear fruit in due season.
Their leaves do not wither.

In a dry country,
You can see where the water is,
Because it's where the people thrive.
Like the trees,
The people settle where the water
Comes welling up
From deep under the ground.

Since the beginning of what we call time
We have gathered where we can draw up the water
That is our life,
Our health,
And our strength.

In the Holy Land,
The running streams are fitful.
But there are wells that never run dry.

And there is one well has never failed
Since our history began,
One well that has never failed to promise life,
The faithfulness of God,
The fruitfulness of the people of God.

This is the well where Rebecca chose Isaac.
The well where Jacob found Rachel.
The well where, at high noon,
Jesus met the woman,
And promised her springs of living water,
Welling up to eternal life.

That woman, outcast and alone, has no name in scripture,
But for generations
The Orthodox Church has called her St. Photini,
Which means, the enlightened one,
And honored her as an evangelist,
A herald of the coming of the Holy One.

We went, this summer,
On our Holy Land pilgrimage,
To the Church of St. Photini
At the Monastery of Jacob's Well
In the West Bank town
That is now called Nablus.

The well which has sustained the faithful
For thousands of years
Now sits deep under the church,
Under the undercroft,
In a room where the air is close
And the walls heavy with icons.

None of that matters.
I came to that small, almost choking underground room
And was stopped still
By the holiness,
The realness,
Of where I was.

This is really the place.
The words filled my head
And entered my heart.

This is really the place

Where the real Jesus
Met the woman at the well.
This is the well.

The well is deep –
Very deep.
Our group drew water up,
Cranking the old wheel,
Bringing up the bucket.
Then we dropped a cupful of water back down,
And counted the many, many seconds
Until it splashed,
More than a hundred feet down.

Give me that living water,
The woman says to Jesus,
So that I don't have to keep coming here
To draw water over and over.

Give me that living water,
I said to the new friends who had pulled it up from the deep well.
I drank more than I needed,
And I could not get enough.

All my life I have loved this story.
And I never knew it mattered to me
To see the well.
But – as Job said in the presence of the living God –
I had heard with the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye beholds.

Job's response was to turn around,
To fall silent,
And to listen.
I have had a chance to do that too,
While I was away.
I have had a chance, for a time out of time,
to savor the rest of the blessed ones
Who walk in the way of God.

No matter what comes,
The blessed ones are like trees,
Whose roots go down to the water of life.
Storms come,
And drought,
And threats from every side.

But the waters do not fail,
And so the trees stand.

Storms came this summer,
While I was away.
Shootings,
Terrorist attacks,
Fire and flood,
The deterioration of our civic life,
And an election year
Filled with fear and anger and little promise.

And from what I hear,
In this stormy time,
Your roots tapped into the water of life.
You kept on doing what we are called to do:
To offer sanctuary in the city,
To grow in God's love,
To seek the renewal of the world.

You kept the faith.
You laughed and sang and prayed.
And – you embraced the possibility of offering sanctuary
In a new and challenging way,
By building small, secure sleeping spaces
For women and transgendered individuals
Who today have nowhere to go.

When I heard that you had given your hearts
To the possibility of a tiny house village,
I was overcome with gratitude and excitement.

As we face an uncertain, discouraging, and unwelcome future
In our civic life,
This is one thing we can do.

We can make room,
In our precious and beautiful space,
And in our hearts,
For those who need sanctuary.

We can invite those who have nowhere to go
To come plant themselves
By the spring of living water.

It will not be easy.

But Jesus knew that
When he called us to follow in the way.

Count the cost,
He tells us in today's gospel.
Count the cost,
And know that it will be real.

There is no need to understand what he says literally,
And so dismiss it.
Giving up family and possessions may be the cost for some,
For more, in fact,
Than we think.

But what Jesus is really saying here,
I think,
Is that for each of us there is something precious,
Something that makes us feel secure and safe,
And grounded in the world of here and now.
And that very something
May be keeping us from drinking the living water,
And planting our roots deep in the stream.

I don't know what that is for you.
I know that for us,
As a community,
Embracing the least of our neighbors
And offering them a home
May mean letting something go.
It may be more costly than we expect.

And I believe that we can count the cost,
And continue on the way.

But only because our roots go deep.
Only because we are sustained, like the happy righteous of old,
By the water of life.

How do we get that living water out of the deep well?
When I stood beside the well
Deep underground in a troubled place
In a holy land,
I was amazed at how long it took
To draw the water up.

And yet,

Up it came.

The water comes up when we work for it,
And receive it as a gift.
Worship brings us to the water.
Our own prayers bring us to the water.
For some of us,
Walking in the woods and mountains
And by running streams
Brings us to the water.
For others,
Quiet conversation with friends,
Or cooking huge meals,
Or singing
Or laughing out loud,
Brings us to the water.

What matters is that we find the water
And let our roots be nourished in the stream.

I believe these are dark and troubled times.
I believe we, as Christians,
Are called to count the cost of remaining faithful to the way,
and then to continue to witness,
to work, and to worship.
I believe that the waters will not fail,
And that we will have everything we need
To choose the life that God is always offering,
And to share it with those who come to our door.

All we need to do,
Is bring the water up from the well.

It seems to me the world is a more terrible place
Than it was when I left you.
That may or may not be true:
It is how it seems to me.
And, at the same time,
The goodness of God
Seems to me more profound.
The well is deeper than I knew.

And the water is everywhere.
I drank from the water of life
At the ancient well.
At the same time,

You were drinking from the water here.

It flows through our city.
It flows deep underground,
Somewhere right near here.

Our roots tap into the living water.
With each new challenge,
We are called to reach deeper,
So that the tree grows ever stronger,
Thriving, giving shade and shelter,
A sign, and a sanctuary,
In the city.

Jesus calls us, right now,
to live into our mission
In a new and particular way.

When we offer this new sanctuary in the city,
We will take part again,
As we have before,
In the renewal of the world.
So we keep growing in God's love,
As trees grow strong
When they reach their roots down,
Way down,
Deep into the water of life.