

“The Fruit of Holy Fire & Water”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
6th Sunday after the Epiphany – 16 & 17 February 2019
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1

With all the rain we got this past week, I’m tired of the mud. Dogs track it in the house every time they go outside. We’re tired of the rising streams and rivers that pose a threat to some of our homes. A nice dry spell sounds good, and I’m all for one, but the wet week we’ve had and our craving for the skies to call a halt makes it a lot harder to connect with the full force of Jeremiah’s warning of drought. Honestly, the timing couldn’t be worse. It also doesn’t help that we live in a place where too much water is more of a problem than not enough.

Even when drought does strike us, the impact’s usually minor. We might fret over our gardens or fuss about the higher cost of fresh produce at the grocery. When it’s too dry, our lawns turn brown, especially if water restrictions are imposed. But really, it’s no big deal. Irrigation helps preserve our food supply. Crop insurance protects farmers, and even when it gets really bad, our faucets still run.

Of course, we know that droughts can be really dangerous. The news shows how devastating it can be when the rains don’t fall: images of cracked, desolate ground; emaciated children; frantic crowds jostling around relief trucks filled with supplies. In our own country, parched forests catch on fire and blaze for days and weeks, consuming everything in their path. But for the most part, those problems are far away, at least for now.

As our planet heats up, the incidence of drought in some parts of the world, including here, may increase, but for the moment, everything’s OK. The worst of it won’t come for a generation or two. Most of us will be dead by then, so why worry? Let our children and

grandchildren deal with it. Yes, for most of us, droughts are just a nuisance, and that can make the Bible's metaphor of drought less compelling.

Take, for instance, what we heard from the prophet Jeremiah and the Psalmist. Both give ominous warnings about drought and its dire consequences. Those who trust human strength more than God "shall be like a shrub in the desert," wrote Jeremiah, "and shall not see when relief comes. They shall be in parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land." On the other hand, those who trust God above all others and all else, "They are like trees planted by streams of water," claims the Psalm, "bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper."

For the first people who heard those words, their meaning was very relevant, clear and scary. The image resonated for them. They lived in a fairly dry climate where water was precious and the desert not far away. Water meant life to them in ways we cannot appreciate. But even for those of us to whom drought has never been a life-or-death issue, the meaning is clear.

Our relationship with God is the only thing that gives life and saves us from desiccation and death, and nothing else can come first, whether it be family or friends, money or power, prestige or just having fun. Nothing else can get in the way of our connection with the source of all life, or we've got big trouble. Just like plants, we too can suffer from drought, a spiritual drought that brings great danger.

Afflicted by spiritual drought, which tends to be a self-inflicted wound, we become easy to enflame and unfruitful. We combust with a passion for things that are not of God. On fire for lesser things, for impermanent, transient things, we burn with desires that lead to a fundamental imbalance in our lives. Those flames consume us, and sometimes we love every minute of it, until in the end we realize that we're charred, ready to crumble into ash. We self-immolate on

the altar of success. And why? To Jeremiah, it's as plain as day. "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?"

How can we escape the human tendency toward self-deception? It starts with the sacred fire that saves, that purifies and consumes only the parts of us that we're better off without. We need to be on fire with the Holy Spirit, a bright and warming beacon to the world that helps bring people to Christ.

We need to seek the flame of the burning bush in the wilderness that called Moses to take a risk to free the enslaved in Egypt, despite the fact that he was wanted on a murder charge there. We need to pray and hope for the Spirit's Pentecostal flame that rested on the heads on the disciples and gave them power to share the Gospel intelligibly with people from many different places and backgrounds and languages. We need to be on fire for the right reasons, by the right flame, set alight by God alone. And along with the fire, God gives us yet another way.

We need to plant our souls near water, the waters of baptism that cleanse and renew and inspire growth in faith. We need to be, to borrow words from the Psalm and Jeremiah, and this is a little bit of a mashup, "like trees planted by streams of water," "sending out [our] roots by the stream"; trees, "which yield their fruit in its season," with "leaves [that] do not wither"; trees who "shall not fear when heat comes." "In the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

When we plant our souls near God's healing water and spread out our roots, we come to know the truth about who we are and who we are meant to be. Sunk into that water we learn about how the world is and what the world could someday become, if we accept and share God's grace, God's wisdom that exposes the lies that surround us. Immersed in the fount of God's blessing, the source of all true life, drought cannot harm or destroy us, but we often set down our

roots elsewhere, and even when we do sink down next to that sacred water, we don't spread out our roots.

Instead of spreading out, we keep our roots close and risk drying up in the process. No plant can mature fully and bear fruit without a root system spread out as far as it can go, so that it can receive as much moisture as possible. We know that the toughest weeds to get rid of are the ones that stretch out their roots the farthest. When we keep our roots close, we shy away from exploring our potential, perhaps because we fear what's out there and how it might respond to our initiative, or because we fear what's in here, afraid that what we find might cause inconvenience or a serious alteration in how we live. When we keep our roots close, we close the possibility of yielding fruit, and there's some sense in that.

We know, at some level, that yielding fruit is a sacrifice. Producing fruit takes a lot of energy, and it does not directly benefit the plant at all. Fruit offers food for others and seeds for the next generation of plants. Neither of those promote the survival of the plant. But Christians who are fruitless can scarcely be called Christians, because the sacrifice of fruit to give seed and sustenance is at the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

No fruit, and the future of faith comes into question. No fruit, and we waste the grace of God. Grace is free, but not cheap. A high price was paid on the cross. Grace calls us to respond with gratitude, a gratitude that motivates fruitful sacrifice. We have a responsibility that's also a privilege, to put down our roots in the water of God so that we can lay down the seeds that help create new disciples.

Now this isn't easy or simple or painless, but it brings life and joy and fulfillment. Just imagine someone you love who needs a kidney, and you're the only match, so you give one of yours to keep your loved one alive. To do that, obviously you'll lose something, and get sliced

open in the process. It will hurt a lot before it heals. It will take a while before you feel good again. But none of that would cause a moment's regret, because compared to the gift of life, all of that weakness and suffering is a small price to pay.

The sacrifice we offer for others is also a sacrifice we offer to Jesus with thanksgiving, and that sacrifice sets us free – free to abide in the peace of holy water and sacred fire. Set down roots and let them spread far and wide. Avoid drought by soaking in baptismal waters, and from that nurturing water, grow and bear fruit. Dwell in the fire that cleanses, not consumes; the fire that grants perspective on what is truly important, so that we can be filled with joy, instead of emptied by the futile quest for satisfaction that the things of this world promise to deliver, but never do. Amen.