

### **ISAIAH 55:1-3; 6-13**

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David...

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. And it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

## **JOHN 7:37-39**

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s hearts shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive. For as yet there was no Spirit because Jesus was to yet be glorified.

### **LESSONS FROM THE MOUNTAIN: PART III**

#### **A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT**

**Isaiah 55:1-3; 6-13**  
**John 7:37-39**

I have always considered hiking to be a metaphor for life. And each year that we hit the trails in Western Carolina, I pay deep attention to what the mountain—and this year, the rivers that run through it, offer to teach me. We can talk about how a trail is similar to our journey through life...and it is. My favorite trail out of Hot Springs follows the Appalachian Trail through downtown and then across a bridge spanning the French Broad River. For the next half a mile, it passes along the banks of the river delighting the hiker in the roar of the white-water rapids which spill thousands of gallons per second over Surprise Falls. And then like life, the trail takes an abrupt turn and begins a very steep and often difficult climb through a winding series of switchbacks to Lover’s Leap which is a large outcropping several thousand feet above the river, offering a spectacular view of both the French Broad and the town of Hot Springs below.

Isn’t life is very much like that—smooth, flat, beautiful and easy at times and then very

difficult and challenging at other times leaving you breathless and wondering if you are going to make it to the top? And after you conquer the difficulties and reach a new plateau of growth, you gaze from the heights of your accomplishment and enjoy the breathtaking view. You know what I mean.

I seek out that experience every year and never grow tired of it—though sometimes I grow tired *from* it!—because it renews my perspective on life which periodically needs to be updated. For life, like hiking, is often hard work and it is good to stop and rest along the trail when you need to catch your breath. But though the climb may stretch us to our physical and even emotional limits, beauty accompanies us along the way. Because of the mild winter, the rhododendrons bloomed early this summer and for the first time ever, we were treated to their magical display of white and purple blossoms decorating the forest like a natural Christmas display. Nature's art imitating life! But unless we stop to look, we do not appreciate it.

Last year my attention was captured by the devastating effects of a forest fire that burned large swaths of trees and foliage on its march through dry tinder. And it was the two-month-old new growth in the burned-out areas which was already springing up everywhere and taking hold in the charred earth that became the focus of my sermon. And I am happy to report that the new greenery is rapidly filling in the areas that were consumed by the blaze. That in itself is another commentary on life, is it not?

This year, I was more focused on the rivers and streams that run through the mountains. There is the French Broad, of course, which cuts the mountain range in half on its journey to the west. It is a big river which the railroad follows for many miles. But also flowing through Hot Springs is Spring Creek which we encountered along several of our trails. It is much less rambunctious than the French Broad and the Upper Laurel River which intersect with it. But on this trip, Spring Creek always just seemed to be with us. We would go away from it, but then turn and soon, there it would be. Then we would follow it again and occasionally cross it, leave it for a while and then return once more. And it caused me to reflect upon the manner in which

the Spirit plays a role in our lives. So the lesson I brought from the mountain this year is centered on the presence and power of Spirit.

Our scriptures for this morning lead us to similar musings. Isaiah extends to the Israelites an invitation to the heavenly banquet: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Look, it is free! It costs nothing. It is here for you always. Like a river that flows through the mountains and carves out valleys and flows to the sea, Spirit is always available. So why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Why are we consumed by life's trivialities—by the latest fashion, the day's Facebook postings, the things that cannot satisfy us? To come to God's banquet is accepting an invitation to live more deeply, to spend time in reflection and in relationships that nurture us, to seek out avenues of learning and the acquisition of wisdom. Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, so that you may live.*

As there are many voices in life, there are many trails to follow. Some are well marked with slashes every hundred yards or so with the path beaten down and easy to follow. And there are trails that are much less obvious which require us to intuit the right direction because the trail markers have faded and fallen trees and gigantic boulders block what we presume is the trail forcing us to take our time and measure each step and hope we are on a path that actually leads somewhere.

What path do we choose and why? What do we do if we get lost? We have been lost before. When we were very tired and running out of water, we have made wrong turns and become disoriented in our direction. And what I discovered is that when that happens, you must listen for the sound of the stream, find it and then follow it because it always goes down the mountain and always leads you home.

Ever the mystic, John sounds the same refrain we hear in Isaiah: *Jesus cried out, Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture*

*has said, Out of the believer's hearts shall flow rivers of living water.* There is something symbolically eternal about rivers. Like the arteries in our bodies, they are the lifeblood of earth. They are never still, always flowing; sometimes moving languidly and sometimes dangerously fast carrying away bridges, homes, people and everything in their path. They endlessly circulate with no beginning and no end.

Oh, and sometimes the Spirit comes as it did at Pentecost with tongues of fire and sometimes it creeps up on us quietly in a sudden inspiration or idea. And like a river, there is something profoundly mysterious about it. I wonder: what is it like to be a droplet of water, to fall as rain and then to join with uncountable billions of other droplets which have gathered in a great crowd to form a liquid body which you are now a member of journeying together for thousands of miles until you arrive in a vast ocean where you will resume your endless circulation until you evaporate and become a denizen of a cloud high above the earth before you fall once again as a droplet of rain beginning the circular journey once again?

That is the sort of thing rivers make me think about. Asking questions like that which have no answers is one way to commune with Spirit. Because it make us realize that there is so much about life and the universe and God that we cannot know and is simply beyond us. And that is good for us because it opens us to mystery and perhaps causes us to not take ourselves too seriously and to appreciate the endless possibilities of what it means to be alive and the sheer AWE-someness of this universe we live in. It is a humbling experience.

*Seek the Lord while he may be found.* You see, that is what we are called upon to do. For that is what makes life rich and full. *You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. And it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

You do not actually have to go to the mountains. Find your sacred place and go there often.  
All you have to know is that *A River Runs Through It*.

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