

Deserts of Life  
Psalm 98  
May 17, 2009  
St. John United Methodist Church  
David Beckett, D.Min.

As I wind down to my final days of being your senior pastor I decided to pull out some of my favorite sermons over the past ten years. Today is a revision of an Easter sermon I preached four years ago. It was about a remarkable event in Death Valley National Park in California. Flowers. Millions of wildflowers. Winter storms dropped 6 inches of rain on this thirsty desert — three times more than usual — encouraging wildflower seeds to sprout. Experts say this kind of show comes once in a lifetime.

The flowers have adapted to the desert by developing seeds with coatings so thick that they can hibernate for decades. Only continued heavy rains will coax them to grow. In the spring of 2005 Death Valley was transformed into a valley of life with blue pendants of desert lupine and tiny purple chias growing in clumps, golden California poppies scattering all over hillsides. Along roads leading into the park, long rows of bright yellow daisies waved, almost as if they'd been seeded to greet the visitors.<sup>1</sup>

What strikes me is this image of the same desert before the rains. We are tempted to describe this scene with words such as barren, dead, or wasteland. And yet the seeds of new life are there. We can't see them but they are there, hidden in the cracks of the dry and dusty earth. They are hibernating, waiting for just the right combination of water and sunlight to transform them into flowers of great beauty.

We talk a lot about the new life promised by the resurrection of Jesus. But we admit that this new life fails to bloom in every arena of our lives. You may be here in church but is the power of this new life in Christ evident in your life? What are the dry, barren places in your life? What are those desert places where you would like to see the resurrection of Christ bring new life? I want to suggest three possible deserts you and I may have right now.

First is the desert of our personal demons. Psychologist, Carl Jung, called it our shadow side. This is about our deep fears and hidden motivations that explain why we act the way we act. Often we do not have control over such fears. They operate at a deep psychological level creating all kinds of unwanted thoughts and words. Do you ever find yourself wishing you could control your personal demons? Most of us believe that as long as they remain hidden and out of the public eye, that they are not a problem.

Anger is one of the personal demons that make of our lives a dry and barren place. Let's face it. No one wants to be around an angry person. Angry people create their own desert of isolation and loneliness.

There's an old story about a man in his little rowboat on a quiet lake. It is a lovely day and he leans back, letting his fingers drift in the water. No one else is around and he lays back further and falls into a dreamy state. Suddenly out of

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the web on March 21, 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7182113/>

nowhere, there is a huge thud and the man falls onto the floor of the boat. He is furious! How dare someone be so careless and knock into his boat! When he gets up and looks around, he sees that an empty boat, accidentally loosened from its moorings had bumped into him. Even this knowledge could not relieve his anger. The trigger had been pulled and the bullet was already out of the barrel.

How many times do we allow our anger to shoot out over an empty boat? Boats are bumping into us every day, disrupting our lives. Even when we are convinced the boat is steered by a person who rams us, our explosive anger can be destructive, not only to others, but to our own spiritual and physical health.

Anger is just one of the inner demons that, like a cancer, will eat away at our soul. We may possess remarkable self-control to keep them hidden from our closest friends and family. But without the cleansing, life-giving water of God we can be destroyed by our own anger, our greed, and our fears. Your personal, inner life may be a desert, but the seeds are there...seeds that can give life to beautiful flowers.

The second area where we often experience the waste of the desert is our marriage and family life. There are families here today who know what life in the desert is like. Siblings constantly bicker and fight with each other. Parents and teenagers can't talk without yelling. Husbands and wives cannot get past those key looks and words that unlock a rush of difficult and hostile feelings.

A husband and wife went to see a psychiatrist to deal with her depressive feelings. They sat down with the doctor and began to talk. It wasn't long before the doctor realized the problem. Without saying a word, he walked over in front of the woman's chair, signaled her to stand, took her by the hands, looked at her in the eyes for a long time, then gathered her into his arms and gave her a big, warm hug. You could see the change come over the woman. Her face softened, her eyes lit up, she immediately relaxed. Her whole face glowed. Stepping back, the doctor said to the husband, "See, that's all she needs." The husband said, "Okay, I'll bring her in Tuesdays and Thursdays each week, but I have to play golf on the other afternoons."<sup>2</sup>

Laughing and making jokes can be a way to poke some harmless fun at marriage. But for many couples who struggle with a lack of communication and intimacy, it is no laughing matter. There is real war being waged in our homes today. The weapons aren't guns, although in some cases we know violence does happen. In most situations the weapons are words. Words spoken like a cannon intended to overwhelm the other. Words spoken quietly, but like a knife, designed to cut on the most vulnerable part of who we are.

Your marriage, your family life may look pretty good on the outside. But peel away the thin veneer and you'll see a desert, a desolate place of dust and rocks. Families can get so accustomed to the desert picture that they cannot see the seeds of color and beauty. But they are there, even in the most broken family. What they need is the love of Christ raining down on those seeds and the landscape of family life. The good news of the gospel of the risen Christ is that new life is possible for all people. This means that families must open wide the

---

<sup>2</sup> Maxie Dunnam, *Preaching*, May-June, 1986.

cracks that hide the possibilities for beauty. It means allowing the waters of God's love to penetrate deep into relationships. Then we will begin to see growth and delicate flowers of eye-catching color.

The third desert that may exist for us is our relationship with God. Deep down we want to believe. We want the assurance that God listens and responds to our prayers. We want the healing that we've been told God offers. But for many of us, the desert is a pretty apt description of our relationship with God. We pray but it feels like God isn't listening. We read the Bible now and then but nothing makes any sense. How can we experience a resurrection, a blooming in our spiritual lives?

This is not an easy question to answer because spiritual renewal looks different for different people. A man stopped to see his pastor to tell him that he had been born again. The pastor said, "You've been what?" "Yes," he said, last week I visited my brother-in-law's church, the Running River of Life Tabernacle, and I don't know what it was, but something happened and I'm born again." The pastor blurted out, "You can't be born again. You're a Lutheran."<sup>3</sup>

The world is filled with various strains of Christianity because people need different ways to be in relationship with God. Some need the traditional approach of many mainline churches. Others need more emotion in a church. Some need more silence in their prayers. And others need to live out their prayer with acts of love and service.

During Superbowl 37, FedEx ran a commercial that spoofed the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks played a FedEx worker whose company plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for years. Looking like the bedraggled Hanks in the movie, the FedEx employee in the commercial goes up to the door of a suburban home, package in hand. When the lady comes to the door, he explains that he survived five years on a deserted island, and during that whole time he kept this package in order to deliver it to her. She gives a simple, "Thank you." But he is curious about what is in the package that he has been protecting for years. He says, "If I may ask, what was in that package after all?" She opens it and shows him the contents, saying, "Oh, nothing really. Just a satellite telephone, GPS device, compass, water purifier, and some seeds."

If we are truly in touch with our deepest desires for love, for God, we will see our seeds germinate and grow. The resources for new life in Christ are very near if we look with spiritual eyes. One of the best ways I know to renew your relationship with God is to hang out with people who are thirsty for God. This church is filled with such people who are living out their thirst for God. We don't have the spiritual life perfected by any means. We still go through times of drought and intense heat, but we go through it together. I could tell you story after story of St. John families dealing with cancer, divorce, and mental illness. What made these deserts bearable was the company and compassion of their church family.

English theologian, C. S. Lewis, told a story of an artist who was thrown into a dungeon whose only light came from a barred window high above. In the dungeon, the woman gave birth to a son. As he grew, she told him about the

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, Acknowledgment, *Christian Century*, March 3, 1999, 245

outside world, a world of wheat fields and mountain streams and cresting emerald waves crashing on golden shores. But the boy couldn't understand her words. So with the drawing pad and pencils she had brought with her into the dungeon, she drew him pictures. At first she thought he understood. But one day while talking with him, she realized he didn't. He thought the outside world was made up of charcoal-gray pencil lines on faded-white backgrounds, and concluded that the world outside the dungeon was less than the world inside.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps you find yourself this Easter without the resurrection power in your personal, your family, or your spiritual life that churches sing about this day. Like this story there are others who are trying to show us the beauty of the trees and flowers beyond the dungeons of our existences. But we can only see a flat and faded version of the joy that awaits us. All we see is a dry and barren desert. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that God wants to heal your inner life. Christ wants your marriage and your family to be centers of peace and love. Christ wants your relationship with God to be vibrant and real! This is truly good news! May it happen for us all.

---

<sup>4</sup> -- Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 84