

May 17 – Music Sunday

Scripture: Acts 16:11-15

Sermon: Down to the River to Pray

Our music team has been sharing in many ways the power of water and prayer. This got me thinking about all of the times we have the image of water as a pivotal moment in Biblical stories. It begins with the creation story and we hear water covered the earth. Then we have Noah and the flood and the people of Israel going through the Red Sea on dry land. Jonah is rescued by a great fish from a storm upon the waters. Moving on to the New Testament it begins with John the Baptist who went into the wilderness by the River Jordan to proclaim his message of repentance and it was here that Jesus was baptized. We recall how Jesus calmed a storm and another time walked upon the water. We heard today how faithful Jewish communities gathered down by the river to pray. And our Biblical journey concerning water would not be complete without mentioning that great hymn of faith found in the Book of Revelation that talks about heaven and how there is a river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. All of this shows that water, faith, and the power and work of God were often associated with water.

Today I want to focus on that time in Acts that we read about. It isn't as well known to us and the context of what is occurring might be lost on us. It was at a turning point in the missionary life of Paul the Apostle. Just prior to today's scripture reading Paul, in a vision, had heard a call to come over into Macedonia and preach. Up until this time Paul's missionary work had been centered in Asia, in what is modern day Turkey. His moving into Macedonia, modern day Europe, was a major step forward in the growth of the church. His first place was to go to Philippi, a major commercial center. Luke mentions that it was a Roman colony and for this reason there was not a strong Jewish presence in this city. We know this because the faithful gathered outside the city by a river at a place of prayer. It takes ten men to open a synagogue. Obviously there were not that many and Jewish worship seemingly was not welcomed in the city so those few Jews in the area had agreed to meet at a place outside the city walls for prayer. One of the people who came to the gatherings was Lydia. She was not Jewish.

Luke identifies her as a worshipper of God. This is a term used for those Gentiles who worshiped with the Jewish community but had not, for a variety of reasons, chosen to convert. Paul, as a visiting teacher and rabbi, was asked to lead the worship that day. Even though there were Jews present we hear that it was only Lydia, a prominent business woman, who opened her heart to Paul's message. She asks to be baptized along with her household and we hear later that a small house church begins to meet at her house. Without Lydia and her support the Macedonian mission might have failed. It also points to the future direction of the church as it moves farther from Jerusalem and closer to Rome. It is going to leave its Jewish roots and become more and more a faith of its own made up of Gentiles. We know from non-Biblical sources that the early Christians, when they had no home to meet in, also met at the river to pray.

We understand why water and God's blessings would be associated in a faith that was begun in an arid land. This year as visions of drought assail us we are more cognizant of water and its blessings, it is much easier to make the connection. Every drop of rain from here on out this season will be greeted with words of praise. Today, I want us to think about water and what it shares with us from its Biblical sources that help us in our walk with God.

Water reminds us of the power of God. One of my favorite walking places is Railroad Bridge. We have gone there frequently ever since coming here almost four years ago. For three years nothing changed. When we took Sophi we had a set routine that included throwing small pieces of wood into the river below at a certain spot. Then we had the first storm this winter that changed the course of the river. All of a sudden that favorite spot was above a sandbar instead of the river. Then after the second storm support posts that had been standing for decades gave way as the river changed course again. The power of water to carve a channel, to uproot trees that are in its way is amazing. It is a force that is hard to resist. This is an important image for me. As I face difficult situations and lift them to God in prayer I remember that God is the creator of water. God is more powerful than water. This reminds me that whatever I am facing will yield ultimately to the power of God and I find comfort.

Water also reminds us of the cleansing power of God. Part of the reason water was and continues to be used in baptism, is because of this symbolism. When I am feeling upset by things I have done and not done water reminds me that when I go to God I can find forgiveness, the past deeds can be washed away and I can be renewed.

Water reminds us of the blessings of God. Chief amongst all of these blessings is the gift of life. For those who wrote the Bible, water was essential for living because without it the crops would wither and die. Water and life are inseparable. We who live in an area of abundant water take this for granted until we come to a year like this one where the snow pack is almost non-existent. We now are thinking about, planning for a potentially long hot and dry summer with no reserves of water. It is a bit scary. But this was normal for those in Biblical times. This is why water is such a powerful reminder of blessings. Literally as the water comes down we are renewed, we are given life.

Finally, for me, water reminds me of the eternity of God. When viewing a stream we see no beginning and no ending. We do not see the individual droplets that make up the torrent. Intellectually we know that it is made up of many drops of rain that fell from the sky and flowed together. It is constantly being renewed. But on an emotional level it is just flowing by with no beginning or end. So for me this reminds me that I am but a drop in the river of life that flows from the throne of grace. Others came before me and others will follow after me. In God's love the sum of all of us is greater than the individual parts. And it is God who controls the flow. So I think of my part in eternity when I view of powerfully moving stream.

All of these images should cause us to give thanks and pray. From the earliest beginning of our faith we have been connected by water to God. From God moving across the waters at the beginning of creation to the end where water flows from the throne of grace, water and God have been linked. So let us give thanks to God the giver of water, of life, and may we go down to the river to pray in our minds and perhaps at times in our steps.