

SCRIPTURE for Time with Children: Psalm 84:1-2

How I love your Temple, LORD Almighty! 2 How I want to be there! I long to be in the LORD's Temple. With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God.

SCRIPTURE for Sermon: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.' Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.'

SERMON:

His name is Jedidiah Jenkins. And I have to admit I'm hooked. I'm hooked on his lovely, fun, thought-provoking work entitled "Like Streams to the Ocean." It is currently occupying my spare time and every moment I get. Jedidiah, whose musings about life and why it matters, about relationship and family and home and faith and ego and all those things that make us human. He describes a day in northern Wisconsin. He is taking a solitary walk through a seemingly never-ending meadow, where at the very edge of that meadow he found what he describes to be the perfect flower. It was, he thinks, a violet of sorts. It was purple and blue. The kind of flower, he writes, that a fairy would wear for a hat, he imagines. It was hidden among the tall grasses and the weeds. And Jedidiah is absolutely convinced that, had he not wandered that way -- and to be fair for not that great a reason -- he actually just had to go to the bathroom -- not only would he not have seen that amazingly perfect, unbelievable flower, but it's almost certain that not a single other human being would have either. It would have bloomed in its perfectly symmetrical shape, with its unbelievably fragile and crisp edges, unnoticed by anyone. His emotion in telling this story is vibrant, and it's a powerful story that stirred my own heart.

I have spent much time in northern Wisconsin. And so I could picture it. I could imagine just the kind of meadow he is talking about. I could even hear the absolute quiet and peace that floats through the air. I could envision the simple beauty that bursts forth in the most unexpected places. I've got to imagine that my own emotional resonance, as strong as it is, is likely far less than his, because he was there. He witnessed the event firsthand. And Jenkins is convinced of something that resonates with me, too, that we feel first and think second. That those things we

feel to the depths of our heart have the chance of becoming our core truths far before we think them up here in our head. So with these things we really need to know it's critical to know, but also to have that emotion that goes with that surprising beauty. In some ways, I can think about his story, and I can imagine it all, but his story can probably never fully claim me until I get out and experience something like it.

The people of faith here in our passage from Joshua, the people of faith in the Exodus, claimed by God, oh, they could tell you all about the miracles of the Exodus. They could tell you about it emotionally. They could tell you about it from their experience. Like Jenkins, each and every one of those people could describe the fragile edge of that journey. They would tell you about the emotion of leaving Egypt, the surge of fear at water's edge, about the miracle of finding a dry path to the other side, about the joy of walking, and then the dreadful tiring notion of doing it every day for 40 years, because they were there and they felt it not just in their body but in their spirit.

Like Jenkins gushed about how blue and purple merged to offer a color that he says still glows in his mind, the people could tell you about the glow of deliverance, the light that went before them to show them the way, the one that became their rear vanguard to offer protection, the bread that rained from heaven, and the water that sprung from rocks, because they saw it, they tasted it, they felt that emotion of the cool slake of thirst. Like Jenkins, who is convinced of that tiny flower's utter uniqueness, so too the people could tell you of impossible deliverance, protection from foe and wilderness too, because it happened over and over and over again until they felt it here in their hearts.

But by the time we get to this reading at the end of Joshua, I'm afraid that, like me, the people are merely testifying to the beauty of what others had seen. By the time we get to the story here at the end of the life of Joshua, the one who followed Moses, almost everyone is merely reciting what others had told them, no matter how emotional it was. For we know that very, very few of those who left Egypt ever entered the Promised Land at all. And we know just eleven verses after today's passage ends, Joshua is going to die at the age of 110. So they've been in the Promised Land for likely 55 or 60 years. Much time has passed since the Passover, since the parting of the waters, since the manna rained from heaven. Although they've heard the story enough that it has become their story, the people claim it as their story, and that is good. The Bible tells us that the time of Joshua in the Promised Land, the time of his leadership, his guidance, his story-telling, his speaking for the still-speaking God, was perhaps the most faithful time in the history of the people of God. The Bible says Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua.

The people on this day in this place that this passage tells us about consider themselves to be a part of the "we" of that journey whether they walked it or not, part of the "we" who still bear witness to the good of what God has done whether they tasted that water or not. On this day our reading says that they as a group, all of them together, they way *we* choose God. This moment is a highlight, a climax, a truth that the psalmist knew – remember that psalmist who delights in being here – a truth that I hope is at the root of why each of you are here today, the truth that we as people together collectively must make the choice of who we're going to be, over and over again, every day and each day.

And yet, even as the people did on that day, even as they dramatically say “far be it from us” to forsake our story and our history, our own lives. And the Bible tells us that in the very next verse after this reading stops, Joshua already knows that they may not be up to that task. Joshua already knows that once they settle in and settle down, once things are good, once they’re through the heat of the moment, that sometimes that story becomes less compelling.

I wonder if, in just the few short years after Joshua leaves them, in that book of Judges where, trust me, things fall apart, I wonder whether the goodness, the protection, the provision, the claim of God on them became so rote, became so secondhand, became somebody else’s story simply to accept and rely on, because they knew someone else at least had experienced it. I wonder if it had become like that flower Jenkins paints in our mind’s eye, unbelievably beautiful, and yet someone else’s account, not our own.

I wonder how long before the abundance of that land of milk and honey made them forget the abundance of God’s deliverance. How long before all that goodness starts becoming an end in itself, and the people start seeing God in those things that make us comfortable, and serve those things instead. How long before the people start thinking that God only shows up in big and miraculous ways, and forget that God really shows up in those tiny ways in each and every one of our lives, and that those moments matter every bit as much as those big miraculous ones.

But we know this: In that book that follows Joshua – Judges – there is a gradual diminishment of faithful living. Small compromises slowly, gradually over time, lead to people straying. For the purpose of the story, whether of a perfect flower in a meadow, or God’s perfect love in the desert, is never supposed to be enough for us. We don’t tell these stories like the one in this passage just so that we can remember and have trust in them, but rather that we might go out there inspired by these stories and live in the kind of faith and trust that the people had, to experience the joy of an unexpected blossom in our times of need, whether they’re quite that dramatic or not.

Back in May when we were observing the one year anniversary of the pandemic, I participated with the Southern New England Conference in a worship service that marked the anniversary of the pandemic by linking it and likening it to the Exodus. It was a theme of wilderness. It was the theme of traveling to destinations unknown. I don’t think primarily the goal was to compare or equate. I don’t think it was even just primarily to help us remember the peril, loss, stress and grief of that wilderness journey, or even of ours currently. But rather I hope to focus on the deliverance of God in those times, and as our worship went on, to remember the deliverance of God in these times.

How in the midst of this journey we have been driven to places we might never have imagined we would go, and saw unbelievable flowers blooming forth. How we ended up seeing strangers caring for strangers by wearing masks, by getting vaccinated, by donating to causes. How food blossomed in deserts both through organized pantries like the People’s Pantry and pop-up ones like ours, and those that exist in dozens of places even here in Berkshire County. How people offered the beauty of concerts from rooftops or street corners. They gave away their stimulus checks to those in greater need. How we found beauty and truth in simple connections. Because

over this last year, it's not just the big miraculous things, I think, where we have seen God blooming, but in those small moments, both those of joys and those that were hard.

Those individual stories have the chance to become our stories when we tell each other those stories. When we share both the joys and the burdens in our prayers or in our lives. Suddenly it's no longer my story but our story, all of them fusing together like the blue and purple of that flower Jenkins found, to glow in a greater beauty that defies any single hue or expression.

In this story, Joshua knew that testimony matters. And so before he told the people that they had to choose, he told them that he had already chosen. He told them his story and how God showed up. He told them about his own choice: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Friends, I think we come to this place each week to make that choice of whether we will serve God or the other competing allegiances of the world. Just like Joshua did, we invite people to come up here and tell and remember the promise of God as it is played out through the sweep of history. But we don't stop there. We share our joys and concerns. We share how God shows up in our lives, the challenges and the deliverances. We bring them to this place and wear them as hats, just like Jenkins imagined that little blossom in the meadow, that we might claim how the promise of God is playing out right now.

Where have you seen the unexpected grace and beauty of God blossom this week? And who are you going to tell about it? Who will you tell about the way you experience beauty in these days, both that they might find heart and joy, but that they might also be inspired not just to rely on your word but to trust and go out there to live into the truth and see the blossoms that are all around, and tell some else too. So it's not just your story but our story.

Here's what you need to know. When Jedidiah Jenkins is burdened and down, when he is doubtful and hurt by big things, or small things like whether his outfit makes sense, when he is stressed out over the world, or about the day's events both big and petty, he says he remembers that little flower. And not just for the sake of that perfect flower he saw, but to remind him that there are millions of flowers just like it blooming all over the world right now, flowers just waiting to be seen, to be cherished. Flowers to be brought into the bouquet that keeps us going, that keeps us choosing each day to serve what is good, holy and true.

This day we must again choose. And I am glad that you are here, to sing and to pray, to listen and learn, to share and receive. For this day, like all days, we must decide what path we will follow. We must imagine what we will find when we do.

Friends, I hope we always remember the faithful testimony of those who have gone on before, and also the testimony of those in this very room. I hope we always tell stories of flowers that bloomed long ago, and those that are blooming in the cracks of the sidewalk or along the roadside today. Flowers in unexpected places, just waiting to be seen. Friends, tell your story. And then go out and find more. Amen.