

“The Wells Of Salvation”

Isaiah 12:1-6

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
God has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD,
call on God's name;
make known God's deeds among the nations;
proclaim that God's name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for God has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

The Wells Of Salvation

Isaiah 12:1-6

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I.

The goal of this morning's sermon is a comparatively modest one, I will admit, but by no means unimportant. Thematically, we are going to revisit last week's sermon on the Powerball; though our purpose is less for reiteration and more about refinement. For those like us with a maturing faith, the *fine* points are what matter most as the daring is in the details.

The homiletical art, that is to say preaching, reaches its zenith when it moves beyond oration or rhetoric and achieves dialogue or conversation. Certainly, this is true of the dialogue which may occur between proclaimer and ponderer, which was the case this past week and what has served as the genesis of this today's sermon. More importantly, though, is the conversation that might be sparked *with* oneself and *within* one's self.

II.

One of the greatest delights for me, as a pastor, is to walk into worship on any given Sunday and discover new faces in the pews as folks take the incredibly bold and courageous step of wandering into our church for the first time; either for a short respite along the way, or to settle in for long-term stay. The decision to do so, be it a hard or easy, big or small, is *always* a step significance along the path of their faith journey; as it has been for each and everyone of us at some point in our lives, myself included.

Significant for the person or family, to be sure, as they seek truth, plumb the depths of faith, and discover how they might both align and ally themselves with their Creator, and the plan our Creator has for this world. It is every bit as significant for the church, though, in a Christmas morning kind of way, as every person who comes to the church is like a gift given and a blessing received.

III.

Such has been the case this fall with Abhi David, Katie and Marshall Fiese and their children Claire and Hunter, as well as the Dekay family, Nick, Christy, and their kids Emily, Rosalie and Sebastian. It would seem that, at least of late, the Church on the Park has become something of a local, national and international destination spot; with the Fiese family having roots locally and in-state, Abhi hailing from India, and the Dekay family recently relocating to the soon-to-be frozen tundra that is the North Country from the warmth and sunshine of Texas, of all places (which, to me, means they have the most explaining to do).

Actually, the great thing about this church is that no explanation is necessary, we are just glad to have folks join us for the journey regardless of the how and why they found their way here (though that is always interesting); the more the merrier, we say, come on in and take a load off!

IV.

Regardless of if you are new, or newer, to the church and still settling in, or if it seems like you've always been here like Margaret Alexander who is our longest tenured member, joining the church 73 years ago, each person has a unique and valued role in our congregation; and, very often, a quirky role at that.

Last Sunday, in the "hand-shake" line after worship, Nick Dekay started to unwrap his quirkiness a bit by making a comparison between the Powerball sermon I had just delivered, and the somewhat obscure philosophical and theological postulate known as "Pascal's Wager." *(Full disclosure, in our email conversations this past week I told Nick he would be taking the "blame" for this Sunday's sermon and he is fine with it; that's the spirit, Nick.)*

V.

Like Duncan (except much older, and French rather than English) Blaise Pascal is (or, more correctly, was) a mathematician who lived in the 17th century. Ironically, though an academic, Pascal spent his life as an apologist for Christianity and a fierce critic of the pursuit of knowledge, which he understood as a form of concupiscence, or sexual desire. *I know*, the plot thickens, right? Well, what can you expect from a Gemini?

Rather than get sidetracked by all of that, however, let us stick to the script and return to “Pascal’s Wager.” Pascal believed that human beings wager with their lives that God either exists or does not. For Pascal, a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does *not* exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (such as pleasures, luxury, for example). However, if God *does* exist, they stand to receive infinite gains (as represented by eternity in Heaven) and avoid infinite losses (an eternity in Hell).

VI.

Which, essentially, was the analogy I was drawing in last week’s sermon: likening salvation to winning the Powerball Grand Prize; where we *all* win it because puts us *in* it by, both, purchasing and punching our ticket through the cross of Christ. For Pascal, the profit/risk assessment says, “Why wouldn’t you take that bet?” Or, for those of you who are sports fans, the analytics would say to *go for it*.

In the course of our conversation, I told Nick his observation and correlation between the Powerball sermon and “Pascal’s Wager” was not only correct, but astutely so. However, I offered one small caveat which, as I said at the start of the sermon, though comparatively modest is, nonetheless, not unimportant. What Pascal is advocating, essentially, is a “Wait and See” approach to one’s faith. Meaning, you do not know the payout until the very end of the game. What I touched on in last week’s sermon as “lesser prizes,” and what I’d like to reemphasize in this morning’s sermon, is a “Come and See” approach our faith.

VII.

Today’s scripture reading from Isaiah 12:1-6 describes a worshipper praising God and declaring the Lord’s greatness among the people. What garnered my attention, though, is verse 3 where we hear about drawing water from “the wells of salvation.” As Christians, we typically understand the source of salvation as *singular*; that is to say, Christ. Certainly, and as we shall see throughout the season of Advent, there are many references to a salvific Messiah throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (I mean, that is where we got the idea in the first place); this is especially true, though, with Isaiah.

VIII.

Being a sharp-witted exegete (that is, scriptural interpreter) I had the sense that this phrase, “the wells of salvation,” was the X that marked the spot to do some historical, scriptural and theological digging. As it turns out, I was correct. The “wells of salvation” is a *thing*. More precisely, it is a *place*; specifically, “Elim,” one of the places the Hebrews stopped following their exodus from Egypt. Referenced in both Exodus 15 and Numbers 33, Elim is described as a place where “there were twelve wells of water and seventy date palms,” and that the Israelites “camped there near the waters.”

In other words, an oasis in the desert. One which offered life saving, that is salvific, fresh, sweet water in ample supply and mercifully cooling and protective shade to a large number of bedraggled pilgrims wandering through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. An oasis such as this, cited by Isaiah to an audience who would certainly identify the reference to the “wells of salvation,” would not only be what *causes* the praise and celebration of God but, also, harken to the importance of having an actual physical *space* to do the praising and celebrating. Not unlike our own Church here on the Park.

IX.

Which is why the room in which we gather for worship is rightly called a *sanctuary*; that is, a refuge, haven, harbor, shelter, port in a storm, retreat, bolthole, foxhole, asylum, safe house and, of course, an oasis. To this list, however, I would add one additional moniker: a well of salvation. Certainly, in terms of Salvation, capital “S”, but also in terms of salvation, lower case “s”.

Not only is “Pascal’s Wager” Salvation with a capital “S”, it is Salvation ALL CAPS; a push all of your chips into the center of the table kind of faith the outcome of which we must, necessarily, wait until the game, that is life, concludes. There are, however, wagers which pay out lesser prizes more modest by comparison, but allow us to hedge our bets a bit. These we might call “salvations,” lower case “s” plural. While not necessarily soul saving, they are, nonetheless, life saving. Rather than a passive “wait and see” approach, these so called “salvations” welcome us to actively “come and see.”

X.

Returning to today's scripture reading, Isaiah is very cleverly reminding the people of three crucial aspects of their faith. The first two are more obvious: the freedom from bondage in Egypt which was the Exodus (that is, redemption) and the eventual gift of the promised land (that is, salvation). The third, though, is more subtle and what causes us to praise and celebrate God: "the wells of salvation." Those things, people and places which sustain us along the way, without which redemption would be pointless, and salvation seems destined to exist as a far off horizon.

Each one of us here, I'm quite sure, has experienced some form of redemption already in our lives. I'm equally sure that each one of us here holds dear the promised land of Salvation which awaits us at the end of our lives. What matters now, and in some way most, is how we make it from here to there.

XI.

We are, each of us, making our way through the wilderness that is life. Though such a wander is certainly a wonder it is often times also a bedraggling journey. Not only do we need the opportunity to take a load off, resupply, recharge rest and renew oneself, we need to have such opportunities at regular and reliable intervals; like visiting, or revisiting, and oasis in the desert. An oasis overflowing with life giving grace which is salvific, lower case "s", and where you might find a compassionate and protective community of believers.

Which is why I get so excited when new people emerge from the wilderness of the world every now and then to join us at this particular well of salvation that is the Church on the Park. The journey through the wilderness of life is always difficult and, at times, filled with peril. While we cannot necessarily change the terrain over which we must travel, we can most assuredly ease our burden by sharing the journey with others.

XII.

The first step we must take to share the journey is *conversation*. Conversations we have with our spouse, our family and with ourselves, about our need to find an oasis. Conversations which are had between those newly arrived to the oasis and those who have been abiding here awhile. And, then, conversations we might have together, all of us, not only about our God, our world, and our place in God's world, but also conversations about the hopes and dreams we have for ourselves and, especially, the fears and worries we hold deep within ourselves.

Finally, I can tell you that such conversations are often *very* difficult to have. The *only* thing that makes them easier is to have them in an actual physical space where grace abounds, renewal is found, and praise and celebration is all around. *Sing praises to the LORD, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.* That is as fine a point as I know how to make. Come and see while we all wait and see. Amen.