

WGUMC March 10, 2019 “I thirst.”
Psalm 69:3-4,21; Mark 15:22-23; John 19:28-29

When I was 12, we moved from Sioux City, Iowa, to Billings, Montana, crossing the 100th meridian, that magical line that separates heat-stroke inducing humidity from the high dry plains and nosebleed country. I watched my world turn from green to shades of brown and gray. And from then until I graduated from high school, I made my home where, for all but a few weeks in the spring time, the landscape always says, “I am thirsty.”

My spirituality was shaped in the rain shadow of the Rockies, which is why these words of Jesus ring so true for me: “I am thirsty.” But how could the one who told the Samaritan woman at the well that he was the Living Water ever be thirsty? How could the spring that gushes up to eternal life ever run dry?

Scholars have interpreted these verses in a couple of ways. Some argue that “I am thirsty” is John’s way of showing us Jesus’ humanity. Jesus could be happy and sad; he could show mercy and get angry; he could be tired and hungry and thirsty. Some early

Christians didn't want to believe that Jesus had a human body with human needs. How could the Son of God feel pain? How could the Savior of the world suffer? So Jesus says, "I am thirsty," to prove that he was fully human. These days, that's not our problem. The humanity of Jesus is the easy part. Thirsty fits into our theology.

Other scholars point out that when Jesus says, "I am thirsty," he is fulfilling scripture, as it says in our text today. Psalm 22, that psalm that Jesus quotes from the cross, says "my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death." [22:15] When he is offered sour wine, we remember Psalm 69: "I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched...They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." [69:3, 21]

OK. Jesus saying "I am thirsty" may be a fulfillment of prophecy and it may be a proof of his humanity, but I believe that in these three words there is a much more powerful message for the rest of humanity.

What is Jesus thirsty for? Water, obviously. And a billion people on the planet who don't have access to clean drinking water on a daily basis join him in that thirst. Hard for us to relate. I read that Boulder Creek is closing in on 50 inches of rain so far this season. Ninety-nine percent of California is out of the drought. But we all know that we have a world-wide fresh water crisis on our hands, and it isn't going to be solved with one good rainy season. As the climate continues to change, we're going to have to look at the possibility of raising Moses from the dead so we can get more water out of the rock.

Meanwhile, an interfaith organization called No More Deaths is leaving jugs of water at our Southern border. Since the year 2000, 2100 people have died trying to cross a section of Arizona desert. Four women were convicted for providing living water to immigrants. They did so because Jesus said, "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." [Matthew 10:42]

Jesus is out there in the desert and knows our physical thirst. But is Jesus thirsty for water only? What about justice? The Prophet Amos (the not-so-famous Amos) said, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” [Amos 5:24] And Jesus told his own disciples, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” But here he is on the cross, convicted on trumped up charges, an innocent man about to die, the victim of a gross injustice.

Jesus knows our thirst for justice. Our General Conference delegates went to Saint Louis over a month ago where they hungered and they thirsted for righteousness. Instead they had to watch as our LGBTQ brothers and sisters were once again hung on a cross of exclusion. I wanted to cry out, “How could the delegates who had spent all day in prayer on Saturday vote for the Traditional Plan on Sunday? God, did you skip church that day? Where were you in all of this?”

In the hours after the vote, hours that stretched into days, my colleagues and a good many of my parishioners were so thirsty for justice we couldn't think straight. We felt so forsaken, so broken, that we were ready to skip Ash Wednesday and the whole season of Lent and head right into Good Friday. And in the discussions about the future of the United Methodist Church since then, that question keeps coming to me: Where is God in all of this?

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And that tells me that Jesus is not only crying out for water. He is not only thirsty for justice. Jesus is thirsting for God.

Now you don't have to be living in the desert to thirst for God, although the desert is a good place to go if you're looking for God. The people of Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert. The Desert Fathers of the Church went out into the wilderness in order to intensify their thirst for God. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and mystic, chose Albuquerque,

New Mexico, for his Center for Action and Contemplation. Someday, I hope to go there.

But for now, I'm stuck here where the creeks are running fast and the reservoirs are filling, and I ask, how can we use this season of Lent to intensify our own thirst for God? What kind of metaphorical deserts can we create for ourselves so that we can feel how thirsty we really are?

I'll let you in on a secret: Silicon Valley is a spiritual desert in many ways, if we could just slow down long enough to realize how thirsty we are. One of these days, we'll figure out that we are never going to quench our thirst if we keep drinking the spiritual equivalents of sugar water and sour wine. They are poor substitutes for living water. It's hard, but we need to fast from a too-comfortable Christianity. We don't have time for a drive through, take-out Christianity, one made with high fructose corn syrup and no complex carbs, a Christianity that doesn't demand anything of us

and doesn't change us. And we have to stop dabbling in discipleship like we're at a wine tasting: swirl, sniff, taste, spit.

If we want to find salvation in Silicon Valley, we have to give up sipping and spitting and drink deeply of real life. We can start by reading a real book. Remember those? The Bible is a collection of books that were written in the desert. When we read it together, we can start building a real relationship with God. And as we begin to quench our own thirst, we are going to find ourselves eager to quench someone else's. Just remember: handing out bottled water is nice, but it isn't enough. They are thirsty for living water, and so are we.

It's a good thing that Jesus is thirsty for us. That's the only conclusion I can come to when I think about why Jesus would be willing to hang on a cross. Mark and Matthew both contain a story about Jesus that took place as the soldiers were getting ready to crucify him. They offered him a cup of wine mixed with myrrh or gall, but he would not drink it. We aren't sure why, but it's possible that

he wouldn't drink it because the myrrh was put in the wine to deaden the pain. Kind of like the three-drug cocktail they used to use at San Quentin. First comes the sedative to dull the senses.

Why would Jesus refuse this little mercy to ease his suffering? Perhaps it is because he wanted to show us the full measure of his love, or as Ephesians puts it, "the breadth and length and height and depth" of his love so that we might be filled with all the fullness of God. [Eph 3:18-19] Jesus is so thirsty for us that he is willing to drain the entire cup of his suffering so that we might drink from his cup of salvation and be filled up with God.

Isn't that what we're after? Isn't that what we thirst for? To be filled with so much God that there isn't room for anything else? No room for pride or prejudice. No room for denial or deceit. No room for guilt or regret. No room for disappointment or despair. No room for hating yourself or anyone else. No room for hard-heartedness or exclusion. To the General Conference delegates and all my fellow

United Methodists, I say, there's no room for injustice when you're filled up with Jesus.

Before Lent even began this year, we Methodists were already at the cross. So now I would invite all of you to the well. The only other time in the Gospels where Jesus says he is thirsty is when he shows up at Jacob's well in the town of Sychar in Samaria. A woman is there and Jesus asks her for a drink.

What would you say if Jesus asked you for a drink? Would you tell him that the well is deep and you have no bucket? Would you tell him that you are tired of coming to this well hot and thirsty, day after day? If he offered you living water, what would you say?

A few years ago, I pondered these questions, and wrote a hymn poem. It's called "Fill This Jar." I offer it to you with a prayer that sometime between now and Easter, you will go to the well and meet a stranger there and drink deeply of life and be filled with all the fullness of God.

Fill This Jar

John 4

[tune: Selena, #287 "O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done"]

*The well is deep, the sun is high,
the air is hot, the breeze has died.
This burden's mine, I have to bear,
but no one sees, and no one cares.
I am so tired of coming here
to fill this jar with all my tears.
My strength is gone, my hopes are spent.
I do not know where my dreams went.
You, by the well, just who are you?
And can you tell me what to do?
Why do you look at me that way?
What is it that you have to say?*

*You want a drink, but you can tell
I die of thirst beside this well.
You offer me the life I need.
By living water, I am freed!
I can't believe! How can this be,
that you would give such love to me?*

*My friends, this well is yours and mine,
and we can come here anytime.
Don't wait, come now, come as you are.
Let joy, not tears, fill up your jar.
The life of Christ, it overflows.
Take it from me as one who knows.*

Rebecca March 3, 2013