

# **A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent**

**Year C - February 29, 2016**

**Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia**

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Lord, bless this gathering with an awareness of your presence. Open the eyes and ears of our hearts and souls to discern you among us. *Amen.*

As you and I continue our journey through Lent and as we gather here together this morning, I would like to offer this question for you to reflect upon. The question is this: "What does your soul thirst for the most?" After what does your soul thirst the most? That question has come to my mind in many forms this week as I read this verse in today's psalm that somehow struck me as it never has before:

*"O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;\* my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water."*

Are you ever exhausted by all the chaos that fills your awareness each day as you watch the news or read the papers or as you simply try to get through each day? The news is all about the presidential race that is in full swing earlier, it seems this year than ever. The Iowa caucuses have recently been in the forefront of the news. The coverage has been a constant intrusion into our homes via the media. Every time I turn on the news, it seems, I see the faces and hear the voices of the candidates hurling insults at each other followed by analysis by the news commentators and then replay after replay. Does your soul ever yearn for something else? In the midst of all this, does your soul thirst for something that gives meaning to what is going on in your life right now? I know my soul does. The words of the psalmist have spoken to me in particular this week: "O God... my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water." –yes as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.

But do you know that in the midst of all this, something very interesting happened in the news after the Iowa caucuses recently? Although newspapers and airwaves were full of analysis and candidates trading demonizing barbs, it turns out that the most talked about news story was one printed in the Health section of all places of the New York Times on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day of the Iowa caucuses. And believe it or not, it had absolutely nothing to do with politics. That's right. Instead, it is reported that the most talked about story was an article about the dreams and visions of the dying.

The article, "A New Vision for Dreams of the Dying" by Jan Hoffman describes how scientists and medical professionals, along with hospice workers and chaplains, are starting to pay special attention to the fact that people who are dying very often have dreams and visions of loved ones who died long ago visiting them, comforting them, and welcoming them. It is a very comforting article and you can read it in its entirety by googling it by title. (Amazing what's at our finger tips on our iPhones!)

What is incredible about this story, at least in part, was the timing of it all. Who would ever have thought that the constant coverage of the latest attacks of Trump against Cruz or Bernie against Hilary would take a back seat to a story in the Times about the dreams of the dying? It was if perhaps, if even for a moment, we had become exhausted by all the coverage of politics, and our souls, thirsting for something more meaningful were responding to something that was having a deeper effect upon us. It is as if we were responding with thirst in a dry land where there was no water. It is as if people were beginning to respond to something that is so much larger, so much deeper than we might have acknowledged. Our souls, yours and mine, are thirsting to be nourished.

What does your soul thirst for the most?

There is a hunger deep within each of us to have our souls fed. Our souls thirst for that which gives meaning to our lives, and which, even more, gives hope to us as we face all that life puts in our path. I want to share with you something Gary Jones, rector of St. Stephen's here in Richmond, shared with his congregation recently both in a sermon and in his weekly

commentary because it speaks so clearly to that hunger we have deep within our souls and to what it is that ultimately feeds us and gives us meaning and hope.

Gary told a story about his first day at St. Stephen's, over ten years ago. He had not even moved into his office yet, but the vestry thought it was a good idea to have a large parish gathering so that people could meet the new rector. The crowd was huge.

Part of the reason for the large turnout was that St. Stephen's, while a healthy, vibrant parish after the tenure of its beloved former rector, Thom Blair, was experiencing controversy as were Episcopal churches all over the country. The turmoil was mostly centered around the consecration of the Bishop of New Hampshire. Some people had left the church. Others had cut their pledges, and tension lingered. Gary was certain many were interested in hearing his views. He was sure the vestry members were all crossing their fingers hoping that he could simply introduce himself without incident.

But instead of launching right away into his personal history or his views on issues facing the church, he began the evening by asking the ushers to pass out blank index cards to everyone. He suggested that his new parishioners might want to close their eyes for a moment. Then he said to them, "Imagine that God has come to you and said that you can ask one question, and God will give you a clear answer. What would you like to ask God? Write that on your index card." He said he told them not to put their names on their cards. He wasn't interested in questions from their egos after all, just in real questions from their hearts and souls. He remembers that you could hear a pin drop. There were a few tears as people began to write down their questions.

Later, when he read through the cards, it was striking to him that not one person asked a political or churchy question. Nobody wanted to ask God about gay bishops or other charged issues of the day. Instead, they asked questions about things that really mattered to them, questions like these:

Is my daughter with you in heaven?

I know I've done some terrible things. Do you really forgive me?

Am I going to see my child again?

I'm afraid. My marriage is crumbling. Will you help me?

In the wake of so much controversy in the Episcopal Church at the time, and after a period of several acrimonious meetings in the parish, Gary thought for sure that people would want to focus on these things. But they really didn't. Instead, their souls were athirst for the presence of the living God in their struggles, in their losses, and in their fears.

As I read the psalm this morning, and as I have been thinking about our Lenten journey this year, Gary's experience with his congregation struck within me a responsive chord.

What question this morning might you and I want to ask God?

Will I see my son with you in heaven?

Will I see my beloved wife with you in heaven?

My loved one is facing a serious illness. Will you be with her and with me as we face this journey together?

My son is having a rough time of it. Will you be there to help him?

Questions like these, and others come from the depths of your soul and mine as we thirst for the presence of God and as we hope deep within our souls to stay connected to God.

May this Lent for you and me be a time when we can tend to the real concerns of our hearts and souls. Our souls are athirst for God as in a barren and dry land. Our souls are waiting, waiting for you and me in silence to return to the deeper things that nourish our thirsty and famished souls.

The words of the psalmist this morning might well be our own, *"O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;\* my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water."*

And these words as well,

*(O God,) My soul clings to you;\* your right hand holds me fast."*

During these weeks in Lent, as we travel with Jesus on his way to the cross, let us tend to these things that come from the heart and the soul, and may we be nourished and fed as we experience the soul nourishing glory of God reflected in one another and in God's presence in our very midst. Amen.

