

## Spring of Life — August 21, 2016

### Scripture readings

- Isaiah 58:9b-14 — If you remove the yoke from among you ... then your light shall rise in the darkness ... like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.
- Hebrews 12:18-29 — Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks ... and offer to God an acceptable worship.
- Luke 13:10-17 — Ought not this woman ... be set free from bondage on the sabbath day? ... and the entire crowd was rejoicing.

### Sermon Notes

A deeper question arises out of our readings this morning. What makes up a transformational experience? What are the experiences and the places that help us step into the life God calls us into? What helps us sidestep the things that distract and oppress and keep us bound? What helps us step into true life in the Spirit together as a community of people, a community of faith, and as a human living in this world?

This week I spent some time in Sedona, Arizona. My host family set me up with a transformational experience — mountain biking for several days with a Buddhist monk! As we took in the beautiful vistas, we talked about how we each were trying to help lead a community into something that speaks to the real life within us. He recommended I visit a nearby Buddhist shrine, the Amitabha Stupa, named for the Buddha of Limitless Light. The stupa is located in a place called the Peaceful Valley. It rises almost 40 feet and is filled with hundreds of millions of prayers for peace, sacred relics and ritual offerings. Outside, there is a worn path circling the stupa. A sign suggests that you may follow this path, walking barefoot, and completing 3 full clockwise circles, while offering prayers for oneself, for loved ones, for the world. It is a holy place, a place of transformation, and one can get lost in the depths of the movement while walking and praying. As a Christian in a Buddhist shrine, I began to feel there is something about our shared experience as humans that calls us into the spirit of the sacred, which then calls us into compassionate service to the Other.

On the way home, I stopped at another place just outside Sedona called Harding Spring. This looked like a small, unremarkable stone structure. But you walk around to the back and find two spigots from which flow gushing water. It has a cool, crisp taste, certainly appearing as a gift from God for our parched places. For me, this, too, was a holy place. As I sat and stared at the water gushing out so strongly and without ceasing, it was like witnessing the spirit of God as a spring of life, something that sustains us, that never stops, where you can fill yourself up, be refreshed, and go about your way. The image of water flowing and flowing was powerful, and again, transformative.

Isaiah wants us to be a spring of life for all people. The people are sad because they have been led by God back across the desert to find their “city on a hill” has been decimated and what had been is in ruins. Yes, life is hard, God says, but you must stand up straight, remove your yoke, and claim your true life. Relieve your sadness by serving others, rise to the light and ride with God as if on angels’ wings. Share your bread with the hungry, your house with the homeless,

your clothes with the naked. Enter into the injustices of the world, see what it is, then you'll know how to act to bring about freedom for all the people. Celebrate the sabbath as a community to observe the rituals of worship. Honor the sabbath as a call to the transformational life, and bring others into that well of life, introducing them to the water that symbolizes real life. To live in a world with dark spaces, we need to honor the rituals of our religion as well as tend to the people and places that may be living at the margins.

Luke tells the story of Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath. He sees a woman in need, barely able to walk. Out of his compassion, Jesus calls the woman to him and proclaims her healed, whereupon she happily celebrates her new freedom. The synagogue leader is "offended" that healing has occurred on a holy day. Jesus asks, Is there a better day for healing and loving? The healing spirit of God cannot be controlled or constricted to a certain day of the week, and neither can love! To treat the sabbath with honor, we celebrate healing and action, we promote freedom and justice, we gather strength for the journey, and we recognize how sacred life is as well as how gifted and blessed we are. This is the "work" of real religion. The crowd gathered in the synagogue is with Jesus, and like the woman who is healed, they rejoice in all they have seen.

While driving back from Sedona, I was discussing the readings for this Sunday with a friend, and the question of church stewardship arose. It became clear that we had different perceptions about what it means to be a steward of God. For some, it is about keeping the lights on and the programs running. For me, it's about our integrity as a community of faith. Are we who we say we are? Yes, we need to keep the lights on and to hold the space for gathering in celebration of God's love. It is also the work we do in the community. We live in a church with a sense of abundance, of joy and service. What we are called into as stewards of God is giving of ourselves with integrity. Stewardship is about money, yes, and it's also about our actions. We honor the sabbath as a sacred time of celebration and praising God, as we also honor God's call through our sacred work within the community.

Transformational experiences are a source of light and life for us, nourishment for the soul. In them, we find hope for humanity and remind ourselves there is a spring of life within each of us. They may also help us enter into the hard places and find the sacred and holy ground that guides us into the real life God calls us to. It is there, with God's help, that we find healing, freedom and joy.

"and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail."

The Amitabha Stupa: <http://www.tara.org/stupas/amitabha-stupa-and-peace-park/>  
The Harding Spring: <http://www.365thingstodoinisedona.com/visit-harding-spring/>