

THE RIVER OF GOD

Psalm 65

October 24, 2010; Emory Presbyterian Church

When I was in the Middle East, a year and some months ago, the dominant color I saw...was brown, dirt brown. As we drove from the airport in Tel Aviv to where we were staying in Galilee, wending our way through hills and valleys, they were all...brown. Occasionally we would pass green – a farm, an orchard, a garden. Our tour guide explained the incredible feat of engineering that allowed *massive* irrigation in Israel. He said, “If you see green in Israel, it is because of 1) a natural spring, or 2) irrigation.” Before modern irrigation, most of Israel/Palestine was brown, for most of the year.

One afternoon we hiked down a path down a huge hill, and I was able to see the landscape up close. I was surprised that it wasn't just barren dirt, as it'd appeared, but there were dead weeds, waist height, as far as I could see. Brown, brittle, lifeless weeds. The weeds scratched as we walked. The dirt crunched and crumbled under our steps.

Have you ever been in such a season? We're in a drought now in Georgia. You can see it in the trees, in our yards, in dry creek beds. It's not the worst drought we've seen; there's still comparatively a lot of green, but it's dry...and a long time dry.

Have *you* ever been in such a season? Our economy is in a drought now, too. I'm unemployed. Even church jobs are drying up, as church funds dry up. As budgeting season grinds around again – for churches, for businesses, for governments, for households – we face questions of, “how do we keep going?”

“What must we cut?” “How can I give when it feels like there’s already not enough?” Funds are drying up; jobs drying up; retirement accounts look like dry creek beds. They tell us this is not the worst recession we’ve ever seen. There’s still comparatively a lot of green. But it’s dry...and it’s been a long time dry.

Have *you*, personally, emotionally – ever been in a dry season? A long, dry time without.... without joy or laughter? A long season without love or affirmation? A long season without peace...or hope?

That day in Israel, hiking down that rocky, craggy path, our guide explained that the deep gullies we saw crossing our path, making for some rugged going... were rivulets, streams. It did not compute. In the dry season, what looked like just dirt dry ditches... in the rainy season, would suddenly become swift, flowing streams of water.

My mind struggled to imagine the sight. As my eyes took in death and dry ridges all around me, my mind tried to see cool rushing water...filling..overflowing these trenches. To smell the mud. To hear the rushing and splashing...the squelching of my steps in it.

In the gift shop at this site, I’d seen postcards of this hill that showed it covered in carpets of red and purple and orange flowers. I’d thought they must’ve photoshop-ed those flowers in, because no one would want to buy a postcard of the hill as it really was, all dry and brown. But the pictures were true – just in a different season. As I looked around, I saw the waist-high brittle weeds had brown dried-up flower heads. These hills – these brutal desert hills – Lord willing and the creek should rise! – in springtime were alive! with gentle blossoms, humming with honey bees.

Listen again to verse 12 and 13 and try to picture the scene: “The pastures of

the wilderness overflow, the hills clothe themselves with joy, they shout and sing together for joy!”

Our psalm today is the story of: who God is, and what God has, and what God gives.

You make the sunrise and the sunset shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it, you enrich it.

Your river is ever full of water.

You provide the people with grain, you have fore-ordained it.

You water the furrows *abundantly*,

you level out its trenches,

you soften it with showers,

you bless its growth.

Your wagon tracks overflow with richness -

in other words, your wagon is so full, so bountiful,

it weighs down the wheels,

so heavy it makes deep trenches in the rich earth.

This is a song of God’s abundance.

Our verse today is v. 9, “The river of God is full of water.” Well duh!, you might say. Rivers *are* full of water. But what I learned this week is that, just as we have many words for water - like river, stream, brook, creek – in Hebrew, there are also several words. The word for *river* is: nahar. Nahar refers to a river that always has water, which in the region of the Middle East are few. There’s the Jordan, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile – the biggies. And having been in the Jordan River, I would call it a creek because the part I saw, you could throw a stone across. But in Israel they called it the *Jordan River because* it was always

full of water. Even in drought, when water levels went down to a trickle – it was still there – it never ceased to flow.

But the word in our verse today (“the river of God is full of water”) is not nahar, but peleg, which means: stream, channel, rivulet. Peleg is the kind of stream that doesn’t get mapped because it is sometimes there and it is sometimes not; it’s seasonal. Where, in Israel, river - nahar - is something large and permanent and usually far away – a river was some place people would go to – the “river” - peleg - in verse 9 is local, imminent (as in nearby). A peleg meant sudden life in the midst of dry, dead, drought. Pelegs are the sort of streams the spring up quickly – can hear the splashing? can you smell the mud? – and bring instant life wherever they emerge.

And this is what God is, peleg...local, present, in our midst.... not somewhere else that we must go to, but right here in our desert, in our need. God is new life, rushing into our dry brittle need.

And God is full. “The river of God is full of water,” is not a “duh” statement. It is an “oh, wow!” statement, because Psalm 65 is eternal...stating an eternal truth. God is not seasonal. Unlike all the other streams that flow, flow, flow, then stop and the mud dries up and the dead earth waits again – God’s stream is ever FULL of water. Winter, spring, summer or fall – our lives are seasonal, but God IS, God is eternal, and God is full.

Every time we read this psalm it will say the same thing. It does not say, “the river of God is *going to be* full of water,” or “the river of God is *sometimes* full of water,” or “the river of God is *dry, but hopefully one day* it will come back.” Every time we read this verse it will say – for now and all time – that the river of God is full of water.

When we close the book and put it away...it still says the river of God is full of water. When we forget about it, it is true. When we believe it, it is true. When we scoff at it and say, “that’s not true,” it is still true. Whether we feel it or not, The river of God IS...full of water.

Psalm 65 tells us who God IS, and what God HAS, and what God GIVES. God **is** life. God **is** forgiveness and power and love and grace. God **has** everything. Everything good, and beautiful, and important. Everything we need, and so much more. And God **gives** everything.

Did you hear the verbs in our verses this morning? God pours out, overflows, forgives, creates, blesses. God is a river that flows, bringing life and joy and hope and peace and power and grace and blessing. It blesses us, and soaks us – do you smell the mud? – and it never dries up. //

What good does it do to say that God’s river is full...when I am empty? What good does it do to hear about God’s abundance, when I am struggling? If God is so full and so generous, how does that help me survive this recession?, this dry spell?

Let me ask you: is it possible to stand in the middle of a river and still be bone dry? I know that it is, because I’ve done it. Physically, no, it’s not possible, without some kind of special protective suit. But metaphorically..it is possible for a person to stand in the river of God, in the midst of God, and to feel Sahara dry. To be surrounded by God’s abundance and to still feel lack.

Have you ever been to the funeral of someone who committed suicide, and found that the church is standing room only - filled to overflowing with literally *hundreds* of people who cared about this person - and wondered, how can a person feel so all alone when he is surrounded by so much love and care? The young

people we've heard about in the news lately who have given up hope, focused on the hurt and lack in their lives, the lack of acceptance. What if instead they were able to focus on the good? There is hurt, there is loneliness, there are hard days, hard seasons. Psalm 65 reminds us, no matter what, there is also goodness, and grace, and life, and beauty. Vs 3 today reminds us, "When we are overwhelmed with sin, you pour out forgiveness and grace." When we're overwhelmed with sin – our own guilt and shame, or the hurt caused by others' sin, by a world of sin – God IS grace, poured out for the sin and hurt of the world. We can focus on the sin and the hurt and the pain, but scripture invites us to find healing and life in the river of God.

Psalm 65 says to us, regardless of our feelings, regardless of our season, God IS full. God is abundant. God HAS everything that we need and more. And God's desire is to pour out life and abundant life. He sent Jesus, who came that we might have... life, eh?...life so-so?...life mediocre? No! I came that you might have life abundant.

Jesus said to us, "The water that I give will become in you a spring of water, welling up into eternal life!" This is a promise that we have – that who God IS, and what God HAS, and what God GIVES - is *ours*, it belongs to us, it is *in us*. Post-resurrection, we have the Spirit of God!, and not only is the river of God not-far-from us...it is in!, us. The forgiveness of God, is in us. The power of God is in us. The love of God is in us. The abundance of God – that wagon weighted down with the all the riches of heaven, is available to us. We may be a dry, cracked creek bed, thirsty and waiting...But God is a river that is always full of water. We may be struggling to make ends meet, but we know **there is abundance**.

And so we are FREE!, to be like God, to not fear, to not hold back, but to

pour forth, to be poured out, to give and to share what we have – in love and in joy.

This picture, of God as a living stream, full, bringing life in the midst of a desert – this is what *we* are to be, bringing blessing and life to those around us. It makes me think of the apostle Paul, writing from prison. Did he write about the pains of prison? Did he write about how bad the food was, how little there was. About the rats, the cold nights, the hard floor, the loneliness, the chafing of the chains around his wrists and ankles?

No, he wrote: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is noble, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about these things.”

When we’re in a low place, a dry place, a difficult place, scripture lifts us up to a higher place, to the rock that is higher than ourselves, where we can see – and receive – the beauty of God. Who God **is**, and all that God **has**, and all that God **gives**.