

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
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*The Immensity of Longing*  
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I can tell you this has been one stressful week. It has been non-stop and complicated or colored by a sense that I was rapidly coming to a place where I was going to have to make a decision about the future.

Some of this was brought on simply by the calendar. Each year in our school district, if you notify the administration of your intention to retire by March 1, you are eligible for a cash payout for unused sick days, up to 200 days. It can be a sizeable amount, even after taxes.

Additionally, we all know that we are moving toward a time of transition, euphemism for getting a new pastor. Others know that, too, and some general conversation occurs now and then about what might be my next call.

Along with the all this and more, a clear recognition that I have come to enjoy this congregation and the work of parish ministry in a very wonderful way –

Well, I suddenly felt like I needed to make some choices and had ten days to do it.

It all precipitated a round of talks and discussions with those close to me to help me discern what, indeed, I *was supposed* to do.

In the process, I recognized an old friend, this sense of *longing* that I had known before, especially in times of discernment and decision making.

When I discovered the quote on this week's bulletin, I realized that in many ways, I was longing and that, as the quote suggests it did for ship-builders, this *pull or yearning* was moving me into the direction of discernment and seeking – looking for answers, yes, but more really – a heart place; a place of serenity and peace; of assurance.

The immensity of longing, co-mingled with expectations and projections, was, again, stirring things up.

Several years ago, in a time like this, I found myself speaking with someone to help me work through some issues I was having. It was a time of upheaval on several fronts. Nine-eleven, some personal relationships in transition, a deep and confusing struggle with the church, and choices about the future.

As I said, a familiar place in many ways.

I had come through other difficult times, and I understood that the future was really a series of todays, taken one at a time, practicing each day, if you will – in the ways in which I aspired to live my life. Some days I did better at it than others. But, taken a day at a time and with the help of others, we navigated the challenging times and actually flourished in many ways.

In each case, it was always about rediscovering the fundamental path that harmonized with me – and then staying on it. Far from confining, such recognition was always liberating!

What follows are simply my observations on the path.

In some ways, the path is multi-dimensional.

There is a sort-of surface dimension that makes it possible for complex societies to operate. Speed limits, public courtesy, laws that protect us and our possessions.

There is another path, from a different direction, that allows us the interaction we enjoy with others in positive ways, social pragmatics - a path that – for me anyway - frequently takes a bit of work.

A personal, intimate path that joins others in deep friendships, soul-mates, even as partners-in-life.

And many more, I am sure. But beyond these and the many more –

There is a deep path that is more river-like; flowing in unseen undulations, yet transverse all other paths, manifesting themselves from the core of who we are – much of which remains a mystery, at least for me.

It is not always easy to get to the core, in fact, I suspect that best most of us can do is to disturb the surface now and then. Once ruffled, it is not always an easy place to be, because it has an uncanny way of disturbing the other paths know well, the paths that are secure, safe, defining.

I remember being in CPE and participating in IPR. We met three times a week, as I recall, and during that time each chaplain would present a verbatim on a recent visit to a patient. After literally hundreds of hours together in sometimes brutally honest ways, we came to know each other well and could challenge each other about our methods of ministering to the patients. The intention was always to do a better job of serving the patients. So, what we longed for afforded us a willingness to put up with it all.

For example, part of a verbatim that had the chaplain asking a patient if they would like to pray, usually was met with a response of questioning whether or not the chaplain was uncomfortable, wanted to get away, and so signaled an end to the visit by calling for prayer.

That's a small example. But the challenges were all meant for us to be able to enter a patient's room without an agenda, to be present, to meet the patient where they were, and go from there.

I have said it here and elsewhere, it was the most valuable training of my life. Sometimes the most uncomfortable, as well, and it took me deeper into that river than I probably ever would have otherwise gone. It was a journey into the light *and* the dark side; to the place where self meets self and truth becomes a bit more complex than right or wrong.

Between the conversations with my spiritual guide, the work in chaplaincy, and other places I discovered the "longing" that I described. The first time someone suggested that I was longing for something, I really had no idea what they were talking about. It sounded like weakness or some saccharine descriptor for a pulp fiction character.

It took me a while to come to understand that the "longing" that emanates from deep inside, from that river-dimension, is really a powerful language of the core of who I am, who God made me to be. Because it comes out of living waters in motion and because it can also become filtered and disturbed by the other dimensions it passes through – it is sometimes not easy to get a clear read on just what it is.

It is perhaps the reason we rest, become silent, breathe, and confer with others.

In this today's reading with Jesus at the well, the symbolism jogged much of this morning's comments. Think of Jesus sitting by a well and then talking about the water he offers to drink, life giving water that never needs to be refreshed.

Remember, he was thirsty, so he went to the well. He went to get a drink. And, like a good chaplain or chaplaincy supervisor, he leaped to the meta-story of thirst for more than just well water when the Samaritan woman came forward.

Jesus recognized her "real thirst." The thirst, perhaps, close to the longing we all know for something better, fuller, more-meaningful, rewarding, illuminating, enlightening, energizing – eternal. In chaplaincy, I should tell you, some referred to Jesus as the first of chaplains.

Remember, this was Jesus: rabbi, teacher by definition, culmination of all the prophets who had gone before, incarnate of God in ways that made him the Messiah.

He was – and is today for many – what it is we long for.

John's narrative, along with the beauty of Jesus' again crossing boundaries established by the surface dimensions, so to speak, the boundaries of not talking to a woman *and* a Samaritan, at that.

Along with the much that we could learn or talk about from those perspectives of this reading – for me, today, at least - it is about that transcendent stirring, the yearning,

longing that we all have for “fullness of life, peace, justice – and ending up on the right side of God.”

As we move through the Lenten period of time, onto passion week, and Easter Sunday – I think it is good to remember that Jesus had a longing, too. His longing was for those he led and those he would touch to know that there was a different, better way to live one’s life, without being ground up in the surface dimension.

He wasn’t saying not to drink from the well, but he was saying don’t get one well mixed up with the other. Don’t mistake one layer of dimension for the core of who we are and miss the true beauty that exceeds calculus and security.

Jesus’s death, his execution for following this longing, tells us more about the importance of knowing who we are and being true to that self – than all the surface protocols of public worship or displays of success. And he teaches us how to discern – in community, with others.

It is true that our longings sometimes disrupt everything, just when we think we’ve got it all figured out. It is true that longings, too, can go awry – as with any other human emotion. But what is also true is that longings are not meant to be kept bottled up deep inside, floating in the core river like some driftwood.

There is much we can learn from this morning’s rich gospel. Among them is the importance of talking with others about who we are – seven wives and husbands, and all. Finding the people with whom we can talk about our deep longings and bringing them up from the well to the surface.

This week was a week that I would not have made it through if it were not for prayer and others to talk with. In the end, I discovered what I always find out when I go through these things – I don’t have to know the future (I can’t anyway, not can I predict it). What I do need to do is to stay on the path that comes from the well, that deep river, stay in community, and take the leap of faith – not always in dramatic fashion, sometimes just in waiting, actively waiting for what God has next in store for me. In the meantime, paying attention to where I am and with whom I am traveling. All else will unfold when and as it should.

You know, the response of the woman and the others from the village at being “known” – “he knew all about me” – seems to be as refreshing as it was unsettling.

Perhaps that is what it takes: the willing to be unsettled to be refreshed. The willingness to touch the immensity of longing for a better knowing of who we are and how much we are truly loved and guided.

May that, and more, be so for you.

Amen.