

St. Bartholomew's Church  
Good Friday: The Three Hours  
The Fifth Meditation

Though wars for us in the US almost always occur somewhere else, sadly they provide markers for large periods of our lives. I was born during the Korean War, came of age and conscience during the Vietnam War, and have spent the last twenty years watching and resisting various incarnations of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Any chronicle of the war in the gulf contains images of occasional dust storms, troops eerily whitened by the insistence of the blowing sand. Bone dry, choking, stuck to clothing, exposed skin—nothing escaping the landscape of its layer. I can almost taste the thirst.

Often when people are dying, even when intravenously well hydrated, their lips become parched, life's sustaining fluids slipping slowly away, ridding the body of its moisture and elasticity. A tiny sip of water or a small chip of ice becomes one of the last great pleasures known on earth. Every dying soul deserves that gift.

I don't like the desert. I know it is beautiful and majestic and often the place where mystics take their search for God. I'll have to look elsewhere for God for I just don't like the desert. The reason, I think, is that it makes me thirsty. I don't mean literally thirsty though I know it would if I stayed long. I doubt if I have ever been really thirsty, certainly not for more than a few moments. But the desert makes me aware of thirst that is deeper than merely the physical lack of water.

As Jesus neared death, he said, "I thirst." Those who look for such things suggest that Jesus said these words to set up the fulfilling of a prophecy found in Psalm 69, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." Perhaps. Those who struggle to imagine Jesus as fully human see these words as teaching evidence of his humanness, his possession of human needs, universal needs of water and other essentials of life, the argument being, I suppose, that Jesus said these words primarily to show that he was human.

I think Jesus said them because he was thirsty. Really thirsty. And when I allow it to, that makes me really, really sad.

Today is Earth Day. I don't do much in the way of observing. For years I haven't devoutly taken quick showers, made sure I didn't leave the water running while brushing my teeth, and have called myself an environmentalist. No doubt, a more generous designation than deserved. Among the nearly 7 billion people living on this globe, 1 billion of them don't have clean drinking water. Many alarmists say that we are going to run out of water a long time before we run out of oil. I don't know, but I do know that my not liking deserts has a primal feel to it.

The last time Jesus gathered with all his disciples he told them that he had come to give a new commandment: "love one another just as I have loved you," he instructed them. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." A savior who felt real physical thirst must be pained that something as basic as clean water is not available to all his children, in fact unavailable to a huge number of them. It

makes us wonder how many other ways we do not love as he imagined we might.

Little wonder that we thirst. Thirst in deep ways that have little to do with physical water.

In my heart I know that “as the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for God, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” I do long like that; and in my heart I know that you have that longing too, an existential thirst that we know only God can quench and, yet, somehow an arid crossing, a no man’s land of resistance and self-reliance and doubt and fear, keeps us from drinking freely from the spring of living water, which comes only from God. Deep longing, deep resistance—the paradox of the human in search.

It begs the question: what is the pedagogy of the cross? What is that we are to learn from meditating on these sayings attributed to Jesus in the hours of his death? What might we learn from hearing Jesus’ agonizing cry, “I thirst?”

Maybe just this, this simple lasting message: drink only from a fountain that flows with life water, water that nourishes the soul, water that is real and lasting, true and clear. We do not have to be existentially thirsty, not desperately so. Of course, our desire for the living water will always involve a search, but it is available to us right now in proportions that satisfy, that can fill our souls, that can take the sting of thirst even as it leaves us wanting more.

I thirst, but God gives living water that never dies.