



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson  
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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*"...because in our weakness, we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace...."*

THESE WORDS FROM OUR COLLECT FOR THE DAY have such power to them in part because they challenge us. Do we truly believe that we can do *nothing good* without the grace of God? Or are these simply words from a distant past that have no real meaning today? And if we do believe them intellectually, how do we live them out in our lives?

*We* can do nothing good without *you*, O God.

These words relate quite directly to our first reading from Jeremiah: "Cursed are those who trust in *mere mortals* and make *mere flesh* their strength." The prophet has Judah in mind, trusting as a nation not in the Lord their God but in their own strength and might. "They shall be like a shrub *in the desert*," the reading continues. "...they shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land."

Such a barren image! You can *feel* the dryness. You can *feel* the brittleness and *taste* the bitterness of that *salt land* that absorbs all moisture. If you've ever tried to live depriving yourself of the Spirit of God in your life, you can tap into that wilderness that is referred to in Jeremiah: the sense of trying to live drawing continually on your *own* resources, when our own resources are *never* enough. Trying to live without the Spirit

of God is trying to live without a part of ourselves. It's like trying to live without an arm or a leg. Only far worse than that. Because we *can* live without an arm or a leg. But if we cut ourselves off from the Spirit of God dwelling within us—that wellspring of life within us—we dry up and wither. We *ourselves* become brittle and breakable. And eventually we lose the very essence of life itself, which is God. We might continue to exist; but we do not live.

“O God, we can do nothing good *without you.*”

Our Propers for this morning offer an alternative vision to going it alone in the dry desert. Our Collect begins with the words, “[you] are the *strength* of *all* who put their trust in you...”

And the reading from Jeremiah contrasts those who are cursed because they trust in mere flesh with those who are “blessed—[for *they*] put their trust in the Lord. “*They* shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. The tree shall not *fear* when heat comes, and its leaves shall *stay green*; in the year of the drought, it is not *anxious*, and it does not *cease* to bear fruit.”

It's quite a different vision: here we can feel the moistness of that stream and the fresh life it continually brings to us as our roots draw from that abundant source of our life who is God. We can *feel* the resilience against adversity, the *confidence* in the midst of difficulty, and the fruitfulness that results from steady nourishment with the very best food there is.

It's that image of extending our roots into the stream with which I want to spend a few more minutes. The image immediately brings to mind the baptismal waters with which we are brought into the community of faith. The waters in which we *die* with

Christ and which are the source of new and continuing life, continual transformation, continual conversion in Christ. The waters which are a sign of the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God. The waters which flow among us and within us, just as the Holy Spirit does.

It's surely no coincidence that our very bodies are three-quarters water, just as the body of the earth is. The water from which we are made and which covers the earth reminds us how much we depend as the Body of Christ on the water that comes from God.

The waters from which we drink *as* the community of faith, and the waters from which we drink *within* the community of faith. As I was preparing the sermon for this morning, as I was writing those last words, a young friend of ours called to ask if she could come over to our house to borrow an egg. Carol and I had a few whimsical moments about this because she said to me about four times that Ellie was coming over to borrow an egg. But Carol had a cold this week, and I kept hearing her say that Ellie was coming over tomorrow an egg—which didn't make a whole lot of sense! When I finally figured out what she was saying, I asked if we were going to get the egg *back* when Ellie was finished with it. In other words, if she was baking something with it, would we get a bit of whatever it was when it was done baking?

I realized that that is similar to what happens with us in baptism. God takes what we are and makes us into something else, something that has our original properties but that is transformed, changed, as we become part of something larger, the community of faith, intentionally living in the Spirit.

The thing is, God just keeps baking us our whole lives. Or to use the Biblical image, God the potter keeps forming us our whole lives. But that only happens to the degree that we keep our roots reaching into the stream of those waters that God provides us.

The waters God provides us in the community of faith with which we've been blessed. The waters that run among us, but which come from a source far deeper than ourselves, just as water can seep up from deep underground.

I don't know if I had a deprived education, but I remember when I came to talk to the search committee and heard for the first time about this thing that Nebraska sits upon called an aquifer. We didn't have aquifers when I was growing up in Ohio, or if we did, I don't remember ever hearing of them. Aquifers are another good metaphor for the Holy Spirit rising from the depths of ourselves as individuals and as a community of faith—rising to the surface of life. But as we know from living in Nebraska, the water level can drop to dangerous levels, and then we end up in drought situations.

That analogy works in some ways for ourselves and God, in that if we aren't intentionally drawing from the stream, we can get into a drought situation spiritually, too. But analogies aren't perfect. This analogy falls short in that God is *always* there for us; God never drops to dangerous levels! The Holy Spirit is *always* there for us to draw on when we extend our roots. And just as is true about tree roots and water, our souls naturally extend to God for the nourishment we so desperately require. It's *we* who pull them back. It's *we* who stop ourselves as we are reaching out. And it's *we* who suffer when we do. The good news is that the tributaries of God are all over the place. All we have to do is reach out to them and we will be awash in the Holy Spirit. That's the way that our God works. We have no real reason to be dry. EVER!

Thanks be to God.