

"And the Rains Came"

Psalm 65:9-13; Joel 2:23-28

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 24, 2016 – 5th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

In Israel the agricultural year is reversed from ours. This is largely due to geography. The hot summer season extends from June through September. The rest of the year the weather is cooler and there are periods of rain in October and November and then again in April and May. Most of the harvesting takes place in late spring.

The fall rains are known as the “early” rains; those in spring as the “later” rains. They've been called that for a long time. They are referenced in our second reading today from Joel, a book that dates from about the 4th century B.C.

Like farming anywhere, when the rains come on schedule and are neither too much nor too little, the crops will be good. Deviations either way will naturally reduce the yield. In Palestine there are great variations in rainfall from year to year and so the success of the harvests can swing up or down.

Our other reading for today from Psalm 65 is also close to the land. It's a thanksgiving to God in a time of abundance. The early rains and the later rains have been sufficient. It is a moment for praise:

You visit the earth and water it,
You greatly enrich it...
You water its furrows abundantly,
Settling its ridges,
Softening it with showers,
And blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty...
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
The hills gird themselves with joy,
The meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
The valleys deck themselves with grain,
They shout and sing together for joy.

You can picture the land fully green, with crops ripening in the fields. It is a time for rejoicing, for it spells the difference between a productive year and a difficult one, between plenty and scarcity. What would have been more natural for a Hebrew family than to give thanks to God for their bounty?

For those of us who get almost all our food off grocery shelves, we can't fully appreciate the visual imagery and joy expressed in this psalm. Food for us is just something we buy, like clothing or gasoline for the car. It's always there. Our only disappointment is not finding a specific brand in a particular size when we want it.

Only in the most recent generations, in countries like ours, have we been relieved from the uncertainty of the growing year. That makes it especially hard for us to empathize with the small farmer in Africa or Asia. Food is not a given in the Third World. We can't understand what it is like to be on the edge of starvation. The rural family in the Sudan, however, could fully identify with the words of the psalmist.

In Palestine so much depends on the two main periods of rain. In human life, too, there is a period of early rain and a time of later rain. Ideally, both rainy seasons are important for a life to bloom and be fruitful. Yet, sometimes that early sustenance never comes, like in the case of a child who is neglected or abused, and young life is left to dry up and wither. You can walk into a class of third-graders and pretty well identify the ones for whom life is a struggle against the odds, and what a shame and waste it is.

Abraham Lincoln grew up in an area and time where the flame in a person could be snuffed out early. Not many people could read and write in his whereabouts. But young Abe was blessed with a stepmother who came into his life and made a crucial difference.

Sarah Bush Lincoln saw something special in the boy. She took in laundry from other families so that she could buy books for her son. As he lay sprawled on the floor, reading the latest treasure that she had found for him, she would say to the others: "Hush, you leave Abe alone. Someday he's going to amount to something." Without the nourishment of Sarah helping him to grow, likely his name would not even be known today. He would have lived and died without particular distinction. He would have not been President of the United States at a time when we especially needed strong leadership.

But sometimes a great deal comes at an early age, and then afterward, the soul becomes parched and withered. Once so abundant, the later rains fail to appear and nothing sustains promise later in life. Take the story of Willie. He was a running back for the Green Bay Packers during the glory days of coach Vince Lombardi. Willie's speed and skill made him a valuable player on the team. The early rain in his life gave him quite a start that carried him successfully into his twenties. He had both fame and fortune.

Following his playing days Willie returned home to San Francisco. There he fell on hard times. Through bad investments and foolish spending he lost all of his money. He went through several unhappy marriages and fathered a total of seven children. He became a street person, wearing tattered clothes, and catching odd jobs when he could. The early rains came quickly for Willie, but afterward he died on the vine.

Then there's those people who only later in life come into their own. The rains are only intermittent earlier on, but they come plentifully as the years progress. Like plants that finally get the nourishment they need and go on to make a good harvest, so it is with some people. When finally they get what they need, their potential develops and blossoms.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was such a person. He wasn't totally unsuccessful in the first part of his life; yet, he didn't have much to show for it. He held a rather mundane position in a customs house, but even this he lost due to politics. When that occurred, his whole world came tumbling down around him.

After Hawthorne told his wife of his apparent disaster, she suggested, "Why don't you write a book? You've always wanted to write." Her encouragement during those difficult days were a major reason why Hawthorne has become one of America's best-known authors. That first book turned out to be *The Scarlet Letter*, and he went on to write much more. The man whose best period of growth came later went on to be a person of true achievement.

Imagine a garden you have prepared. After you've sown your seeds or put out the tender plants, it's important they get water early on. Their roots are small and moisture must either come naturally or you will have to provide it. The strongest and largest plants are always those which get enough water regularly. These plants will eventually bring the greatest yield. They're the ribbon winners at the fair.

People are like that, too. They do best when they get the nourishment they need at the times that it will do them the most good. Throughout life God gives us two ways of receiving nourishment: that which is given to us by others and that which we find on our own. This combination is intentional.

We can identify what we need like educational nourishment, physical nourishment, cultural nourishment, and spiritual nourishment, and go find it. This takes planning and perseverance, but we know the effort we make is necessary for us to thrive.

But then there's another nourishment we receive without planning it. This is the nourishment we receive from others who freely offer us something we can use. They sense we're a bit dry around the edges and so they simply do a little watering.

They give us a smile when we walk through the door. They ask with genuine concern how things are in our life. They listen to our problems. They take us to lunch when we're discouraged. They send us cards to cheer us. They give us a helping hand when needed. The wise person is one who learns to accept what is offered and is grateful for it.

In this person-to-person way, we can not only be a receiver but we can also be a giver. We need to provide the water of life for each other. We need to give back even as we receive. No one's well is so deep that he doesn't need to be replenished by another at times. No one has so little to offer that she doesn't have something to give when someone else has needs.

Our scriptures for this morning remind us again of the absolute necessity of water for the growing earth. By extension, we also realize the need of nourishment for the growing person. Ultimately all these gifts are from God, and sometimes they come through us.