

“The Heart in Summer”

This Sermon was Preached by Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith

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Trinity Lutheran Church

Based on Zechariah 8:2-4, 20-21

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our creator, Amen.

‘Day comes early [in summer] and bids you rise.’ In the yet grey moments of early dawn, a choir of birds breaks into song. There’s dew on the grass, and the kind of clouds in the sky that will burn off by midday. The warmth of the day is an invitation: to dig in the dirt or get a project done; To swim or fish or float or play in the water, any water, any beach, all day.

‘Night [in summer] comes softly and bids you linger.’ The smell of charcoal hangs in the air—mingled with marinated chicken, savory brats, or olive-oil tossed vegetables. A pack of boys on their bikes race down the middle of the street, beach towels or baseball mitts under their arms, on their way home. The rhythm of the neighbor’s sprinklers is heard as they kick on at dusk, as cicadas in their trees and frogs in their marshes fill in the evening’s melody.

Summer. It is not difficult to recognize this season, whose weather and activities stand in such radiant contrast to the other nine months here in Wisconsin. But what of a *heart* that is in summer? How do we recognize and best live into this season in our spiritual lives?

*In hearts summertime, there is an experience of vitality, connectedness, rest. The opposite of winter—where God and friends feel distant and death and darkness close at hand—in the summer of the heart, God and others draw intimately near, light and life surround us. You have energy to spare. Spiritual insight hangs plump from low branches. The heart in summer is a taste of the kingdom of God, a savory morsel of heaven, sweet and brief, where God, fully present, shines light day and night, and that light affects and blesses all those it touches.*¹

Zechariah, the prophet we hear from today, describes the summer of the heart as a city, Jerusalem. He was writing to a people who are returning and rebuilding their lives after decades in exile, prisoners of war. Their hope is that a God who had seemed far, now was finally drawing radically near. As the text says, God is in the city, and when God is at the center, everyone around behaves accordingly. The elderly are able to rest and watch while children play, and adults, from all around, just want to get in on this kingdom living that has somehow become manifest on earth. A city with God at the center is an infectious place. A heart that is in summer, is infectious, too.

When I was 19 years old, after my freshman year in college, I was hired as a camp counselor at Shores of St. Andrew Bible Camp in my hometown of New London, MN. I knew that a season on the lake, in the outdoors, with a bunch of kids would be a fun. I didn’t

¹ Paraphrased from March Buchanan, *Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus Every season of your Heart* (Zondervan, 2010), 113.

know, how spending time in creation, while also daily connecting *to* the Creator in Bible study, worship, and song-- could put my heart into its first true summer it had ever known. Those weeks at camp, I never was so tired and yet so alive. I didn't know what I was doing, so I had to pray, constantly, that I wouldn't mess up and maybe even bless somebody. I heard Christ clearer than I ever had. I could almost see him in others, hear him in the conversations I had. And there was fruit—every week, boys and girls who would thank me and tell me how I had impacted their faith. I was filled with such hope as they left on Fridays, that some of that week would stick with them, as that summer of the heart has forever stuck with me.

A summer of the heart—is beautiful, but also can come with baggage: Nostalgia. It's a part of summer—'part of its lure and magic, a strange tint of melancholy.' Every summer since that first one at camp has had this tint, for me. I guess that's only normal-- mountain top periods of faith by their nature affects us and sticks with us. It's like we taste heaven, then go rummaging in a storage closet, among the clutter of keepsakes and pictures, hoping to get back to that place. And yet, writes Mark Buchanan, "Summer doesn't so much evoke a 'back there' experience. But it jolts and 'up there' one. Calling us not back to a garden we once enjoyed and then lost but to a city we've yet to visit and barely imagined."

A foretaste of the feast to come, a kingdom that is now but not yet. That's summer. What are we to do, when we are blessed to find ourselves in it?

1. Do Enjoy. Play. Rest. Enjoy God and others, without reserve and without apology. Many of us carry a residue of Protestant angst, that makes us feel guilty when we feel good. Yet, we have a Savior whose first miracle was to turn water into wine for no greater reason than that the party might go on. The apostle Paul—whom we read so much of in the New Testament—wrote, "Finally my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!...Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"²

Some day, the glimpses of this time could be like snapshots in time whose residual joy gives us an extra charge, perhaps when we need it most, in a hearts winter. Enjoy Summer.

2. Don't rush: Kingdom living is not hurried. Ever feel like in the calendar season of summer, you rush to fit it all in while the weather is fine? Reunions and weddings and parties and vacations. In a summertime of the heart—when all is flowing with our connection to God and the Spirit—that can be a temptation too. To fit it all in. To say yes to everything we are asked of, whether we are called to it or not. In those moments, God's command is towards Sabbath, to 'be still and know'; to let a two letter word be your salvation: 'n-o'. In the summer of your heart, let yourself slow down, put less on the calendar, and enjoy the peace, shalom, in which the presence of God is so vivid and real that anxiety doesn't stand a chance. "That peace is summer's birthright and winters lifeblood." Slow down. Soak in a summer of the heart.³

² Buchanan, 128.

³ Ibid.

3. Delight in Abundance: in the summertime of the heart, God's blessings are clear and many and that fills you with joy. It can also cause a problem. The zucchini problem. At the peak of summer, there's so much around—you can't give the stuff away because your neighbor too, didn't pick theirs on time and now have half a dozen 4 lb monsters, and so it is easy to be picky—taking that abundance for granted, even letting it go to waste. And so a summertime caution is to not take the zucchini for granted. To delight in and continue to treasure the treasure that you are experiencing in summer. For consumerism—the sin always around the corner in our culture—will try to convince you to even in summer chase what you lack instead of enjoy what you have. But we are called to a mode of living in summer that instead of craving and complaining, is about giving and thanksgiving. Delight. Give thanks in summer.

4. Finally, Continue to Hydrate: Resting and playing—are well and good in summer. But one thing any coach will tell you—it applies to sports as well as spiritual life-- drink enough water! That is, nourish your life of prayer and the Word. I wondered why it was, for many years, that when I would go home to be with my family over Christmas or spring break that I would be so blessed and yet so crabby at the same time. Well, family dynamics aside, I realized that I would come into the abundance of my family—hugs and good food and comfortable surroundings of home—and forget to pray, set aside my Bible. Summer's abundance can seduce us into a spiritual complacency. The lake brims and is so refreshing we fail to notice that the river that feeds it has dwindled to a trickle."⁴ As the psalmist says, our souls thirst for the living God, and ask-- even in summer—'when can we meet with God' in prayer and worship, service and praise.

Summer is a foretaste of the feast to come. The kingdom of God come near, for a season. And the beauty is, we see it, participate in it, and even build it up! When hearts summer comes to you, recognize it, enjoy it, slow down, soak it up, delight in the abundance, continue to connect to the Word. When you are in summer, you shine. Others will be drawn to that light—some in winter might need the warmth. Bask in the season. Bless others by it. Thank God for it. Amen.

⁴ Ibid, 136.