

Montezuma's Well

Preached FCCW on August 11, 2019

Hebrews 11:1-3, 1-16

More than a thousand years ago, before any European settlers had migrated to the North American continent, a people known as the Sinagua made their way up from what is now Mexico into the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. The Spanish translation of the name Sinagua means “without water.” Something they were not destined to be for very long. As they crossed the dry grasslands of Arizona they stumbled upon a lush oasis, concealed within the depths of a massive sinkhole with a span of 125 yards from rim to rim.

The place came to be known much later as Montezuma's Well. That name is only half accurate, since Montezuma would not even be born until centuries after the Sinagua made their discovery. But the “Well” part of the name fits it perfectly. Because the bottom of this sinkhole is a 55-foot-deep pool fed by underground springs, so that its depth remains fairly constant even during severe droughts. So, these wandering, “without water” Sinagua, built cliff-dwellings into the walls of Montezuma's Well and created a community literally centered upon an ever-flowing, life-giving, source of water.

They may be remembered as the Sinagua “without water” people, but at Montezuma's Well they became Conagua. The “with water” people. The Yavapai tribe, who claim that the Sinagua are their ancestors, still consider the Well a sacred site, believing it is the place through which they emerged as a people into the world. After a century or so of stability, the Sinagua people inexplicably abandoned Montezuma's Well and faded from history. There are theories but little certainty about what happened to the Sinagua culture. But the well-preserved ruins of their cliff-buildings and artifacts remain to this day as a window into their way of life.

Not that many centuries before the Sinagua people came into being, the biblical Epistle to the Hebrews was written, giving us a window into a struggling community of Jewish followers of Jesus. Like the Sinagua, their ancestors trekked through waterless deserts and wilderness in search of a homeland. While the waters of Montezuma's Well literally served as the center of the Sinagua settlement there, this Jewish/Christian community's existence revolved around a different kind of water. Through the waters of baptism, they had emerged into a new life; the life of Christian discipleship. But now, their passion was fading and their faith was growing weak. The numbers of those gathering for worship were dwindling and the depth of commitment by others was wearing thin.

We can't identify what specifically was causing an erosion of the faith that bound them together in community with any more certainty than we can explain why the Sinagua abandoned Montezuma's Well. But we can recognize some of the challenges that they faced in

the struggles of churches today. The challenge of maintaining itself as a cohesive community of faith is one that the Church continues to face in our time.

One of the approaches that the author of Hebrews took to try and rejuvenate their weary spirits was to remind his readers that the Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon. That the very definition of faith is “the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.” The Epistle to the Hebrews held up Abraham--the forefather of the Hebrew people--as the prime model of an enduring faithfulness. Abraham had obediently left his home for a place he had never laid eyes on, with nothing to go on but God’s promise of a land that would be God’s gift to him and his descendants. And, even though Abraham and his wife Sarah were elderly beyond child bearing—“as good as dead,” is how the author of Hebrews so indelicately describes them—God even promised them that they would have descendants numbering “as many as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as grains of sand by the seashore.”

Based solely on his faith in God’s promises, without explicit details or directions to guide him, Abraham set off into the unknown. And although he personally would not live to see the complete fulfillment of those promises, without those first faithful steps, there might never have been a Jewish people and therefore, at least theoretically, no such person as Jesus of Nazareth.

The kind of faith that Abraham modeled when he set out for an unnamed land not knowing where he was going or what awaited him there, remains something to strive for. From time to time **we** need to be reminded that we are still a “people of the water” of baptism. The waters of baptism are something we can see, touch and taste. But the significance of the water that we experience with our physical senses is the assurance it provides of the unseen reality to which it points. The unseen reality of God’s grace that can only be experienced through faith.

When Baptism is entered into intentionally, thoughtfully and prayerfully, it signifies an act of faith in the intentions God has for one’s life. It is a function of confidence in the truths about God that have been passed down from one generation to another. It is an expression of sacred trust that the promises of God will be realized even if the fulfillment of those promises lies just beyond our range of vision. That’s very different from the definition of faith that many people go by, who see faith as a kind of currency we use to purchase favors from God. Like a rewards card upon which we accrue points and cash them in for special treatment from God.

True faith actually begins with the assurance that God **already wants** to give us good things, and the desire to follow where God leads which is the only way to experience God’s goodness. Thankfully, the fulfillment of our hopes does not ultimately rest on our ability to keep faith, but on the faithfulness of God in bringing things into being that God has prepared for us.

On the walls of my office there hang a few framed diplomas and certificates. They are just pieces of paper under glass. But each one points beyond the letters on the paper to important milestones on the faith journey upon which God has led me to this day. Each one conjures memories of real people, places and experiences.

On a shelf nearby, rests a less conspicuous document. In a simple, unvarnished wood frame, its paper yellowed from the 62 years that have passed since it was printed and signed, sits the original certificate of my baptism. I keep it there as a reminder, that without that one defining event--of which I have absolutely no recollection, but in which I have the utmost conviction--none of the other mementos of fulfilled hopes that hang above it would ever have come to pass.

Whether we are baptized as a child or an adult, baptism marks the moment that we emerge into the world as a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. A new creation. A conagua (with water) child of God. And ever after, our lives, relationships, and choices are centered upon that water. Just as the writer of Hebrews looked back to the faith of ancestors who went before, when our children are baptized the responsibility is ours, as parents, godparents, and as a community of faith, to be models for them of faithful living. May we live out our baptismal faith well, so that those who follow in our footsteps might be encouraged by the legacy that we have left to them.

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