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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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## Say It With Psalms

### 7. Ditches & Dry Land: A Stewardship Sunday Celebration

#### Psalm 66:1-10 The Message

All together now - applause for God!

Sing songs to the tune of his glory,

Set glory to the rhythms of his praise.

Say of God, "We've never seen anything like him!"

When your enemies see you in action, they slink off like scolded dogs.

The whole earth falls to its knees - it worships you, sings to you,

Can't stop enjoying your name and fame.

Take a good look at God's wonders - they'll take your breath away.

He converted sea to dry land; travelers crossed the river on foot.

Now isn't that cause for a song?

Ever sovereign in his high tower, he keeps his eye on the godless nations.

Rebels don't dare raise a finger against him.

Bless our God, O peoples! Give him a thunderous welcome!

Didn't he set us on the road to life? Didn't he keep us out of the ditch?

*"He converted sea to dry land.... Didn't he keep us out of the ditch?"* In the early years of World War II, the United States Army wanted to build a road around the northwest part of Hawaii's island of Kauai, a road that would make the Army's base on the western shore easier to get to from the north shore, and which would allow, for the first time, circumnavigation of the island by motor vehicle. But they didn't count on what was in their way: Mt. Waialeale and the Aalakai Swamp. You see, those spots have the second-highest annual rainfall on the planet, 460 inches per year. That's over thirty-eight **feet** of rain, an amount that would fill this sanctuary to the ceiling and then some. The Army first tried a plank road. The planks were sucked into the swamp. Then it tried bringing in loads of gravel to build up the road. The gravel simply endlessly disappeared never to be seen again. In fact, one of the stories from that attempt says

that one of the bulldozer drivers suddenly found his bulldozer sinking and he had only moments to flee to safety whereupon the bulldozer sank never to be seen again. The driver's response - cleaned up a bit for this morning - was "My life flashed before my eyes and I saw everything so very clearly." Here is a man who, with the Psalmist, was no doubt grateful for "dry land."

Another story: It was in the early '90s. I was a fairly new private pilot with maybe one-hundred hours or so in the air and I was a one-third partner in a Cessna 150 two-seater plane. We hangered that plane at small, rural airport which had a narrow 2400 foot asphalt runway with a grass runway beside it. I had taken the plane up one night and after a brief flight decided to try what I'd heard local long-time pilots describe as "The Waffle House Approach" - find the Waffle House at Exit 90 on Interstate 65 and then fly a heading of 210 degrees straight to the runway. It works. But for a low-time, over-cocky, private pilot on a night flight it was a dumb move. You see, the reason that pilots fly patterns around a runway before landing, especially at night, is that that way you get several standard visual reference points as to whether your speed and altitude are correct. But on a straight-in approach to a runway with no glideslope lights, you have none of those checks. And I came in too fast. I landed but that 2100 feet that looked long by day didn't at night and I didn't have the experience or judgment to just slam the throttle and go around. No, I stood on the brakes, watching the end of the runway coming fast and then the plane was off the runway but finally stopped before the ditch a few feet beyond. And what I remember oh-so-clearly (although I'll not tell you what I said because I couldn't clean it up enough) is the utter clarity and beauty of that moment - the trees against the Indiana moonlight, the dazzling luminescence of

the twinkling stars, the fragrance of the newly-plowed dirt in the fields nearby, the sheer wonder of life. And I too could have said with the Psalmist “Didn't he keep us out of the ditch?”

Psychologists call such moments “liminal” moments. The word comes from the Latin for “threshold” and is related to the word “limit” as well. Liminal moments are moments in which you seem to be beyond your ordinary limits, on or even over the threshold of a new way of experiencing life. They often occur, to return to the Psalmist’s imagery, in either those “dry land” or “ditch” moments of our lives, moments when life changes utterly and profoundly, hopefully for the good but not always. Each of you has had your own liminal moments, your own experiences of both dry land and ditches: that first time your newborn child cries and the clarity and newness of that moment and all that it portends takes you somewhere you’ve not been before. Or, at the other end of life, the death of a loved one is reported by so many people to be a moment which is strange surreal, and everything is both utterly clear and utterly different. Or your car spins on the ice and your life literally flashes before your eyes. Or you watch the sun rise or set from high up in the mountains or on the ocean’s shore and you are transported to a completely new appreciation of the beauty of life and creation.

You might be wondering how or why such reflections about ditches and dry land and liminal experiences relate to this Sunday when we are having our annual stewardship celebration of your financial and prayer commitments for 2017. Well, in a word, ***giving*** can also be a life-transforming liminal moment; ***giving*** can change your life and mine in profound and wonderful ways. ***Giving*** can change our perspective and

show us new things about ourselves and our world. Let me illustrate from a perhaps unlikely source, novelist Stephen King who shares this story about how his own moment in a ditch changed him. It's long, but it's worth the telling:

A couple of years ago I found out what "you can't take it with you" means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.

And how was that ditch-moment also a life-changing moment? Well, King goes on to reflect in this way:

...We come in [to life] naked and broke. We may be dressed [up] when we go out, but we're just as broke.... All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade—all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors..... So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan, anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on....

And then King strikes a powerful chord with these words:

Now imagine a nice little backyard, surrounded by a board fence. [On] the picnic table [are] fried chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, a chocolate cake for dessert.

And standing around the fence, looking in, are emaciated men and women, starving children. They are silent. They only watch.

That family at the picnic is us; that backyard is America, and those hungry people on the other side of the fence, watching us sit down to eat, include far too

much of the rest of the world: Asia and the subcontinent; countries in Central Europe, where people live on the edge from one harvest to the next; South America, where they're burning down the rain forests; and most of all, Africa, where AIDS is pandemic and starvation is a fact of life. It's not a pretty picture, but we have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we're going to take it with us? Please.

And then King concludes with these poetic words:

Giving isn't about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It's for the giver.... A life of giving—not just money, but time and spirit—repays. It helps us remember that we may be going out broke, but right now we're doing O.K. Right now we have the power to do great good for others and for ourselves. So I ask you to begin giving, and to continue as you begin. I think you'll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had, and did more good than you ever dreamed.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, from this chancel, you have heard stories from folks like Don Sarton, and Bill Robertson, and Betsy Straka, and scores of church members just like you about how, indeed, giving changed their lives. In the last few years, my wife Barbara and I have felt that too; we have rejoiced in the clarity that our age and station in life has brought us about how blessed we are to be able to give more and more of our resources, and about how much less “stuff” we really need. More and more these folks have found themselves agreeing with the Psalmist's words, “Take a good look at God's wonders - they'll take your breath away” – and those wonders become ever-more

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Feb/16/twelve-giving-stories/>

clear as the opportunity and ability to give is indeed itself a life-changing, liminal moment.

And yet you and I also know that amidst the breathtaking wonders of God's world are also examples of the horrific and the hellacious and the seemingly hopeless: the one billion-plus people in our world who lack access to clean water or even the most primitive of sanitation which leads to debilitating disease and even death; the one in five American children who spend their weekends hungry; those pictures of the bodies of dead toddlers washed ashore as their families only sought the same thing we want for our families; the utter devastation of too many lands like Haiti where earthquake and hurricane have left destruction beyond words; the several hundred of your sisters and brothers in Colorado Springs who each night sleep in fear under bridges and in bushes; the folks outside our doorsteps who do not know that God is love and are scarred from being judged and abraded in the name of a God whom we thankfully do not recognize; the precious schoolgirls in Kenya who continue to be roused from their homes and sexually assaulted for sport. The wonders are very real, but so are the horrors. And you need to know this: the money that you give to First Christian Church, the financial commitments you have made or will make this morning for 2017, seek to address all these things. Ten percent of your giving is dedicated to mission beyond our doors. A goodly portion of your giving makes it possible to proclaim in worship Sunday by Sunday that God is a God of grace and welcome and love for all people. Some of your giving supports the gift of beauty through music to the community in an era in which those arts that help expand our imaginations and empathies are less and less funded. And some of your giving goes to maintain this place as a safe place, a place of

welcome and holy wondering, a place where people can come home to a gracious community and to the very heart of God. I could go on and on, and you could add to that list, but simply know that if your own liminal moments are leading you to want to give more, know that your church will use those gifts well and to the glory of God.

Tuesday was a liminal moment for millions of people in our nation. Some felt like they had driven into a ditch. Others felt like they were once again on dry land. Those feelings are real and they are important and they are an index of just how much we care about our country and want the best for it. But clearly there is deep, deep disagreement about what that liminal moment means and portends for the future. People are elated or angry. People are confused or confident. Millions of people are flocking back to their Facebook echo chambers and one wonders how in the world we can move forward, how in the world we can be the reconcilers that God has called us to be, following the one “who is our Peace,” the One who has reconciled the world to Himself.

But I want you to notice something: notice where YOU are this morning. **You** did not rouse yourself, drink your coffee, get dressed and then drive to the county Democratic headquarters. **You** did not take yourself and your family to the Republican headquarters. And if neither candidate represented ditch or dry land for you, you still brought yourself **here** and not to Starbucks. You are here and not somewhere else this morning because you do believe that regardless of who is President or Senator or Representative or County Commissioner, what finally is most important, most decisive, most life-changing is the fact that Christ is our Savior and God is our God. We are here and not somewhere else this morning because we want our time of worship itself to be

a dry land perch from which indeed our perspective can be changed, our hopes reinforced, our spirits reminded of who is our neighbor. We are here and not somewhere else this morning because we want to know the Living God, we want to be reminded that we have both opportunity and obligation to offer hope and safety to those who are living in fear. We are here and not somewhere else this morning because we do want to give to something that is bigger than ourselves, that is worthy, that will assuage the hurts of the world and make its wonders shine ever more brightly. We are here; thanks be to God, we are here. May our worship indeed be a liminal moment that changes us and may we see more clearly the joy that our giving can bring both the world and ourselves. May it be so. Amen.