

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent Communion Service, November 27, 2011  
Lessons: Psalm 42:1-11 and Philippians 4:4-9

## SALT LICK

In last Monday's *Upper Room* devotional, a horse owner tells of the mare that, having given birth to a healthy foal, began pawing the earth and eating dirt. Something had to be done. If the horse kept eating dirt, she would develop severe stomach problems and might die. Why would a horse start eating dirt? The owner was baffled, but a friend with more horse experience provided the answer and the solution. The pregnancy and birth had depleted the salt in the mare's body. As soon as the owner provided a mineral block, the horse began licking it instead of eating dirt, and her body's need for salt was satisfied.

Parallels to human life are not hard to find. The horse felt her need but did not understand her craving and so she sought relief in a course of action that was harmful and potentially self-destructive. Change "horse" to "person," and fill in the blanks. A child feeling neglected will act up to get attention, even if that attention proves unpleasant to receive. Adults who have lost their jobs sometimes start drinking too much or overindulging in some other escape to "take their minds off" the painful feelings of defeat and loss of personal worth they don't know how to handle. Why does it become so much easier to inflame crowds to unreasoning rage and blind hatred during a recession? The feelings boil over. A man kept standing in line at the checkout uses his credit card to pay, but as instructed, the young checker asks to see his driver's license to verify his identity as the cardholder. The tiny spark of shame affected at the challenge to his power to use his own credit card ignites his anger, and instead of taking a few seconds to show his license, he explodes into a senseless rant about undocumented immigrants. Teenage girls craving love and a sense of themselves as people who matter to someone try to satisfy their need by having babies. The list is endless because what ailed that horse ails people in countless ways. We feel our needs but cannot identify them correctly or, perhaps, do not know how to get the emotional or spiritual salt even if we do realize what we need. So, as the mare pawed the ground and ate dirt, we seek relief in ways that cause additional problems.

Thankfully, God does understand and so looks upon our self-defeating behavior with compassion rather than disgust. Experienced, understanding parents realize why their child is acting up for attention, and so they respond to the child's need rather than to the disruptive behavior itself. Unfortunately, the cure is not so simple for older children or adults, whose reactions to affronts to their pride or the obstruction of their desires have hardened into their

personalities and become habitual. For this reason, I keep saying in sermons that this thing we call “salvation” involves much more than just the assurance that we will go to heaven when we die. Responding to God’s love and mercy personified for us, in suffering and shame, in Jesus Christ amounts to far more than just believing the right things or feeling “saved” in the emotion of a religious experience. Salvation includes deep-down liberation from our many and complex habits of eating dirt – that is, of responding to our needs in harmful, self-defeating, and potentially destructive ways. While it is true that absolute deliverance and complete healing may not be possible in this world where the struggle goes on, Christ is present to us now, and so our deliverance can start here and now and we can be brought out into freedom, and our healing can begin and progress. Our habits of mind and behavior can be changed – not in the blink of an eye, as though by magic, but in our real day-by-day lives as we respond to God’s love and mercy.

It would have done no good whatsoever to have punished the horse for eating dirt. The owner had to provide a salt lick. Taking away the false solution without meeting the need will not provide a cure. No more will telling enraged, hate-filled people their words make no sense and their behavior is shameful work to cure the shame and frustration that already lie at the source of their anger. That’s like trying to put out a fire by dousing it with gasoline. In what passes for our national conversation, we need to stop mocking our opponents, stop slandering them, and stop listening to demagogues who spout the kind of hatred and rage – the kind of dirt – that appeals to us but gets us all worked up and further divides us from each other.

Every day we make choices, mostly choices that seem quite small. What do we feed on? What do we take into our minds and bodies – fear, anger, and resentment or trust, hope, and compassion? Paul urges us to fill our minds with the things that belong to the grace of God and to focus on God’s promises – for us, for human societies, and for the world. He’s not telling us to escape into a fantasy where every little kindness will be met with great gratitude and warm responses. Paul, who has been beaten by a mob and left for dead and who is writing from prison, has no such rose-colored glasses. He understands the human capacity for evil and people’s delight in cruelty, but he holds to the promises of God that hold him to hope.

Advent is the season of hope. It is our yearly reminder that God has neither finished with us nor given up on this world. So we need to see where in our lives we have been pawing the ground and eating dirt – nursing grudges, feeding our anger or resentment, indulging ourselves in thoughts or habits that turn us away from God’s grace and from respect for ourselves and others as people God loves.

Hope opens our minds (and, in time, our hearts) to a new and different vision of life and its possibilities. Because our hope comes from God, it will not fail, but because we ourselves need to be changed to fit the hope, our salvation is no quick and easy matter. We have acquired quite a taste for some of the dirt that fails to nourish us and our lives, and it may not look or taste like dirt at all but like fine food for privileged people. So, let me offer you and myself an Advent question. How can we go each day to the salt lick instead of pawing the ground? What can we do to feed our minds, hearts, and habits of living with the hope Jesus Christ gives us in God's redemptive love? Here we have Communion in which we take into ourselves symbolically and sacramentally the love and mercy of God, but how do we feed out there on what is spiritually edifying? Paul urges us to find what is nourishing, what ennobles life, what builds mutual respect and kindness, what lifts us up and out of bitterness, shame, bigotry, and discouragement, and he says, "Think about these things," and God will bring us step by step into a peace – a healing and wholeness – greater and deeper than we can now imagine. Amen.