

Our City

I have been thinking of green pastures, still waters, the valley and the shadow of late. Psalm 23. The Psalm of David.

I have been wondering about various phrases within David's Psalm for the best part of two weeks. I took my granddaughter Leila and daughter Leona fishing two weekends ago to a mountain lake where Leona had learned to fly-fish. After a steady to steep three-mile climb, my heart sank as I looked at the mere puddle of what used to be. I had little idea that the drought we are experiencing was this bad. The inviting depths of 20 years ago had dwindled to mere feet where the bottom was visible even in the deepest of spots. That there were still a few small fish visible gave a shadow of hope, though the death of their much bigger kin was just as evident. Although the girls and I had a great time, the fishing for me was disheartening. The bigger picture has me more than just a little worried about what the future holds for eight year old Leila.

Make no mistake, after the Idaho Ground Water Association meeting I attended on August 14 and what I have seen since, there is little doubt in my mind that changes are coming. As Sally and I drove to the Willamette Valley of Oregon last week, scorched earth passed by my window mile after mile. "OK," I thought, "Eastern Oregon is supposed to be dry and subject to fire." But, the dryness continued clear to the coast. As we sat in a very nice city park in Chehalem for lunch, the houses surrounding it were of the vintage of those found on Falls and Tyhee between Roosevelt and Polk. Very neat, tidy, and well cared for except for their lawns. The lawns, grasses, and many trees lay dead from the lack of water. Water from "normal" rainfall. Deciduous trees along the freeways have leaves burned brown from the extreme heat wafting off the asphalt. It is the hottest and driest year of record for the area. The grapes are ripening too early, the alcohol levels of most wines will be overly high because of increased sugar levels caused by the excessive heat, and the 2015 vintage is generally anticipated to be poor.

As I sat last night at our B&B in a bit of a funk I surfed the net as Sally watched an old movie. I googled "winter weather predictions for 2015 -2016." The strongest El Nino in 50 years is building in the Pacific. It is uncertain where eastern Idaho and western Wyoming will fall beneath the jet stream as the warm waters of the Pacific push moisture inland over the course of the next eight months. But, the Pacific Northwest is predicted to be 33% to 50% drier and 33% to 60% warmer. The lake where Leila learned to fish may well be completely dry next year. The forests of central Idaho to the Pacific coast that are spared from fire this year will face another year of certain peril and devastation. As the sun burns through the smoky haze of dawn out my window, another fire has started off to the southwest threatening homes, vast tracts of agricultural lands, vineyards and orchards. The smoke casts its own shadow of death.

The folks in the room next to ours are retired and from Kansas City, Missouri. They came out here for vacation and to forget everything. They said it was working as they stared at the smoke coming from the west. I am happy for them. Unfortunately it is not the way I am wired. I worry about a lot of things, many of which I have no control over. I worry about where the jet stream this winter will push moisture up from the south. Will it make it to Two Ocean Pass in the Bridger Teton Wilderness and the headwaters of the Snake River? It is not expected to make it as far north as the Lost and Wood River Valleys which at least used to help

feed the Upper Snake River Aquifer; an aquifer that a vast number of central and eastern Idaho farmers are dependent upon. Which means the 240,000 acre feet of water that are to be reduced from pumping, and that I wrote about last week, may be even harder to come by.

Now, I don't know what the future holds, but I try and pay attention to what's going on around me. The "nature of things" seems to be changing. Are we as a species the sole cause of the change? Probably not. Have we contributed? My opinion is that "we" have. For whatever reason "we" as a species tend to be our own worst enemy as we continue to walk through the valley and find a want for green grass and still water and wonder where they have gone and why. Why so many don't look within to find the answer is a mystery to me. The free will we possess is no less wondrous and mysterious. That we continue to ignore its effects on that around us is like the lake practically devoid of water; disheartening.

On matters closer to home but no less troubling to me I was given a letter two weeks ago by long time City Water and Waste Water employee Lee Love. It was his letter of resignation. Lee has accepted a better paying job at Lamb Weston and I am happy for him and his family; greener pastures are always welcome. He will be missed. Lee is the second in four months to leave the City's employ and the Water and Waste Water Departments; the other was Marcus Kettle. I have written on this topic previously and while folks don't enter into public service to get rich, they do expect to make a decent living. In my tenure as Mayor the City Council and I have done the best we could for our employees with the funds afforded in our budget. But, it will never be what private industry can pay.

A case can be made that a municipality could pay more to employees of enterprise operations because those departments (water, waste water and sanitation) are funded out of fees collected for a service, not tax dollars. And, to be fair to those employees they are required to gain degrees of certification in order to perform their duties in clean water distribution, waste water collections and handling. It is a lengthy and time intensive process requiring additional education, training, and testing. While different than our police officers, they perform functions no less vital to the overall health and well-being of our entire community.

I will be working with our departmental superintendents over the course of the winter to develop a pay scale based on an individual's responsibility, merit, and longevity. Several cities in the region use similar systems so we may not have to invent the wheel. A path needs to be found that will allow us to pay our employees what they are truly worth to all of us. The cost of continually rehiring and training is very costly and inefficient. I look forward to the challenge it poses and more importantly the stability it will bring to our City.

If you have been in town lately, you might have noticed our Street Department has been hard at work supervising and completing various projects from painting crosswalks and other street appointments to setting grade for curb, gutter and asphalt on Fairway below Oregon Trail and on the lower blocks of Madison in our industrial area. Thank you gentlemen!

I dearly hope that things aren't as dark and gloomy as I sometimes see them. Yet, it is impossible for me not to recognize the need for change. I long for green pastures and still water for all. I know the path to them maybe be shadowed yet it must be traveled.

Until next week...