**7 Easter, May 12, 2013; Acts 16: 16-34; Ps 97; John 17: 20-26; The Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

The scene is a cabin in the forest by a lake. I am there on the rustic, pine-needle laden front porch in an old chair next to my mother. On this mother's day, I am reminded of the many hours I have spent on that front porch hearing my mother tell me stories of the old days. Do you have a front porch on your house? Most older homes have good size front porches, but houses built in recent years seemed not to have porches. Porches have practical functions: they are places to visit with family and friends on a hot summer day. Porches also have another function: to prepare you to enter what is behind the front door. This preparation might be a physical one: removing your muddy shoes before going inside the house. This preparation is also be a spiritual thing: preparing your heart and mind for where you are headed, for what is behind the front door.

We here at St. John's Episcopal Church have two areas that fulfill the functions of porches: at the front of the church we have what is called a "*narthex*," which is the entry way to the church. And on the side, we have the hallway. "*Narthex*" is defined as the entrance area, located at the far end from the church's main [altar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altar); it is not considered part of the church proper. The word "narthex" is an old Latin word meaning "*a place for penitents"* those not eligible for admittance into the general congregation (those who are not baptized, sinners). The narthex often contained the Baptismal Font. so that infants or adults could be baptized there before entering the church, and also reminding people of their baptisms as they gathered to worship. This is why our Baptismal font is there at our church entrance. In our fast-paced lives, we don't often stop and prepare before we enter a space; we don't have front porch time before we enter our workplaces, stores, etc. Maybe you have never thought about pausing mentally to prepare your heart and mind to be receptive to God before you come in the church. The narthex, porch, and font are wonderful reminders; just those few moments of silence before entering helps put us into an expectant, quiet, spiritually open mental state. Entering this holy space, where generations of people before us have prayed, worshiped, and served, is a privilege. Prayers said here today and in generations past lift us up as we face our challenges; many mothers have prayed for their children here. This is space that is "*set apart"*  to strengthen us on our journey. We are offered a new beginning when we enter these doors.

This new beginning is all about relationship, our relationship with Jesus. Jesus is THE *Alpha* and *Omega,* the beginning and the end. *Alpha and Omega* are the first and last letters in the Greek Alphabet. Jesus said in this morning's reading from Revelation, "***I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end....the bright morning star...let everyone who hears say "come" And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift...Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"*** This is an invitation to enter anew into a relationship with Jesus, which is the way to knowing God. And as we share the gift of the ***water of life***, ***the bright morning star***, we together become more than we are as individuals: we become transformed by Christ. We heard Jesus praying for this in our Gospel this morning, that ***God's love may be known by us through Jesus***!

This fantastic invitation is free for the taking. How can people say no to this invitation? We here today do not understand those who say "no. There are many who bemoan that there are not more people attending church today. "**What are WE doing wrong**?" we ask ourselves. Is this the right question to ask? Actually, no, because this question is we-focused, instead of God-focused. When we are functioning out of our own strength and ideas then we are the center -- but we are supposed to function with Christ as the center, not us! Our Psalm puts God into perspective for us today: "***the mountains melt like wax at the presence of the Lord...the heavens declare His righteousness...bow down before Him...rejoice."*** Ah, it is about God doing His work in the world in us and through us. It seems like a subtle difference, but it is significant. So, the question instead is "**What does God want us to do in the world, filled with His love?"**

St. Paul clearly was asking this particular question in the saga we heard in our reading from Acts 16 this morning. Paul was in Philippi, where he brought the message of Christ to the people and started the church there. He, like us, was looking to bring more people to Christ. First, he encountered a girl who had gotten mixed up with the occult. Paul prayed to God for help and guidance, and God answered -- Paul prayed over the girl and she turned away from the dark side and towards God. But, oh my, this caused all kinds of problems for Paul--he was attacked and put into prison. Where was God in this? Oh, God was mightily present and this was all part of His plan! Paul couldn't see it then, but sure saw it later! Paul kept praying to God as he lay injured in prison, and his prayer took the form of singing hymns. Boom! God did something big! An earthquake happened causing the prison doors to open and Paul to be free of his chains. The prison guard saw all of this, and was despondent figuring he was going to be killed by the Roman government for allowing all of this to happen -- but Paul prayed again and called after the jailer. The jailer was transformed after witnessing all of this, and became a believer in Jesus as Lord. Then, the jailer took Paul and his companions home, nursed them back to health, and Paul baptized the jailer and his whole household. An amazing story! God was in the midst of this whole situation. This happened because Paul recognized that the "***water of life***" was His source of direction, because Paul paused and listened to God before taking a step. Paul was so connected to Christ that he was guided every step of the way as he did God's work in the world. God's plan for us is the same.

So, back to the front porch and the narthex. From this day onward, spend time with God on the front porch of your life. Pause a few moments, before you take a step, to give yourself to the Lord and ask for guidance for every decision and action of your day. Then wait and see. The Lord is in your midst. Let us pray. Lord, thank you for the gift of Yourself and Your guidance through our lives. Thank You for inviting us to come and receive Your living water. Help us not be distracted from You by the busyness of our lives. Teach us to listen, and trust You before we take a step in our lives, as we serve you in the world around us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.