

March 13, 2022

The Second Sunday in Lent

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During our lives, most of us will likely experience moments of crisis. Moments or situations that can stop us in our tracks, leaving us uncertain of how to respond, or where to turn for help. Moments that can overtake us, causing fear and worry to arise within us, and that might cause us to doubt, to lose hope. Sometimes our crises are personal: a death in the family, a life-threatening health diagnosis, concerns about money and finances, struggles with work, or family. Sometimes the heaviness of the world overwhelms us, impacting our ability to sleep and eat, causing us sadness, anxiety and impacting our ability to function well.

Each of us responds to challenge differently. Some of us will attack issues head on, doing everything in our power to take control of the situation and to protect ourselves or those we love from harm and suffering. Others of us may first need to retreat, to seek a place of safety where we can take time to process our feelings, reactions, and emotions. Still others of us may choose to turn our heads and walk away, feeling that this is the most life-giving and preserving choice.

In Psalm 27, the psalm of trust is prayed from a situation of severe crisis – what the speaker calls the time when “evildoers assail me”, or as found in Psalm 46 is named as a time when “waters roar and foam and the mountains tremble.” What is clear in these psalms is that life in God’s creation—in the world—is not safe. Clear and present dangers faced the psalmists, just as they face us in our world today.

We find Jesus making his way through Samaria and other towns, heading ultimately to Jerusalem. He has been preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons – all actions which demonstrate God’s power, and reveal him as the Son of God, the one sent to save and protect God’s people. Along the way, he has faced resistance. Jesus speaks with God-given authority, unwilling to conform to the powers of the religious establishment. He attracts followers and advocates, as well as adversaries and enemies, some who are said to seek his life.

The Jewish religious leaders have come to check him out, to witness for themselves who he is, or who he says he is. While some engage Jesus with curiosity and openness; others of them find Jesus’ words, actions and persona so confronting that their only response is one of defense and condemnation.

They ask questions like:

- In Luke 5:2 – They say of what they have witnessed:  
Who is this speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?
- In Luke 5:36, they ask him, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”
- Chapter 6:2, again they question him, “Why are you doing on the Sabbath what is not lawful?”

Jesus’ words and actions seem to confront. With authority and wisdom, Jesus speaks to Torah, but in action and practice, He challenges rules and expectations of the Jewish community and even of Rome – rules which define their religious and political lives and allows those in power to maintain their positions. Jesus senses it is not safe. Perhaps Herod does seek his life? Or perhaps it is the Pharisees seeking to silence him? What Jesus knows for sure is the purpose for which he has come, and he is committed to see it to its end.

How shocked might we be to encounter a self-proclaimed Messiah in the center of our valley, proclaiming God’s Word and the forgiveness of sins, but also pointing to where we fall short as a church. Even though we know we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we might not appreciate this itinerate preacher’s implication that our self-interest exceeds our care of the marginalized and oppressed. We might feel

compelled to put said pastor under a microscope, examining him closely to see if we can find cracks in his message. And then we, like the Pharisees, might try to do whatever we can to discredit him, to protect ourselves and our power.

Those in positions of power and authority often will do whatever it takes to protect their own interests, sometimes at the expense of human life. This was true of the empiric and religious powers in Jerusalem, and we see it today across the globe as Russia and its allies vie for control of Ukraine. We, who follow the way of the cross and subscribe to Jesus' promise of peace may find ourselves deep in distress. As bombs are dropped and tanks roll, fear and anxiety arise within us. As innocent civilians are killed and millions seek refuge in neighboring countries, we feel sorrow, helpless to help, and our hearts break. As the choice to attain worldly power through violence and destruction again takes precedence over God's way of justice and peace, and relationship, in our despair we may cry out, "How Long, o Lord?" The spoken threat of armies and war in today's psalm may discomfort us, all too real. We may ask, where is God in all of this?

In the midst of our crisis responses, Jesus reminds us of God's shelter, and of his desire to protect his own. The Psalmist shows us what it can look like to turn in trust to God, the God who dispels our fears. Yet, if the fear and anxiety within us doesn't quell; if it doesn't settle, the Psalmist gives us permission to acknowledge how we feel, and words to speak. Like the psalmist, we may recall an earlier time when we trusted in God, and God did not abandon us.

Initially, the psalmist turns to God in trust, with praise. "Though armies should encamp against me; And though war should rise up against me, Yet my heart shall not be afraid; yet will I put my trust in him." In times when we are facing danger or threat, or the worst possible challenge we can imagine, affirmations can help. Diagnosed with cancer in his teens, Robert found strength in the first verse of Psalm 27 "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" Praying these words somehow gave him the power to stand against cancer's power, and to claim his fearlessness, rather than succumb to fear. When his cancer recurred in his late 20's, it was in these words that he once again found strength and courage. And when cancer reared its head again, this time in his brother's leukemia, together the two called upon verse one as an affirmation of their trust in God, and God's goodness.

While the psalmist stands strong in his rejection of fear, and his reliance and trust upon God in the first half of the psalm, there is a shift in the second half, as if to say, "Well, you know God, actually, I am afraid. I am afraid of enemies, and war, and disease, and violence, and destruction. You have called me to seek your face, and so, I will seek you. I will trust you. So, don't abandon me. Don't give up on me."

Are these not the prayers of our hearts? Are these not what we, too, in times of adversity and illness, war and division, seek from the God we love? Our hearts seek to behold God's face, to bask in the beauty of the Lord; to be protected; to be saved; to know and believe in every moment that we, as Psalm 17:8 tells us, are the apple of God's eye and are protected under the shadow of God's wing, a place of refuge and protection. Is not our prayer for peace on earth?

When the world is hard to hold and the challenges and burdens of our lives overwhelm us, let us remember God's promise to those who put their trust in the Lord: that we are under God's protection and care, and that no matter how absent God may seem, God has not abandoned us. Beyond our lived experience and beyond what we can see and reason, lies God's promise that we, who believe, may always find our strength, our courage, our hope, and our protection under God's wings of love.