

Secret Places

November 29, 2015

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Psalm 25:1-10

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God, my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me for you are good, O Lord. Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.

Acts 17:24-28 (Paul is speaking to the residents of Athens)

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Sermon

In the season of Advent, tradition says we hope to see a renewed strength and vision in our lives and our relationship to God. Is that just verbal fluff in the bible commentaries or is it true? Why do we have to wait for Advent to think this way?

Our verses today from Psalms are chosen from the Revised Common Lectionary, but to really understand them, you must read the entire Psalm. In the interest of

time, I want you – I challenge you - to go home and read the entire 25th Psalm; it's not that long.

We are told the Psalmist in this case is King David. Why does the king sound so desperate in some of the first few verses? Listen again to the middle part of verse 2:

Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Sounds like he's been in a situation and feels the need for God to bail him out. Yes, he's had that fling with Bathsheba and her husband is now dead because of David's treachery. And his son, Absalom, is wreaking havoc on the kingdom. Then he goes on to describe what God does for those who are deserving and then he describes himself as someone deserving.

Really?

Is David feeling God's absence? Does he fear a voice that says, "Depart from me, for I never knew you." Is God like a magic genie in a lamp waiting for us to rub it in just the right way? Why does David feel the need to tell God what to remember and to tell God what heavenly promises are to be kept? Who does David think he is? He did what he did because he wanted to and because he knew he could. He was thinking the way any of us think if and when we commit such acts. We secretly say God is not there; God does not see this. God is not real.

Commentaries speak of the perception or sensing of God's absence in the words and mind of David. Absence is a dark and foreboding word in this context. Is God really absent – ever? If we think of this psalm as a prayer, which it probably is, I see it as a man trying to put his own mind in the right state so his pain of strife will not block out God's voice. He wants to reconnect with God and his darkness comes from fear that God will not pick up the phone when it rings.

But turbulent times do not come only when our transgressions bring them on. Why, when things are going good for us, is God an easy subject to talk about, to feel good about? But when the storm clouds of life gather, how many of us begin to feel abandoned and alone?

Years ago, a good friend of mine who was a questionable believer, lost his young daughter to a fast moving illness. He had heard me and others speak of faith and prayer before his daughter died. When he returned to work after her funeral, he said to me, “Well, I guess my daughter gave you guys something to pray about. For me, I don’t feel any need to pray, because there’s no one listening.”

Talk about darkness!

I wonder if David had felt the same way? Perhaps in his telling God what to remember and what covenants were promised, he’s actually telling himself these things.

This is especially true in verses 8-10. Notice in these verses how he seems to be telling someone else about God, not talking directly to God:

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.

Maybe he needs to hear his own voice say these things. Maybe this is his way of showing God that he knows of God’s power and majesty. David had one huge difference from my old friend who lost his child. David *WAS* a believer. He had put his faith in God before and, now, his life has storm clouds. Like the sun, God is always shining in a blaze, even when the clouds cover his appearance.

The prominent theologian, Dr. N.T. Wright once told a story of a trip he made with his wife to a conference in Paris. While he was there, they wanted to go to the Louvre, specifically to see the Mona Lisa which had recently been put on display after having been out of the public eye for some time. When they found it, it was surrounded by a crowd of onlookers who were milling about and giving others only a brief glimpse of the masterpiece. When Dr. Wright and his wife finally got to the front of the crowd, they saw the painting had been enclosed in a plexiglass case for protection.

Looking at this historical piece through transparent glass required that they look through the reflections of all the people around gazing at it. The true beauty of the

painting could not be completely appreciated because of the reflected distractions. But, because they knew what it was supposed to look like, they were able to appreciate just being there. And they had faith that, in spite of the obscuring reflections, it was the genuine article. David was trying to see through the glass, knowing that the genuine article was behind it.

The same goes for us trying to see and hear God when the world tries to drown him out. Our transgressions sometimes seem so great that our human minds begin to think that there is no God who could forgive what we have done. Come to think of it, if we take it a step further, it may seem there is no God. Maybe that's God's way of giving us a little taste of what hell is like. Perhaps David was mired down in his own mud hole of self-loathing. But we instinctively hunger and hope for something greater than us, wiser than us. Our hope comes from being created in His image.

In our NT scripture, Paul is talking to the crowd in Athens about their 'Unknown God.' There was once a pagan ritual in Athens in which sheep were released into the city and wherever one sheep stopped, it was sacrificed right there to the god of the nearest temple. Some stopped nowhere near a temple, so the sacrifice was made to the unknown god. So, Paul is now taking advantage of this legendary issue and telling them who this unknown god really was and is. If King David had any doubts about God and had access to a time travel machine, he could have talked to Paul and perhaps set his mind at ease. According to today's reading, we remember that Paul said, "*For in him we live and move and have our being.*"

The words of Paul in the Book of Acts are not unique. In John's gospel, we hear Jesus say, "Trust God and trust me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you." He did not say, "If it were not so, I would have worked a miracle to prove it to you," nor did he say, "If it were not so, I would have given you a statistical analysis to show you." He just said, "I would have told you." His words are beyond any doubt and go to the depths of our comprehension. He made a covenant with us and he keeps promises.

But, speaking of heaven, was our Psalm today all about just getting into heaven? Did it not say, *teach me your paths; guide me in your truth?* We must remember that Christianity is not just about getting into heaven. So much of what Christ

taught us and practically everything Paul emphasized had to do with life on this earth. The Psalmist was in a dire situation - on this earth. If you read the words carefully, you can get a sense that it must have been real darkness.

I know there are those among us who have experienced real, deep darkness. You've been there; I have been there. You have known people who have been there.

Our Psalm starts off with mention of one's soul; "*I lift up my soul,*" it says. We could make a whole sermon on that word. Soul is that secret, holy place in your mind, your heart – whatever you want to call it – that only you and God know about. David certainly knew about it. It is a place of profound vulnerability. It is the home of that secret human desire that things of this world cannot satisfy. It is a room of mirrors, all placed at different angles, so you see yourself from all sides. To raise up one's own soul to God is to open up that secret place and admit your weaknesses, your own messiness, your own failure, to cry out for help, and yet it is there to eventually remove all obstacles and trust Him. It is a place where there is no fear of retribution, condemnation, punishment, shame. And what we fail to remember so often is that each and every one of us has that secret, holy place in our hearts. The next time you see a vile criminal on the news, you ask yourself "How could he or she have done that?" Remember that for some, the world has buried that secret place under a layer of hate, mistrust, and fear, but never beyond the point of redemption through the cross.

I wonder if David had had anyone he could talk to? I do not think so, because the prophet Nathan came to him, blind-sided him, and made him face his wrong doing, leaving David apparently alone in his despair. We have all done things we regret, things that make us fall short of God's glory. The amazing thing is that God is willing to offer his compassion and love and to NOT remember the stupid things that still haunt us. In fact, he frees us from those things that haunt us.

How many times have you caught a glimpse of someone else's secret place? How many times has God asked you to be his ambassador; to show his face to someone else? It requires patience and understanding on your part. It is a process in which you must picture the hurricane of thoughts, fears, and doubts going through the other person's mind like the glass case around Mona Lisa. These are all things that

cloud out any undeniable reassurance from God. You must help that person feel the meaning conveyed to us in Psalm 25.

But, we humans continue to keep God in a glass case on a shelf. We make excuses. We distort the truth for our own comfort. Loving God is not supposed to be that hard. Have you ever felt the need to reconnect with God? Have you ever felt God's absence in your life? Have you ever felt your heart trying to say something that sounded like Psalm 25? Do you ever open the door to that secret place and let God in? Have you ever asked God to forgive you and guide you; to put you back on track? If so, remember Paul's words from Acts that we read today in which he said, "God is not far from each of us."

So in this season of Advent, I leave you with this: Do you believe Paul's words? Are you afraid to open the door of that secret place? Do you trust God enough to let him in?

Amen.