

October 7, 2018
World Communion Sunday
Columbia Congregational Church
Psalm 26: 1-3, 12; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Leaning on the Wisdom of God
Sermon by the Reverend Betsey Polglase

For this World Communion Sunday it seemed appropriate to consider our living in the world with all its goodness and messiness. The Psalm we just heard a small part of seems to be the words of a perfect human – not unlike Job but quite unlike me and perhaps you. Can any of us say during our whole life, “I have walked in my integrity...trusted in the Lord without wavering...I wash my hands in innocence ...my foot stands on level ground?” While I think many of us strive to live this way, speaking only for myself, I know I fall short of such perfection.

However, this is not a psalm petitioning for entry into eternal life, into the realm of God at the time of our death, to be found faultless throughout our lives, but a prayer at a time of great difficulty. Now that is something we can relate to, just looking at the state of our world past and present, and perhaps looking at our personal lives.

The psalmist is seeking God’s intervention in some human situation in which the petitioner is facing some harsh oppression or judgment. Well, maybe that doesn’t quite fit us but certainly there are times when life just doesn’t seem fair, wrongs are done, and we find ourselves in some kind of trouble. This is a prayer to the righteous judge of heaven to “preserve the life and well-being “ of the one at the mercy of those who “manipulate the human machinery of justice.”¹ We can use this psalm ourselves, given a

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, p108-109

particular time of suffering or injustice, when we believe we did nothing to bring this on ourselves. “Vindicate me, O Lord,...for I walk in faithfulness to you.”

This immediately makes me think of the book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” by Harold Kushner, a Conservative rabbi, in which he wrestles with the question, “If God is a loving Creator, why is there so much suffering, in particular, for good and faithful people.” The book comes out of his own great suffering when his own son Aaron died at the age of 14 of an incurable disease. We can imagine the words of today’s psalm coming from Rabbi Kushner’s mouth, or any number of folks we have met along our own life journey.

The psalmist does not presume to have lived a perfect life but has lived a life committed to a relationship with God, a life dependent on God alone. He has not adopted the ways of sinners, but has entered into redemptive relationships with those who were not centered on God; similar to the way Jesus subverted the Judaic law by eating with sinners and tax collectors and reaching out to all God’s children whether considered clean or unclean. Without being assimilated into the ways of the wicked and the hypocrites and the worthless, Jesus makes clear the expansion of the kingdom relies on our inclusion of all. However, this psalm is not talking about an entire life span, but a particular incident in the life of the psalmist for which the petitioner cries out for God’s help. He turns to God, the very center of his world, like a child to his parent, to lead him through his distress.

In the long reading from the letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded of God’s active presence with humankind since the beginning of time. Since

the time of creation, God spoke to human beings through key individuals and prophets. Then God spoke to us finally through Jesus, who was not only “the reflection of God’s glory” but also “the exact imprint of God’s very being.” Such descriptions come from Jewish wisdom literature in which wisdom is a reflection of God, “a spotless mirror of the working of God, an image of God’s goodness” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:26).

Curiously, those who selected the lectionary readings excluded the first verses of Chapter 2, which, to me, seem very important. Verse 1 of Chapter 2 reads, “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.” If, before the coming of Christ, we were bound to receive penalty for our disobediences and transgressions throughout our lives, who among us can afford to neglect the good news of so great a salvation through Jesus. We must keep God and the redeeming grace of Jesus at the center of our lives and act in the world accordingly.

I recently saw a Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy is sitting at her advice booth. Charlie Brown as usual is standing on the other side ready for her words of wisdom. The caption with the cartoon is Lucy saying, “I can’t help thinking that this world would be a better world if everyone would listen to God.” Charles Schultz makes a good point, if a bit simplistic in our diverse world.

Jesus tells the disciples (in the gospel of Mark) that it is not adherence to the laws but their complete dependence on God, as a child depends on her parents, that subverts the assumptions of the powerful. Jesus demonstrates radical hospitality to those who are most oppressed: the children, the tax collectors, the sick, and the outcasts of all sorts. We too need to lean on the wisdom of God as we consider the future of our world

and our church.

In this world filled with conflict, and a culture that promotes the philosophy of looking out for Number 1, that is ourselves, our family, and our own jobs, we are hard pressed to keep our relationship with God at the center of our being, and central to our intentions and motivations. We might benefit from the prayer written by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton,

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you”²

As we gather in worship each Sunday, we come in our wholeness and in our brokenness. Even the way in which we share communion, we recognize these two sides of our being. We come for forgiveness, hope, answers, and wisdom. Ideally, we are seeking God’s mercy and “a relationship with the One who created us all in the first place.” As members of the body of Christ, we come together as equals, each a child of God with our various talents and gifts as well as our flaws and failures. As we stand before God, singing, praying and living the good news, we are assured of our worth in the eyes of God and forgiven our transgressions not because of anything we have done, “but because of God’s unfathomable grace.”³

Let us Pray,

² Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 79, as quoted by Kathleen Bostrom, in *Feasting On The Word*, 130

³ Kathleen Bostrom, *Feasting on the Word*, 132

O God, we hunger for your wisdom. We long to be disciplined to know your way. We are grateful for your steadfast love even as we become lost and found, again and again.

Amen.