

Never Be Ashamed
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
August 9, 2015

Psalm 34:1-8

- ¹ I will bless the Lord at all times;
God's praise shall continually be in my mouth.
² My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.
³ O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt God's name together.
- ⁴ I sought the Lord, and God answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
⁵ Look to God, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.
⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear God, and delivers them.
⁸ O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in God.

Professor Matthew Myer Boulton writes of the psalms, which are understood to be songs, “[The psalms] are meant to shape us as we sing. They are meant to place us in a particular situation or scene or stance, enjoy the company of others there, and depart the song as different people.”¹ We depart, together, as different people. This is actually the hope of every time we come together, every time we serve in God's name, every time we hear scripture. Today our scripture happens to be one of these psalms. It is a psalm of thanksgiving, which serves to encourage.

Thanksgiving is spoken of God, being given to God: I will bless; God's praise shall be continually in my mouth; my soul makes its boast; magnify the Lord with me; let us exalt God's name together. What we are privy to in the hearing of this psalm is by no means a passive relationship with a remote God. This is an active faithfulness which is founded on relying on God. Lest you wonder if relying on God is not somehow passive, remember the last time you released something from your own hands and put it in God's hands. It takes active work to loosen our grip on that which we want to control, doesn't it?

The psalmist prods us to actively rely upon God by telling us how it worked out for the psalmist. “I sought the Lord, and God answered me, and delivered me from all my fears... This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.” Think of the Robert Burns poem which

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p.320.

offers: “The best-laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men / Gang aft agley, / An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain.”² Plan what we will yet the future holds what we cannot ascertain. Yet God always comes through.

In acknowledging the ways in which God comes through, we must equally acknowledge that the way in which God delivers us is not usually how we wish or envision yet, yet, God **does** come through. When the psalmist sings, “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear God, and delivers them,” we hear testimony that God carried the psalmist through to the other side. We don’t know how deliverance was imagined before it came or what it looked like in looking back and neither of those are of matter to the psalmist. What matters is that God carried the psalmist through to the other side. God has decisively moved the psalmist, and us, toward the coming kingdom. Sometimes we can perceive it in our lifetime, sometimes the good is revealed after we are gone.

In the past, when I sought to explain where I saw God pulling the good from the difficult beyond a person’s lifetime, I spoke of the Susan G. Komen Foundation. I would say that I have no doubt Nancy Brinker would wish her sister, Susan, to still be alive AND I would speak of the thousands and thousands of lives that have been made better, that have lasted longer, because of the work of the foundation created in her name after her death from breast cancer. That still remains evidence for me. But now I add to it the stories of nine people in Charleston, South Carolina. I cannot imagine that a day goes by when the people who were killed at Mother Emanuel are not grieved by their families and friends. AND I look at the ways racism has so rapidly changed from a topic oft-avoided to a topic openly addressed, despite the discomfort that comes with acknowledging its reality.

I look to the way a book called *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ writings on race in America, has been the number one book on the New York Times’ best seller list for the three weeks since its release. My point is not whether you have read it yet; my point is that a book on racism has topped the New York Times’ best sellers list. We have moved toward the coming kingdom. Humans have wrought horrible things, here one human killed nine others, and God has brought goodness which looks like the eyes, and hearts, of many forever opened to a horrible reality and those same hearts now burning for change. We have moved toward the coming kingdom. It does not look like we would hope but God has come through again. And the psalmist says, “You can never be ashamed if you rely on God.”

Again, this is not a passive endeavor, this relying upon God. We are not only urged but cheered on by the psalmist to stop, taste and see that the Lord is good. In a past retreat, already a planned stopping to taste and see God, I’ve led a meditation which encourages the participants to actively

² Robert Burns, *To a Mouse*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173072>.

experience God's goodness. We ate a variety of foods, but not how we normally eat, rushed and hardly noticing that our plates are emptying. I invited people to use all of their senses with each food. For example, imagine a blueberry. Look at it – is it the color you thought it was, are there variations in color that you might not have noticed before, how many colors does it have? Feel it – is it smooth, rough, both, does it feel good in your fingers / how does it feel against your teeth, on your tongue, against the roof of your mouth, as it goes down your throat? Smell it – what do you notice – the traditional smell you expect, the smell of the packaging, the smell of the soap you last used on your hands mixed with the smell of the food? Listen to it – what do you hear when you run your fingers across it, bite into it, swallow it? Taste it – move it around in your mouth, does it taste the same all over, does the taste change as it sits in your mouth, does it taste as good as you swallow it as when you put it in your mouth, does it taste as good as you thought it would?

We are invited by the psalmist to give this same attentiveness to God's goodness, to stop and perceive God's goodness. **This** is Sabbath. Of course, there is no limit on when you do this or how often, this stopping and perceiving God's goodness. As we move into time for quiet reflection, I invite you to think now of just one example of God's goodness. What do you see? How does it taste? Taste and see that the Lord is good. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: With thanksgiving, we boast in you, O Lord. Amen.