

Sermon Series on the Book of Psalms

Book of Psalms 3: Songs of Joy

Psalm 51, 73, 150

20 April 2008

This Sunday we come to the third movement of the Book of Psalms. The first is about establishment, orientation, the ground of our faith. “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The second movement is about what happens when life challenges or even contradicts those assumptions. That challenge can cause people to lose their faith entirely. I’m sure we all know people who lost their faith, perhaps in the aftermath of some horrible tragedy, but sometimes for reasons that seem trivial to us, but are not to the person who experienced them. Our psalms, though, show us what it is like to bring both the profound and the trivial to God. Last week we heard psalms of bitter vindictiveness and utter despair. Both are given voice in the Bible. But we also saw how God has a thing or two to say in response, to give a bit of divine perspective on our trials.

The main thing is to keep those lines of communication open. We need to be audacious enough to bring our cries and rants and anger to God, and we also need to be able to listen to what God has to say in response, though we may not like it so much. That dialogue, that back-and-forth, is what covenant is all about. It enables the relationship to endure, and it even makes that relationship stronger, so that on the other side of grief and sorrow we are able to return once more to the simple declarations of faith we made in the beginning. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

These psalms of reorientation, as Walter Brueggemann names them, sometimes sound exactly like the first kind of psalms. But whereas the orientation psalms are characterized by placidness and serenity, the reorientation psalms are jubilant, the kind of joy you can express only after a great struggle.

Let us look first at Psalm 51, well-known in Christian tradition. It may not sound familiar to you, but odds are you know it better than you think you do. We say it every year at the Ash Wednesday service, for example. It is a confessional psalm, and it follows immediately after God’s lamentation psalm that we heard last week. Psalm 51 can be seen as the response to Psalm 50, an example of just the kind of dialogue that the psalms truly represent.

It begins like other lament psalms with a cry: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.” But the cry is a little different this time. It’s a plea not to be saved from enemies, but from one’s own sinful nature. “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” (By the way, there’s that parallel imagery that we talked about in the first week.)

This is not just a mere lip-service confessional either, but a new self-knowledge gained through hard, bitter experience: “For I know my transgression, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” Does that sound familiar? It is used in many prayers of confession: “So that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge” – as God just did in the 50th psalm.

On the surface, this psalm seems to have a very negative view of human nature, and indeed the next couple of verses about “I was sinful at birth” seem to justify the doctrine of original sin. Some critics today have argued that the church has placed too much emphasis on how messed-up humanity is, and they have a point. But recall that many of the lament

psalms are deeply personal. They aren't generic complaints about unspecific problems. They refer to particular people and events. This psalm also is particular. It's the cry of one person, realizing how deeply their own troubles run. The details will vary for each of us, but surely we can relate to the sentiment. Surely we have felt a wrongness within the marrow of our bones, a wrongness that we long desperately to be set right. So the psalmist cries, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." Not just for the sake of being clean, though, and this is the whole point: "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways." That sounds a lot like some of the bargains we heard last week, but here we see that it's not so much a bargain as a consequence of God's saving act. I am not *able* to teach transgressors, because my sin is always before me. But when "you create a pure heart in me, O God, then I will be able to tell of your salvation to others." And just as last week, God's lament psalm complained about the phony sacrifices offered by those who hold back their hearts, this psalm declares, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." This is the true basis for our relationship with God. This is a relationship that has put God's steadfast love to the test through our sin, and has found that indeed God will never fail us – even when we have failed God.

Psalm 73 provides a similar transition from lament to rejoicing. But first, I have to make a confession of my own. I was glad to have this opportunity to delve deeply into the psalms, and they affected me more than I even knew. When I came to read this one, the 73rd, tears began to flow. I was so overcome that I had to leave my books and take a little walk to let that emotion well up in me and wash out. I'm not sure why this psalm touched me so deeply, but it is a testimony to how powerful the psalms are and how much we need them.

Again, consider this psalm in the context of the laments we heard last week, about enemies that attack and mock, and a desire for vengeance. The psalm begins not with a cry, but with a simple statement of wisdom: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure at heart." But immediately we find trouble in paradise: "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold." The psalmist recognizes that he or she has not been pure at heart. And why? Not because of enemies that have attacked him, but rather, "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." No, the psalmist was not attacked. Nor was the psalmist outraged by the evil that others did. Rather the issue here is jealousy of those wicked ones— even envy. The psalmist saw evil people prospering, and he or she wants a taste of that good life for herself. "They have not struggled, their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to humankind; they are not plagued by human evils." But according to the orientation psalms, it is the pure in heart who should be blessed by God. How then can the wicked prosper? More to the point, how come I have to suffer so much? "Surely... in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me, until..." But now at last redemption comes. Reorientation. Salvation. Resurrection. And what is it that restores the psalmist's faith? "Until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny."

That verse makes me think of another psalm, 84: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself." A true sanctuary, a safe place where your troubles may not follow. It speaks again of that childlike trust, that sense that God will take care of us. The psalmist returns to that safe place, to the lap of God, and now all that envy melts away, the doubts vanish like shadows, and we know that even though appearances are to the contrary, all is indeed right in the world.

The psalmist realizes now that wicked people will not stand, their own perversity will cause their downfall. But more to the point, we should not spend all our spiritual energies on them, for to do so is to bring harm upon ourselves. This is not

to say that we should never be angry, that we should not lament the evil in the world. But our anger is properly directed toward God, not toward others in vengeance, or inwardly in envy. For “when my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.” When we let that anger consume us, we become mere animals.

But – but – allow me an extended quote because the psalmist says it so perfectly, a return to that childlike trust but this time with the wisdom of experience, a simplicity on the far side of complexity. “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”