

Epiphany 3, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Every Sunday
we read a psalm.
After the Old Testament reading;
before the New,
we open our bulletins or our prayer books
and read together
a psalm.

And it's not simply
that we all need something
to wake us up.

The psalms
are a unique part
of our Scriptures;
they are the prayer book
of the bible.

For the most part, we don't know who
wrote them.
Were they professional poets, hymn writers in effect?
Was it done by a committee?
Or did one person's heartfelt prayer
touch so many people
that they memorized it
and passed it on?

And most of the time, we don't know either
why they were written.
What was in the mind of the person speaking?
Were they talking with God
about something that had just happened to them?
Or are these the fruit of years of reflection,
looking back at the vicissitudes
of life?

All those questions
remain unanswered.

All we have
are the words themselves.

Today
our psalm is Psalm 27.
The choir and I sang an abbreviated version of it,
with a refrain that actually comes from the book of Isaiah chapter 43,
a refrain that imagines
how God might have answered the psalmist, how God has answered
so many prayers
like this one.

The people who put our lectionary together
only required
that we read verse 1 and verses 5 through 13 of Psalm 27;
however the rules say we are always permitted to lengthen readings.
And the shorter version, as we found in bible study this week, the short version
leaves out some pretty important things.
So we've printed the whole psalm for you.
You might find it helpful to turn to it and follow along with it.

It's a psalm
that constantly walks the line
between fear and trust,
between uncertainty and longing.
And a psalm that begins at least
talking to some unknown bystander.

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear?
the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
The very first verse
sets us up.
The begins confidently,
declaring faith
in a God who is life and salvation,
echoing, it seems, in anticipation of the words
that will be written in the gospel of John,
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in
the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing
came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all
people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

...He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God....

The Lord is my light, my salvation, my life - and yet
there is a question.
Whom shall I fear?
Of whom shall I be afraid?
As if the person speaking
has some doubts.
On the one hand,
faith.
On the other
fear.
And the writer, teetering
in between.

And we can almost hear God's reassurance,
"Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you by your name: you are mine."

And as we read further,
there is reason for fear.
Life has not been easy.
We don't know the details,
but verses 2 through 4
list the things that have gone wrong..
Evildoers, and armies, and war.
And although the psalmist seems to speak with confidence
about trusting God,
it almost seems
as if he's trying to convince himself, almost pleading,
"My heart won't be afraid, will it?
"I put my trust in God, don't I?"

When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, *
it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who
stumbled and fell.
Though an army should encamp against me, *
yet my heart shall not be afraid;
And though war should rise up against me, *
yet will I put my trust in him.

“Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you by your name: you are mine.”

And then it seems
the psalmist is trying to remind himself,
how he has lived his life with God at the center
how surely, God will hear him.
Or perhaps to tell his anonymous hearer
why God should, must, will, answer.
I’ve tried to worship God. I never asked anything,
just to be with God, and maybe, maybe just
be granted the chance to see him. Is that too much?

And then, perhaps unknowingly,
he echoes the story of Elijah,
the prophet Elijah, who was running scared from King Ahab,
and hid in a cave, and God came to him,
not in the wind, and not in the earthquake, and not in the fire
but in the sound
of sheer silence.

One thing have I asked of the Lord; one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days
of my life;
To behold the fair beauty of the Lord *
and to seek him in his temple.
For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe
in his shelter; *
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.
Even now he lifts up my head *
above my enemies round about me.
Therefore I will offer in his dwelling an oblation
with sounds of great gladness; *
I will sing and make music to the Lord.

“Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you by your name: you are mine.”

And now the psalmist
talks to God
directly.
This isn’t just about faith.

This is faith, uncertain, pleading, struggling
faith.

Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; *
 have mercy on me and answer me.
You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." *
 Your face, Lord, will I seek.
Hide not your face from me, *
 nor turn away your servant in displeasure.
You have been my helper; cast me not away; *
 do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
Though my father and my mother forsake me, *
 the Lord will sustain me.
Show me your way, O Lord; *
 lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.
Deliver me not into the hand of my adversaries, *
 for false witnesses have risen up against me,
 and also those who speak malice.

"Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you by your name: you are mine."

But the psalmist doesn't end there.
Suddenly he turns back
to that anonymous bystander,
who, it seems, has been listening
to his prayer.

What if I had not believed
 that I should see the goodness of the Lord *
in the land of the living!
O tarry and await the Lord's pleasure;
 be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; *
 wait patiently for the Lord.

God has answered. God
has answered.
And the psalmist knows
that if he had lost heart,
if he had given up on God,
perhaps
he would not have heard
God's answer.

And he has not only heard it,
he has seen it.
The one who asked
to see God's
 has seen
God's goodness,
and known
God's comfort,
and given
God's strength.

We know, most of us, that line
between fear and trust,
we know that line
between uncertainty and longing.

We've experienced trouble in our lives.
We know what it is to struggle
We've wondered
whether God
is even listening.

But at the same time
we've kept coming back.
Otherwise
we wouldn't be here today.
Because somehow
deep within us
we long for God,
somehow, deep within us
we believe
that God can be trusted,
somewhere, deep within us
no matter what else happens
we have a memory
of God.
Of God who says in our baptism, and ever since,
"Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you by your name: you are mine."

Please read the psalm with me. I'll read to the asterisk of each verse,
and you
respond.

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom then shall I fear? *
the Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom then shall I be afraid?
2 When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, *
it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who
stumbled and fell.
3 Though an army should encamp against me, *
yet my heart shall not be afraid;
4 And though war should rise up against me, *
yet will I put my trust in him.
5 One thing have I asked of the Lord;
one thing I seek; *
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days
of my life;
6 To behold the fair beauty of the Lord *
and to seek him in his temple.
7 For in the day of trouble he shall keep me safe
in his shelter; *
he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling
and set me high upon a rock.
8 Even now he lifts up my head *
above my enemies round about me.
9 Therefore I will offer in his dwelling an oblation
with sounds of great gladness; *
I will sing and make music to the Lord.
10 Harken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; *
have mercy on me and answer me.
11 You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." *
Your face, Lord, will I seek.
12 Hide not your face from me, *
nor turn away your servant in displeasure.
13 You have been my helper;
cast me not away; *
do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
14 Though my father and my mother forsake me, *
the Lord will sustain me.
15 Show me your way, O Lord; *
lead me on a level path, because of my enemies.
16 Deliver me not into the hand of my adversaries, *
for false witnesses have risen up against me,
and also those who speak malice.

17 What if I had not believed
that I should see the goodness of the Lord *
in the land of the living!

18 O tarry and await the Lord's pleasure;
be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; *
wait patiently for the Lord.