

Lent 2, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Yesterday
I had the privilege
of hearing a beginning preacher
experimenting
with one of his first
sermons.

Once a month
I teach people who are preparing for ordination as deacons
the basics
of preaching.
As part of that, they have to preach three sermons in class,
one on a gospel reading, one on an Old Testament reading, and one
for a special occasion, such as a funeral or wedding or holiday.
This was the student's
Old Testament sermon
and he preached on the Old Testament and psalm lessons for today.

And he began
with this story.
“Back in 2012,” he said,
“I was on vacation in Sweden visiting my cousin and her family
and attended the Baptism of her third child
into the household of God.
It was...done in the Church of Sweden,
and the paternal grandfather performed the baptism.
We...gathered back at the house afterwards,
friends and family conversed,
and [then] the paternal grandmother got up and read a poem
she put together
with words and phrases [that] her own grandfather
used to say to her.
It was read both in Swedish and English
and the repeated phrase placed throughout the poem was
‘Put your hands together and whisper
quietly His Name.
Then you are never alone.
You rest in His arms.’”

We know what it is like
to see a newborn babies
asleep in the secure hold
of their parents' arms.

We can dream
of what it would be like
to be held that securely
in God's arms.

And it's that dream
that is the focus
of our psalm today.

It's a psalm
that was traditionally recited
as people travelled
up to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem
is situated

on the spine of mountains that runs between the Mediterranean to the west
and the Jordan River to the east.

Traditionally to travel to Jerusalem by foot- and even today by car -
you went down to the coastal plain
or down into the river valley,

where you could travel much more quickly than going up and down through the mountains,
you would go down,
travel south or north,
and finally turn back in toward the mountains
and climb the last twenty or so miles
along winding roads
that gradually rose
to the Holy City.

And at least from the east, the safest route
far from the threat first from the Philistines who lived along the coast
and then from the Roman seafarers who made their ports there,
the safest and easiest route
was along the Jordan Valley,
that is, until you got to Jericho
and began that climb to Jerusalem.

We know that the road was dangerous,
not only because for the first dozen or so miles
the land is arid, rocky desert,
with nowhere to stop and refresh yourself,
but because it was a favorite place

for robbers to waylay
travelers.
Remember the story of the Good Samaritan?
It happened
on that road.
So as the pilgrims to Jerusalem went up
it was safety
that was on their minds.
And so they would pray
and sing psalms to God
asking
for God's protection.

This psalm
is one of those songs of prayer.

And it begins with a question,
as the pilgrims look up
from the river flat
into the dusty, rocky, barren
hills,
the question that we all ask
when we begin to travel
an unfamiliar and possibly dangerous
way.
"Where is my help to come?"

And the answer
is immediate.
 My help comes from the LORD,
 the maker of heaven and earth.

And although the rest of the psalm
looks at first glance to be an answer
the pattern of repetition suggests
that perhaps the question-answer format continues throughout.
I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?
 My help comes from the LORD,
 the maker of heaven and earth.
Will God let my feet be moved?
Will he who watches over me fall asleep?
 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel

shall neither slumber nor sleep;
Does the LORD himself watches over me?
The LORD is your shade at your right hand,
So that the sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
Will the LORD preserve me from all evil?
Will he keep me safe?
The LORD shall watch over your going out
and your coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.

The assurance is clear.
God will indeed
care for those
who seek his protection.
It's a psalm
of confident trust in God,
but it's more than that.
Because it's a psalm
that allows us
to question,
a psalm that allows us to wonder
whether we are indeed
on the right trail.
The questions are ones that we can imagine Abram asking
when he was on that long journey
that we read about
in our first reading from Genesis,
God called Abram, God called Abram
to leave his home,
his country, his extended family,
and travel hundreds of miles
to make a new home
a new family, a new country
far away.

And Abram must have asked
more than once,
Where are you God?
Will you help me?
Will you protect me?

And I imagine Mary and Joseph

must have felt like that too
 when they fled with their baby boy from the fearful anger of Herod
 and became refugees in Egypt.
 Where are you God?
 Will you help me?
 Will you protect me?

And Jesus himself,
 tempted in the wilderness,
 and attacked by the Pharisees,
 and praying that final night in the garden.
 Where are you God?
 Will you help me?
 Will you protect me?

They are questions that are asked
 throughout Scripture,
 and throughout Christian history
 by all who seek to follow Christ.
 Where are you God?
 Will you help me?
 Will you protect me?

And while they are questions we often ask about our own individual situations -
 and let there be no mistake,
 God's answer is the same then,
 "Yes, I will help you,
 Yes, I will protect you,
 yes, I will be with you" -
 this psalm
 was not just the prayer
 of an individual.
 It is the prayer
 of a community,
 a prayer of people responding together
 to the command of God
 to go in pilgrimage,
 to the call of God
 to travel together
 in obedience and service.

And that makes it a prayer for us too
 as a church.

Yesterday
 most of the members of the vestry and I
 went to a workshop in Garden City
 called "Vestry Leadership in the Twenty-First Century."
 I was expecting something
 about leadership
 and the mission of the church in response to the call of God.
 Instead
 what we got
 was a thorough education on the care of our property, finances, and administration.
 It was excellent in what it covered,
 which was the things that the church canons, that is, the church law, require.
 But as a church
 the canons are only supplementary. They don't define our purpose.
 That is given to us in Scripture,
 and developed in our liturgy.

A few weeks ago we commissioned our vestry with this prayer:
 "Enlighten with your grace the Wardens and members of the Vestry of this congregation, and so
 rule their minds and guide their counsels, that in all things they that they may seek your glory
 and promote the mission of your Church."

If we see the vestry's role as simply fulfilling their canonical duties,
 then in turn we tend to focus our energy as a church
 on our finances, buildings and administration.
 But they are not our mission, our calling from God,
 They are simply tools for that ministry.

Is our call primarily
 to preserve what we have,
 our buildings and our money?
 No.
 Our call,
 as Christ told his apostles
 when he appeared to them by the lake in Galilee
 after his resurrection,
 our call
 is to make disciples, baptizing and teaching.
 And of course first
 to be disciples ourselves.

Or, in the words of the Catechism in our Prayer book,
 The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.
 The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes
 justice, peace, and love.
 The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

And so when we consider our buildings and our finances and our administration, we have to ask,
 How can we
 best do the work
 that God has called us to?

Our buildings are part of that - but not just because they are beautiful, or useful, or even
 necessary, but because they provide us with physical space for worship and learning and
 hospitality.
 They are places where we do the work of God.

Our cemetery is part of that.
 Not just because it's beautiful and historic,
 but because through it we can reach out and minister to those who mourn.

Our finances are part of that
 because they allow us to do the work God is calling us to.

Doing what God calls us to
 is often scary.
 It involves risks.
 It involves asking the hard questions of ourselves as individuals
 and ourselves as a church?
 What are we prepared to do?
 What are we prepared to risk?
 Will we give more, give more time, give more money,
 so that God's work can be strengthened?
 Will we work harder
 For the kingdom of God?

If the answer to those questions is yes,
 if we will take risks for God,
 then this psalm is for us.

This psalm is for us, because
 God wants us
 to go on a journey with him.
 And on that journey,

Our help comes from the LORD,
the maker of heaven and earth.
God who keeps watch over Israel
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
The LORD is our shade at our right hand,
So that the sun shall not strike us by day,
nor the moon by night.
The LORD shall watch over our going out
and our coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.

We rest secure
in the arms of God.