

Sermon for Sunday, March 1, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“Praise the LORD, you that fear him;
stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;
all you of Jacob's line, give glory.”

At first glance
our psalm today
is a wonderful
psalm of praise.

It begins
with a call to worship God,
and that call is repeated time and time again
interspersed with reminders
of all that God has done.

God has looked at people
who are suffering from poverty,
God has looked at them
with compassion and loved.
In a world where their voices
so often go unheard,
God has listened to them,
and has answered them
providing food
to eat.

In a world that is divided,
God rules over all the nations,
and will eventually bring all people
to know and honor him.

And in a world
where death is something to be feared,
even the dead will worship him,
which suggests that they

will not be dead forever
but be raised to live and worship God.

God has done all this
and so much more,
and so, the psalmist says,
God is to be praised.

But this isn't just any
psalm of praise.
Because these verses
are part of psalm 22.
And remember how psalm 22
begins.
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
and are so far from my cry
and from the words of my distress?"

These are the words
that Jesus cries out from the cross;
they are words
of absolute
desolation.

And they introduce this psalm.
For the first twenty verses
what we hear
is lament.
They are the words of someone
who is suffering,
words of someone
who is desperate,
the words of someone
who is in total despair.

He feels abandoned,
as if God is far, far away.
He calls out to God,
and hears no answer.
His pain

keeps him awake.
He looks back
at what God did in the past
and wonders why
God hasn't answered him now.
Is it his fault?
Is he too insignificant,
too broken,
too evil,
for God to bother?

It's clear that that's what
the people around him think,
making fun of him,
scorning him,
mocking him,
and with him,
God.

He keeps reminding himself
of what he knows, at least in theory,
that it was God who created him,
God who brought him to birth.

But where is God now? Where is God when he needs him?
He feels abandoned, helpless.

But more than that,
it feels as if
he is being attacked:
a pack of wolves baring their teeth,
wild bulls ready to trample him,
lions roaring ready to pounce,
criminals and thieves assaulting him,
stripping away his belongings
and auctioning them
to the highest bidder.
And his body, his body itself
seems to be falling apart.
His bones dissolving,

his organs collapsing,
his voice failing,
his skin
melting away.
He might as well
be dead.

And God seems
to be no help.

Yet, yet
suddenly
the psalm changes.

One moment
the psalmist might as well be dead.
The next,
he lifts up his head
and starts to talk
about praising God.

It seems
inconceivable.
What has happened
to make such a dramatic change?

Of course,
it might simply be that time passed
between the writing of the two halves
of this psalm.
Things got better.
God finally answered
his prayer.
But if that were the case,
you'd expect the psalmist to say so.

And if, for whatever reason,
the psalmist decided to leave out the good news,
then you'd expect that the Jewish tradition,
and Christians following them

would have done what they did
in many other cases,
which was to split the two halves apart
into two psalms.

But they aren't.
Which suggests
that there is something important
about speaking those words of praise
immediately following
the words of lament,
with no resolution of the situation that caused the lament.
The psalmist
is suffering,
but even before
his suffering is resolved
he turns
and praises God.

And perhaps
that's the reason
that the two halves
are held together.
Because we know what it is
to struggle;
we know what it's like
to have unanswered prayer;
we know what it is to wonder
whether God has abandoned us.

And the question for us at those times is
what do we do?
Do we just give up,
figuring all this God stuff
was just a figment of our imaginations?
Do we just hide away
nursing our pain?
Or is there another
alternative?

This psalm suggests
that there is.

It suggests that when we are struggling and doubting and feeling abandoned,
we should do the very last thing
that we might feel like doing.

We should turn
and praise God.

It sounds crazy, doesn't it?

The last thing we can imagine doing
when it seems like God isn't answering our prayer,
is to praise God.

But that's what this psalmist does.

He turns
and praises God.

And it's actually the verse right before where we began reading
that begins to make some sense of it.

Because all the way up to verse twenty,
the psalmist is lamenting.

And then, in verse twenty-one, he says,
"I will declare your Name to my brethren;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

By itself,
it sounds like a statement of great confidence and trust,
but in this context
maybe it's less about what the psalmist will say
and more about where he will be.

Because he will be
in the midst of the congregation.
After enduring the mocking and scorn,
the struggle and pain and threats,
having prayed his heart out to God,
the psalmist seeks out help
in the congregation
the place where the people of God gather,
the community
of faith.

And there, there the psalmist
will be led by the prayer and praise of his community
back to wholeness,
back to faith,
back to God.

Twenty or so years ago
I lost everything I owned
in a house fire.
It was devastating.
And in the days and weeks afterwards
I found it almost impossible
to pray.

Being in seminary
I was expected to go to chapel
every day.
But I couldn't really see the point.
I had nothing to say to God, and I didn't think God
had anything to say to me.
I wasn't even sure
where God was.

But my friends gathered round.
They said,
"Come with us. You don't have to do anything. Just sit there in the corner
and we will do your praying for you."
And so I went.
Day after day, we went to chapel;
day after day
I sat in the corner,
and day after day
they prayed.
And then, over time,
I began to pray as well.
It was as if all the prayer around me
somehow seeped into my soul,
and with it
the love of God,

and I couldn't help
but speak with God,
I couldn't help
but praise God.

Two things happened when I went to chapel.
One
was that I could feel the love of God
through the actions of those friends of mine.
And the other
was that simply being in the presence of others's conversations with God
allowed me to gradually open myself to God,
and to find myself again
as someone who was dependent on
and trusting in
my Savior.

It's happened time and time again in my life.
When I've had nothing left
to say to God,
but, to use the metaphor from last week
my feet have followed their usual habit
turning towards God,
and God has met me there.

You see,
in the midst of struggle
the very act
of putting ourselves
in the middle of God's people,
that act,
puts us in the presence of God,
and eventually, often when we least expect it,
God will seep
into our souls
and bring us to new hope
and trust.

No wonder the psalmist moves
from lament to praise.

Not because
God has fixed everything,
but because the psalmist has unexpectedly
come to know again
the presence and the love of God.

Leading him
to that incredible statement of trust:
“My soul shall live for him.”

“Praise the Lord, you that fear him;
stand in awe of him...give glory.”