

Sermon for Sunday, July 19, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

On Friday night
I finally got around to watching the movie
'Into the Woods.'
It didn't get entirely positive reviews,
but I enjoyed it, not least
because of the music.
It's a kind of fractured fairy tale,
where a whole bunch of the characters
and up together
with their stories overlapping.

And my favorite part
is when, during a conversation with Little Red Riding Hood,
Cinderella
and the Baker
sing the song,
"No one is alone."

"Mother cannot guide you.
Now you're on your own.
Only me beside you.
Still, you're not alone.
No one is alone. Truly.
No one is alone.
Sometimes people leave you.
Halfway through the wood.
Others may deceive you.
You decide what's good.
You decide alone.
But no one is alone."

And what struck me most about this song
is how much it has in common
with our psalm today.

At first glance
it looks like our psalm
has nothing to do with us.
It's all about, David, King David
as we know him.

Remember his story?

It all began
when the people of God
decided that they are with theocracy,
done being ruled by a series of priests
who supposedly express the rule of God.
They want a king
just like all the other nations around them.
And God listened to them
and made Saul king.
But Saul began to ignore God,
and so God sent Samuel the prophet
to anoint a new king.

He showed up at the home of Jesse,
and asked to meet his sons.
One by one they were introduced;
each time, Samuel said, "No, not this one."
Finally,
after he'd met number six,
he asked,
"Don't you have any more?"
"Well, there's David, out in the fields with the sheep."
"Call him."
And so it was
that David was anointed.
Though it didn't really make much difference,
not at first, anyway.
He went back to his sheep,
although it seems that because he was well known for musical skills
he was called upon on occasion
to play his harp to calm down king Saul.

But it was his victory over the Philistine Goliath
that really got the king's attention.
Saul made David an army commander, and married off his daughter to him.
But as David
had more and more success in battle,
Saul was more and more threatened by him, until finally
Saul made plans to kill him
and David only escaped
thanks to an early warning
from his best friend,
Saul's son Jonathan.

Eventually
both Saul and Jonathan
were killed in battle,
and David returned
as king.
He was a great leader,
stabilizing the kingdom,
neutralizing the threat of adjoining nations,
and leading the people
in worshipping and serving God.

But he wasn't perfect.
Remember the story we had in last week's Old Testament reading?
The ark of the covenant,
which held the holy relics
that the people had carried
through the wilderness and into the promised land,
the place where God
was understood to be particularly present,
the ark
had been stored
in various places.
But David decided it was time
to bring it to his capital city, Jerusalem.
Except on the way,
the cart carrying it wobbled,
and one of the men supervising it
reached out his hands to steady it

and was struck dead.
And David was so scared
that he stopped his great procession
and left the ark in the home of a foreigner, Obed-edom the Gittite,
lest he himself accidentally touch it
and be struck dead too.
And then, after a three months
he then he discovered that far from being struck dead,
Obed-edom had been blessed,
he decided that he wanted the ark back again
and continued the great procession up to Jerusalem.

And then there's the particularly unsavory story of David and Bathsheba.
We'd be reading it next week
if it weren't the Feast of St James, our patronal celebration.

David saw Bathsheba from his palace,
and was attracted to her.
They had an affair
while her husband was away at war,
and when she became pregnant,
David effectively arranged
for the death of her husband
so he could marry her.

And then there were the times
that David struggled.
When his kingdom and rule was threatened.
When his best friend Jonathan was killed.
When his baby died.

Sometimes
it was his own fault.
Sometimes
not.

But all these together
give us a picture of someone
who yes, was a great king,
but who also struggled and suffered and failed.

That might have seemed
like a long way
to introduce the psalm
but knowing that background
makes all the difference.

Because this psalm begins
with a psalmist
celebrating God's faithfulness,
but ends by wondering
where God is
in the middle of suffering.
Where is God
when everything goes wrong?

It's the same place we so often find ourselves.
On the one hand,
we have our faith in God.
On the other,
something in our lives that we are struggling with,
some deep grief or pain.
And sometimes
it feels as if there is an abyss between them,
an abyss
that threatens to suck everything into it.
And we wonder
if there is anything
that can bridge it.

But what fills the abyss
in the psalm
is the words that we read today.
A vision,
God speaking in response
to the faithfulness
of the first part of the psalm
and in preparation
for the struggle

of the last part.

And there are two themes in God's words,
two themes
that are intermingled through them.

First,
is the promises that God made to David
about his rule as king.

"I have found David my servant; *
with my holy oil have I anointed him.
My hand will hold him fast *
and my arm will make him strong.
No enemy shall deceive him, *
nor any wicked man bring him down.
I will crush his foes before him *
and strike down those who hate him.

This is God's
king.
God put him in place,
God will make his throne secure.
He will defeat his enemies, and extend his territory,
and his children and his children's children
will continue to reign.

But there's a second theme.
And that is
God's faithfulness.
Because underlying
David's kingship
is the covenant that God made with Abraham
that the people will be God's people
and God will be their God.
The relationship God has with David
is simply a continuation
of that covenant.
It's a covenant
where God promises

that his love and faithfulness
will be with David
- as it has been with his ancestors.

David will know God,
will know him as a rock,
his stability and security,
as his God,
is savior,
and as his father.

And as his father
he will love him and love him and love him,
even when David
and his descendants
mess up,
even when David
and his descendants
turn their backs,
even when David and his descendants
break faith.

God may punish them
but God will not stop loving them.
Ever.

That's where the psalm end,
but it's not where the story ends.

Because when we turn to the pages of New Testament,
we see this psalm
lived out.
Jesus, born of the house of David,
born of David's line.
Another ruler, but a very different one.
Because here
God and king
become one.
In Jesus
the love and the faithfulness of God

are expressed in human form,
as he walked among the people of the Holy Land,
praying and teaching and healing,
and bringing life
and hope.

And then, as he died.
Expressing the same fear and grief
that the psalmist expresses
in the verses after the ones we read.
Hanging on the cross.
“My God my God
why have you abandoned me?”

After all the promises,
after all the celebration,
what will God do
with despair.

And the answer, the answer
comes
three days later.
When
against all logic,
Jesus is raised from the dead.
And God says
once and for all.
No abandonment.
My faithfulness and love are with you. Always.
We too
are members of God’s household, we too
are members of God’s family.
We too
are inheritors of the covenant, inheritors
of the promise.
God loves us.
God is faithful.

And when we stand
staring at the abyss,

faith on the one side
and struggle on the other,
we find between them
God.
God who loves us
and is faithful.
Always.

“Someone is on your side
No one is alone.”

God is on our side.
We are not alone.