

A sermon preached online on March 22nd, 2020 based upon Psalm 42 entitled, “Ancient Wisdom to Help Us in this Uncertain Time.”

It is helpful for me to remember the great of saints who have gone before us. They dealt with times of crisis and profound struggle, many of which were far worse than what we are confronted with, and in their own imperfect way they passed the torch of faith down through generations to us. And now this great cloud of witnesses is rooting for us that we will call forth our better angels and pass the torch of faith, hope and love to those who follow us.

I’ve been thinking about the Book of 150 Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures because for the past 2500 years the psalms have provided a tool by which people of faith – first Jews, then also Christians – have reached out to connect with God. With powerful, poetic imagery the psalms give expression to the full range of emotions that we human beings experience. Some of them express great joy: *“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.” (Psalm 100 vs.1-2)*

But other psalms express far darker emotions: profound sadness, doubt, feelings of abandonment. The psalms can be very raw -- brutally honest. And when we are trying to connect with God, it is best to acknowledge whatever emotional state we happen to find ourselves in at the present moment.

I want to reflect on one of the psalms – psalm 42 – because I think it is a particularly helpful one in the time in which we find ourselves, with wisdom to be gleaned.

***As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?***

The ancient Jewish people believed that God’s living presence dwelt with the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem. In this instance, the psalmist – who, given the constraints of the culture most likely was a male -- finds himself far away from Jerusalem, and grieves over his inability to go to the sacred temple. Perhaps many of us can identify as we find ourselves grieving over our own inability to gather with our church family in our own sacred space.

On a deeper level, though the psalmist expresses the longing of our soul for the tender embrace of God’s love – the blessed assurance of God’s love for us as beloved children. Perhaps we feel abandoned by God. In the compelling image of the psalmist, our soul is like a deer in a time of draught, searching, searching, searching for a flowing stream of water from which to drink.

***3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’***

My tears have been my food day and night. Pretty raw, right?
And then the question, “Where is your God?” In times like this -- times when suffering is rampant -- this question has a way of rising up, doesn't it? Why would God allow something like this to happen?

These are profound questions without easy answers. This I can tell you, the God Jesus embodied – the God Jesus taught us about -- does not send suffering as punishment.

The great story that is our focus during the season Lent involves Jesus moving towards suffering, not away from it. He make the long walk to the cross. Like a fireman running into the towers on 9/11, or in the present moment, a nurse taking her shift in a pulmonary intensive care unit, God comes to meet us in the midst of the suffering. Therefore we can say with the words of that most famous of psalm, “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.*”

***4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.***

We talk often about the importance of living in the present moment. Here, however the psalmist reminds us of the positive function of memory and our ability to return to past moments of shared joy. When I've visited people in nursing homes – which sadly is not possible during this time – one of the things I've noticed is that when I take the time with the elderly residents to ask questions and really listen to the stories they can tell of the lives they have lived, often their faces become radiant. The past experiences of love and belonging becomes present.

As we are isolated in our homes, we would do well to do the same. Consciously choose to remember good times past, perhaps recording them in a journal. If you are confined with others, have conversations about happy times of the past – laugh about funny times of old. If you alone call up family or friends to do this with. Perhaps now is the time to get become familiar with the back stories of people that you are not familiar with – particularly of the love that shaped them. In doing so, we allow the joy of the past to be in the present, nourishing us for the journey on which we find ourselves.

***5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?***

There is more wisdom here: Take note of the self-reflection of the psalmist. It's almost as if he steps out of himself to watch the directions his thoughts are moving -- the emotions that are arising up within him. Try to cultivate a similar awareness in yourself.

One of the lessons here is: *I am not my emotions*. There is a part of us that is deeper than these fleeting emotions. There are moments that will come as we travel this valley when certain dark emotions may seem to utterly consume us. It is the nature of emotions, however that they come but eventually they go.

And so the psalmist goes on to say,

**Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.**

**My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.**

**⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.**

If you are like me, you have been feeling a range of strong emotions during this time of enforced social distancing. There have been good feelings: gratitude for what I have, indeed, sometimes a deeper sense of gratitude than I had before. We have a new appreciation of simple blessings we so easily take for granted. It is strange, is it not that sometimes it takes a crisis to recognize what a gift simple kindness is.

But I think it is important to acknowledge the other, darker feelings that in the imagery of the psalmist are like waves that wash over us – threaten to drown us. The psalmist conjures up the primordial chaos of the deep dark waters out of which the Spirit of God called forth creation. The fear arises that everything is coming unhinged, descending back into those primordial dark waters of chaos.

If you are like me there have been moments when fear hits you like a wave. I spend some time paying attention to the news and the projections regarding the spread of the disease and the loss of jobs and it starts to overwhelm me. The temptation to despair arises.

But here is what I have been noticing. These feelings of fear and despair – like a wave they pass through me. Gratitude returns.

So here is the wisdom that inhabits this psalm: Don't be afraid of the dark emotions. They will come, but they will also go. Go ahead and let yourself feel fear, or despair, or loneliness that arises. Locate it in your body. And then notice as these emotions begin to pass on.

Know that these kinds of feelings are normal. They are a part of being human. And noticing them in ourselves makes it possible to feel compassion towards others. We recognize we are all in this together.

***⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.***

Hear the wisdom: “*the Lord commands his steadfast love.*”

Faith involves obedience. We often think of faith as though it were an emotion – a reassuring feeling of God’s presence. When this kind of feeling arises it is a gift, but faith is more than a feeling.

But faith involves choosing in obedience to God to commit ourselves to follow the path of love. It can involve singing a song even when we feel stuck and don’t feel like singing, and as we do perhaps we discover something begin to shift inside us.

It involves praying even we don’t feel like praying, pouring out our hearts to God, in the course of which we may discover the stillness of which the Psalm 46 speaks: “*Be still and know that I am God.*” It can involve getting on the phone and calling someone who might be feeling lonely even when we don’t feel like it, and as we do we discover some freedom from our own self-absorption.

The psalm circles around again in the final verses:

*9 I say to God, my rock,
‘Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?’
10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’*

*11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

Do you recognize the pattern? The psalmist descends once more into the darkness, but arises at the end with a final strong assertion of hope.

I saw a meme online – someone saying, “*I really hadn’t planned to give so much up for Lent.*” One way I would invite you to frame the present time is to see it as crash course in spirituality – in learning how to follow Jesus.

You know the serenity prayer: “*God grant me the serenity to accept that which I cannot change, the courage to change that which I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

There are things we can do. When we begin to feel overwhelmed we can go for a walk in the woods and as Jesus commanded us, “*look at the birds; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them.*” (Matthew 6:26)

We can call up a friend to make a much needed human connection.

On the way to the cross Jesus took note of Zaccheaus the taxcollector and Bartimaeus the blind beggar, attending to people who were invisible to others. We can do the same, seeking out those who may go unnoticed in this time of uncertainty and find a way to provide comfort.

Those of us who find ourselves confined without an end in sight in close quarters with family members, know that we will at times find ourselves feeling irritable. We may lose our temper with these people we dearly love. Know that this is normal. But know also that Jesus commands forgiveness as a way to move forward when hostility disturbs the peace.

In general, we can find the courage to choose love.

There is much in our present context that we can't change, and Jesus shows us what it means to let go, to surrender into acceptance. We watch him as he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pour out his heart to God, desperately asking for some other path than that of the cross. He feels the full force of the darkness, and then he arrives at acceptance: *"Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."*

On the cross we watch as in his dying breathes Jesus turns to the psalm before our favorite, Psalm 22 and cries, *"My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?!"* And then we watch as he relinquishes his life, crying out, *"Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit."*

The cross is at the center of the story, but it is not the end of the story. The resurrection is found at the far side of crucifixion. Death gives way to new life. The darkness gives way to light. In this crash course in spirituality we are invited to find ourselves in this sacred story. We know that whatever painful emotions we are compelled to feel during this challenging time, Jesus has experienced them before us, and so Jesus is with us in the darkness, and in this knowledge we find courage to rise and face another day. Day by day we learn what it means to trust in the darkness. Be assured, Jesus will lead us safely home. The future is uncertain, but we know who holds the future.