



Daily Meditations November 4-9, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, PROPER 26:

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Mercy, Grace, Justice Monday, November 4, 2019

Psalms 56,57, and 58

"Have mercy on me, O God, for my enemies are hounding me; all day long they assault and oppress me."

These three psalms, taken together, seem to form a common story about what it is like to live in any age, not just at the time of David. The story begins with fear of enemies, and I believe those enemies are real and imagined and might even include forces of inequity that are human, as well as those forces that seem all around us that we simply cannot control. Unlike the psalmist, most of us lucky enough to live in the United States have few enemies ready to, say, slit our throats for the contents of our billfolds and purses. Like the psalmist, many of us are unlucky enough to have real opponents, and I'm thinking here especially of children who face bullying in their schools, children who must undergo "active shooter" training, children who could easily view the adult world beyond their immediate families as fearsome and full of threats.

Confronted with enemies real and imagined (*which can be scarier, right?*) the psalmist seeks mercy. I am innocent, he says. I didn't do it. I don't deserve what's happening to me. There are days when I get up feeling the weight of the world, things known and unknown, and I truly long for a merciful God who will intervene on my behalf. At the end of my life, I will be particularly interested in grace; I will not want justice.

In the third part of the story laid out here, appearing in Psalm 58, the writer moves from passive reluctance to the acceptance of reality, hoping for the

mercy of God, to a direct call on the Almighty to come down here right now and take charge: "O God, break their teeth in their mouths; pull the fangs of the young lions, O Lord. Let them be like the snail that melts away, like a stillborn child that never sees the sun...The righteous will be glad when they see the vengeance; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked." From fear to a plea for mercy to a demand for revenge: These three psalms outline basic truths about the human condition. At the very least, we must recognize, though, that we are not alone in what we face. And that recognition itself can be a blessing.

Go Ahead, Make My Day!

Tuesday, November 5, 2019

Psalms 61, 62

"God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, that power belongs to God."

Self-abasement ties these two songs together. We are not good enough, we are not strong enough. Our plight is lamentable even if we are royalty, and particularly so if we are involved in nefarious schemes against our fellow men and women. Fear again emerges as a theme, fear of others, fear of the unknown, fear of being taken for granted. And the response to that fear, as the song goes, is to put trust in the Lord.

The story presented here ends with a sentence for us to really think about: "Steadfast love is yours, O Lord, for you repay everyone according to his deeds." It's hard to tell whether this is wishful thinking or whether it is a statement of fact based on the first-hand knowledge of the songwriter. It's been my experience that this concluding statement in Psalm 62 just isn't true at all. But how I wish it were (sometimes)! Wouldn't it be wonderful if God gave people what they deserved? Think of all the bad bosses you've had; what pains should they suffer? If you could call down acts of vengeance, who would you target? And, truth be known, don't we occasionally pray for revenge even if we don't take up a weapon of some sort to take matters into our own hands? "Go ahead," we imagine ourselves saying, "make my day!"

Contrast some of these conclusions from the Old Testament God of the psalmist to the advice of Jesus Christ in the new covenant with humankind. Or find a book by a reputable counselor and read up on how if we ache for revenge; if we harbor hate in our hearts, we victimize only ourselves.

The Long-awaited Savior

Wednesday, November 6, 2019

Psalm 72

"Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous deeds!"

The authorship of this psalm is disputed, but one pretty good way to look at it is through the eyes of David, who takes seriously the idea that one of his blood line will be the messiah, and so this man from the future will be especially blessed. Thus, to whom much is given, much will be expected, and righteousness will involve good governance, among other things: Treat the poor with justice, defend the needy, rescue the poor and punish the oppressor, ensure an abundance of peace "till the moon shall be no more."

Interestingly enough, the vision for this long-awaited savior is that he will protect the poor and oppressed and spare them from violence. He will bless as

he has been blessed. This prophecy was borne out, as we are well aware, in the "kingship" of Jesus Christ, whose life as an adult is testified to in the works of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and whose ministry hit its high point in the Sermon on the Mount and the acts he pursued that were designed to help the downtrodden, not to enrich the wealthy. The Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus wanted nothing to do with this, of course, and so the King of Kings was put on a cross.

As we go into the Christmas season, we might do well to focus on what David and Solomon foresaw and the actual role played out by the messiah. We are a very rich country. We are a very rich people. Many of us pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps; thus, we believe we earned our privilege. The people who are truly kings and princes today, though, are those who heed the words in Psalm 72 and the much later words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

None of Us are Getting Out of This Alive

Thursday, November 7, 2019

Psalms 70, 71

"But I shall always wait in patience and shall praise you more and more."

In that line, the psalmist is kind of pitiful in his prevarication. Psalms 70 and 71 reflect an old man troubled beyond measure by the coming end of his life and the fact that even at that late time he is pursued by enemies and travails. He is anything but patient. Evidence of his eroding self-confidence is his persistent praise of God and constant seeking of help from the Almighty. He is a broken man, in my estimation, and his only hope seems to be that his praise will move God to intervene and...*and what?*

How very, very human it is to fear our decline and put faith in whatever "God" is presented by the pharmaceutical industry or by politicians or shamans of all sorts and sizes selling this or that spiritual device or trick to push off the inevitable. Today we find God in that bottle of opioids or the one filled with gin. Or we find him on Fox News or in some grand altar in a tabernacle built upon greed and grifting. I have long found it odd that Christians get to the end of their allotted time on earth and fight like crazy, spending all their resources to keep from crossing into another dimension where the lion lies with the lamb and all our wounds are healed. The truth is that none of us are getting out of this alive.

Unfortunately, I generally avoid most of the psalms because they offer few solutions to the human condition, and the psalmist is satisfied to whine. The Roman stoic Seneca has, to my mind, put it better than the psalmist: "It's not that we have too short a time to live, but that we squander a great deal of it. Life is long enough, and it's given in sufficient measure to do many great things if we spend it well. But when it's poured down the drain in luxury and neglect, when it's employed to no good end, we're finally driven to see that it has passed by before we even recognized it passing. And, so it is -- we don't receive a short life, we make it so."

Work Works

Friday, November 8, 2019

Psalm 69

"I will praise the Name of God in song; I will proclaim his greatness with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an offering of oxen, more than bullocks with horns

and hoofs."

Self-awareness is not the songwriter's greatest strength, to say the least. If people are mean to him, if they despise him, if they hurt him physically, it's God's fault: "Zeal for your house has eaten me up; the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me." And, so, Lord, you owe me! You owe me, and yet I will praise your name in the hopes that you'll help me out here.

Psalms 69 seems to be, like today's political situation, all transactional. Quid pro quo with a touch of pleading. I confess this psalm irritates me. Be a man, I want to say. Grow up! Quit whining! You're mistaken if you believe God owes you anything and mistaken once more if you believe you can win him over with praise and thanksgiving. Nothing in my experience tells me that any of these strategies work, but I also admit I may be wrong in thinking that the psalmist himself actually thinks they will work. Here's what I know: work works. Whimpering breeds contempt. Strength comes from facing the real world as it is and not as we wish it were. We save ourselves by saving others. And in a 100 years, we will *all* be ashes, and no amount of money or praying or the laying up of power will change that. In these days and hours, it's time to get out those Big Girl Panties and put 'em on.

Dirty Harry of the Old Testament

Saturday, November 9, 2019

Psalms 75, 76

"He breaks the spirit of princes and strikes terror in the kings of the earth."

Here we find the God of wrath and anger: "For in the Lord's hand there is a cup, full of spiced and foaming wine, which he pours out, and all the wicked of the earth shall drink and drain the dregs." I like that image. The character of God is to judge, and things are black and white. We are not talking justice; we are talking enmity and hostility. If Psalms 75 and 76 were made into a movie, you could easily see Clint Eastwood in the role of God--or Matt Damon. This would be a role you'd find in *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*, where heroes are larger than life itself.

What am I to make of this? I know what evangelical fundamentalists make of it, but I cannot walk the road with them. And so I kind of take a sociological view of this Hobbesian desert where if you attract divine or royal attention, you have to watch every breath you take for fear of being forced to drink the potion of death. Happily, the psalms are about one God and not many, and, more happily, God didn't have nukes at this point in time. We do, of course, and the God we create these days, if we do so at all as a people, is truly a reflection of what somebody with a little learning and not much sense has made out of the Dirty Harry of the Old Testament.

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