

Sermon

The Stronghold of my Life

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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In a world teeming with broken relationships, personal disappointments, public scandals, political games, cultural disrespect, and increased threats of world war, trust is difficult to extend – even to God. In these last few years, we have all experienced deep pain, loss, and at times felt abandoned by God. So many of us believers – followers of the Word – have felt extreme disappointment and sadness in our lives...so it leaves me wondering – how can the Psalmist today claim that the Lord is my light and my salvation? Yet as we read on – we see really gritty honesty from the writer – perhaps this person has just received a cancer diagnosis or perhaps just returned from military service and remains with PTSD symptoms...or perhaps they are battling the on-going demons of addiction and sobriety...

I love the sheer optimism and trust that this psalm expresses – no matter what the evildoers or adversaries he refers to may be – what is clear is that this faithful disciple trusts in God. And in a big way- “For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble he will conceal me under the cover of his tent – he will set me high on a rock.” I love this statement – it reminds me when I was a child, running to my mother’s arms after a fall or something that frightened me – nothing could hurt me while her arms were around me. I was certain of this – I had no fear in that space, none.

But as we grow and experience the disappointments in life – and today, just turning on the news is a pretty frightening experience – yet, I’ve heard and seen extreme courage and strength from those under attack. There was a video on the internet running around social media and You Tube of a Ukrainian girl singing in a bomb shelter...followed by a German man who brought a piano to an immigration camp and two soldiers who married. Is it just optimism? Or is it something more that makes some people capable of rising above the ugliness of life?

Our psalm is one of optimism yes but there is an antagonistic sense by verse 7...“Hear O Lord when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!...do not hide your face from me.” Real fear lives alongside honest faith. Bona fide doubt holds hands with genuine trust.

This may not be a part of Lent we care to explore within ourselves but it is part of our journey. These questions, these doubts – they are part of who we are as a people. It is not possible to see the atrocities we see in this world and not wonder...it is not possible to watch a maternity hospital or a children’s hospital be bombed and not question – and it is not possible to see a young girl sing in a bomb shelter and not feel inspired.

Faith – religion – is not about doctrine. It’s not about what the Book of Order tells us are the rules – it’s about truth. Learning to hold doubt and faith together takes patience, which is why the last verse of the psalm – “Wait for the Lord” – holds all fourteen verses together. Patient seeking, patient searching, patient development of spiritual practices that make both faith and doubt meaningful. When we face our doubts and fears – not just as humans – but as

believers – this is how and when we can experience pain, learn lessons and gain perspective.

When we look into our doubt deeply and look how our faith carries us, like the comfort of a loving mother’s arms – we see abundance before scarcity...recognize grace before loss.

The Gospel of Luke is consistent with the message from the psalm – this inward and outward journey emphasizing deliberate reflection on the obstacles that challenge us and the hope for new direction as we look ahead to the promise of Easter. Jesus knows and says he is journeying to a similar end that others before him have endured...he refers to Herod as a fox – Herod Antipas, the executioner of John the Baptist – yet Jesus could not be distracted from his final destination. Jesus goes on to say, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Jesus gives us insight into the desire of God to protect us – our God is that loving God who sees our struggles, our challenges and wants to and does protect and help us.

So if you’re feeling concern, doubt, anxiety today – join the club. That’s normal – it doesn’t mean you don’t believe, it doesn’t mean you don’t have hope in transformation and redemption – it just means your human and life is difficult sometimes. But as the psalmist so clearly said, “The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall I fear?”

The Lord is our light...when we lean on our own understanding of things – when we seek only council from friends and we don’t bring those worries to God

– “For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble” – so you can come hide in our fort, just like you did as a child. It’s OK to hide away sometimes from the trouble that is around you – but don’t forget to take God with you into the fort, into your hiding space.

So as you go through your week, I’ve included an insert in your bulletin this week – focusing once again on the art of Vincent Van Gogh. Hang this page somewhere you will see it this week. In this week’s passage, Jesus longs to gather in even those who reject him – a tender, maternal image of forgiving love, even in the midst of estrangement. Your assignment this week is to reach out this week to someone from who you feel estranged or distant: a handwritten note, a call or a text can help stitch the world back together, one relationship at a time.

“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord be strong and let your heart take courage...wait for the Lord!”
“The Lord is the stronghold of my life.”

Amen

Second Sunday of Lent 2022

Scripture: Luke 13:31-35

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. And you were not willing!”

– Luke 13:34

This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of gratitude, praying,

“God of grace, thank you for the cradle of the world, for the lullaby of your love, and for the brilliant colors of creation. Shelter us under your wings, Mother, and give us the strength to follow you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Hang this triptych somewhere you will see it this week. In this week’s passage, Jesus longs to gather in even those who reject him – a tender, maternal image of forgiving love, even in the midst of estrangement. Reach out this week to someone from who you feel estranged or distant: a handwritten note, a call or a text can help stitch the world back together, one relationship at a time.

