

Communion Meditation – “Favor for a Lifetime”

Sunday, April 10, 2016

Scripture Readings – Psalm 30 and John 21:1-19

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Psalm 30. Although the superscription on the psalm indicates it was a part of the worship liturgy for the rededication of the temple in the second century before the Common Era, the psalm itself is dated as early as 530 BCE during the post-exilic period. The ancient Hebrew expresses gratitude for the new life which followed liberation, and affirms God’s favor.

*1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. 2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. 3 O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. 4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you God’s faithful ones, and give thanks to God’s holy name. 5 For God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. 6 As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." 7 By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. 8 To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 9 "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? 10 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!" 11 You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, 12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.*

Both New Testament lectionary readings for this Sunday speak of liberating and life changing moments in the lives of the apostles who led the movement of Christianity in the first century of the Common Era. Acts 9 tells of Paul’s conversion on the way to Damascus and John 21 tells of Peter’s encounter with the Risen Christ. Today’s second scripture reading will focus on Peter’s experience in John, chapter 21, verses 1-19.

*1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2 Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. 15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to Peter the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 19 (Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.) After this he said to Peter, "Follow me."*

The title of the meditation: “Favor for a Lifetime”

*The text: “For God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Psalm 30:5*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, too often we forget your favor. Today we are reminded of who you are and this gives us reason for rejoicing. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

The ancient Hebrew whose personal testimony became Psalm 30 is someone I would have enjoyed getting to know. I like his openness. I like his honesty. And I am touched particularly by his experience of God. I think he was a man ahead of his time.

Following their return from the Babylonian exile, persons of faith spent a great deal of time explaining the meaning of their captivity. Many interpreted their suffering and loss as God’s punishment. The Hebrew prophets of this period talk a lot (a lot) about an angry God who is almost out of control in using the surrounding powers as a means to punish Israel.

This ancient Hebrew had a different perspective. He clearly acknowledges that God does get angry but he affirms (what many did not yet understand) that God is a God of favor rather than a God of wrath.

*For God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favor is for a lifetime.*

In her book *The Dance of Anger*, Dr. Harriet Lerner, clinical psychologist, explains that anger is an important emotion...for two reasons: First, it helps us define who we are, and second, it is a vehicle for change. Each of us expresses anger in different ways. Some are healthy and others not so. According to Dr. Lerner, to silence and repress one’s anger, avoiding conflict at all costs is never healthy. Neither is it productive to get caught up in angry cycles, ranting and raving in such a way that there is never a resolution. When anger is used as a way to control, punish or manipulate, no one wins. This psalm affirms that anger is a part of life, and makes an important distinction about God’s anger.

When asked the question, what kind of God is ours? This ancient Hebrew responds: our God is for us. This does not mean that life is without its disappointments or that life is not terribly unfair and cruel at times. What it does mean, however, is that these painful experiences in life are not inflicted upon us by an angry God. This is not the nature of our Creator. We are not gathered in this sanctuary today because we are afraid, we are together to affirm a loving, life-giving God who draws us up from the pit, renews our strength, and restores our soul.

*Weeping may linger for the night but joy comes with the morning.*

This ancient Hebrew celebrates a God who forgives and who gives people second chances and new beginnings. This was his personal experience of God and this was Peter’s experience. Five hundred years later, Peter, the disciple who denied his Lord three times on the night of his betrayal, experiences an honest confrontation and a new beginning on this early morning several days after Christ’s crucifixion.

The disciples were still mourning the loss of their beloved friend whom they hoped would change not only their lives but their world; a world which was still colored by oppressive and unsympathetic rulers. Confused and bewildered, the disciples found themselves drawn to what was most familiar to them – they returned to their fishing boats – to the life they knew before they met Jesus, longing to gain some sense of who they were without him – hoping to feel better just by going through the motions. Their hearts weren't into fishing, they were reliving those last days they spent with Christ wondering what they could have done differently.

Jesus came to his friends on this early morning, not to criticize them but to comfort them. Jesus came to boost their confidence with a load of fish too heavy to haul and to share an early morning meal with them around a campfire. And Jesus came to Peter not to berate him for his betrayal but to bless him. Perhaps Peter anticipated the anger of his Lord and this would explain his anxiety. His grief was compounded with guilt for not being there for Jesus. If Jesus had been mad, he certainly would have been justified.

But instead of anger, Peter found the favor of his friend, his God. He found forgiveness and a second chance.

“Peter, do you love me?” Jesus asked.

Intentionally he asked this question three times – the same number of times Peter denied his love for Christ. In so doing Jesus gives Peter a chance to undo what he had done and to reaffirm what they both already know: Peter's devotion to his Lord.

*You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*

This, my friends, is the story of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a story of honest confrontation, forgiveness, and a call to serve others. It is a story of second chances and new beginnings. It is the story of a God whose anger is but for a moment and whose favor is for a lifetime. Hallelujah! Amen.