

SERMON: Dancing On a Banana Peel

June 28, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Amid the uncertainties of life, prepare us, O Lord, by your Word and Spirit to face whatever may come our way, in the quiet assurance that you are ceaselessly at work in our lives, answering our prayers in ways we may not yet perceive, turning our mourning into dancing, so that we may praise you with our whole being forever; through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 30

New Testament Lesson: Phil. 4:4-7, 12-13

Life is unpredictable. One moment everything is going smoothly. You feel on top of the world. Your children are doing well in school. Your blood pressure is 120 over 70. You've gotten into the college of your choice with plenty of financial aid. You sit back in your easy-chair, prop up your feet up, and sigh, "Ah, it doesn't get any better than this." Life is good.

Then the phone rings—a neighbor comes to the front door with a solemn look on her face—you slip on the back stairs—the stock market tanks—the tumor is malignant--and suddenly, like a light bulb dropped on concrete, your sense of security shatters into a thousand pieces. It's a feeling some of you know well, and one that sooner or later all of us will have to deal with--when life catches us off guard, and things we thought were secure, fall apart.

Like on that warm, crystal-clear September morning in 2001... just before the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and our sense of national security was shaken to its core. The feelings of that day were captured powerfully by the composer René Clausen in his "Memorial" written two years after the event and performed here in Greenville several years ago by the choir of First Baptist Church with full orchestral accompaniment. Clausen's "Memorial" is a stunning, deeply moving cantata. It begins with the strings playing a lovely pastoral melody, as quiet and gentle as a clear September morning.

But gradually you begin to hear the rumble of the timpani, getting louder and louder, like the sound of an aircraft approaching the city. It is unnerving...knowing what is soon to come, literally out-of-the blue, as the quiet, lovely melody of the strings is shattered by the clash of cymbals and screams from the choir, “*Adoni, Adoni!*” “My God, My God!”

Behind our psalm for the day, Psalm 30, lies a somewhat similar experience. Literally at the very center of the psalm, the psalmist acknowledges, “**As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved.’**” Eugene Peterson paraphrases the words of the psalmist this way. “When things were going great, I crowed, ‘I’ve got it made.’” All the rest of the psalm sets over against that false sense of security the reality of a grave illness that almost cost the psalmist his life, but from which God healed and delivered him.

Psalm 30 has rightly been called “a psalm of thanksgiving for recovery from grave illness.” (NRSV) That primarily is how we hear and receive it.

**“O Lord, my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me....
You brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among
those gone down to the Pit.”**

Behind the psalm lies some unnamed near-death experience the psalmist had faced.

But there is superscription above the psalm that calls it “**A psalm at the dedication of the Temple.**” That seems odd, since there is no mention of a temple and its dedication anywhere in the psalm itself. Yet many scholars believe that this psalm may have been used at the dedication of the second temple in the 6th century B.C. after the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon.

If that is the case, then behind the psalm lies not only the experience of grave personal illness, but also the devastating experience of the destruction in 586 B.C. of everything Israel held dear, symbolized most powerfully by the destruction of the

Temple in Jerusalem. In that terrible event all of Israel's false securities were shattered, and the theology that had assured them that God would never allow such a thing to happen to his own covenant people, was exposed as a lie. God most certainly did allow it.

The superscription of the psalm invites us to hear it in the context of anything and everything that shatters our complacency, as individuals, as communities, as nations. The psalmist says, **“I felt secure and said to myself, ‘I will never be defeated.’ You were good to me, Lord; you protected me like a mountain fortress. But then you hid your face from me, and I was afraid.”** (TEV) “I was dismayed.” (NRSV)

Sometimes it seems that we go through life dancing on a banana peel, never knowing when the next slip-up will come. Life itself has a way of catching us off guard. **Or...is it God** who does so? The psalmist says, **“You hid your face, and I was afraid.”** That's a theme that finds expression throughout scripture. The divine face represents the nearness of God, God turning to us with divine favor. If God were to turn away for an instant, life would crumble. “Answer me quickly, O Lord,” begs the author of Psalm 143, “my spirit fails; Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.” The psalmist knows that with God and God alone are the ultimate issues of life and death.

Elsewhere the prophet Isaiah hears the Lord say to his people in exile, **“For a brief moment I forsook you; but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your redeemer.”** (Is. 54:7-8)

There you have it in a nut shell—the tension that runs throughout the Bible between what we experience as the **“wrath of God for a moment”** and the **“everlasting love” of God** that endures forever. The two places in scripture where

that tension is seen and felt most intensely are in the **exile of Israel** and the **crucifixion of Jesus**. “For a brief moment, I forsook you...” says the Lord, and in that moment, the temple was destroyed and the people of God were carted off into exile in Babylon. “For a brief moment” God the Father hid his face, and the Beloved Son cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.”

What do you make of that? Does it make you as uncomfortable as it does me? It is meant to! At the heart of biblical theology is an insistence that at every moment, in every experience of life, we are dealing with the living, sovereign God. The Lord is surely not a god of unrelenting wrath, out to get us. But neither is the Lord a god of “whatever,” a god who literally “doesn’t give a damn,” who showers blessings on anyone and everyone, regardless. No, the God of the Bible is more complex, more mysterious, more sternly sovereign than that.

Knowing that it is with the living God that we are dealing in all that befalls us, the psalmist remembers and gives thanks to God for the healing that he has experienced, and he calls upon the whole community of faith to share in his thanksgiving.

**“O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me...
Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his
holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a
lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the
morning.”**

As important as it is for us to pray to God in the midst of the crises of life that befall us, it is equally important for us to give thanks to God for the prayers that are answered, in whatever way they are answered, even if the answer is only partially what we may have desired. We pray, and keep on praying fervently for healing, for deliverance from the forces of disease or addiction or depression that

assail us, and we give thanks for every glimmer of hope, every moment of health and wholeness, for every little daily victory that comes our way.

James Mays, one of the greatest teachers of the Bible I ever had, says that we today know more about the physical causes and remedies for illness than the ancient psalmists, but still in the face of the things that shake our security or threaten our lives, we have choices to make in terms of how we will understand and deal with those experiences. For us, as well as for the psalmists, “crises of health that threaten life do come. Situations arise when little is certain.” Mays asks, “Do we bracket God out of what happens to us?” Or cannot even the experience of grave illness be a lesson in how insecure and unpredictable life is, and thus a call to rely on God alone through prayer? “It would be an unbiblical religion,” Mays warns, “to see meaning for faith only in positive experiences that can be interpreted as the blessing and favor of God.” The God of the Bible is at work in our lives even in that which is deeply painful and perplexing, that which we would never have chosen for ourselves or our loved ones “Life,” he says, “must be experienced in relation to God, sought and received from the Lord’s hand.”¹

That is a theme that resonates throughout our Presbyterian theology. Our “Brief Statement of Faith” begins by affirming, “In life and death we belong to God,” and ends by declaring “With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In all of life, in our joys and sorrows, we belong to the God from whose steadfast love and covenant faithfulness nothing can finally separate us, even when for the moment it may seem as if God had hidden his face from us.

With intense honesty all of scripture, the psalms in particular, acknowledge that there are indeed situations in life in which it does seem that God has hidden his

¹ James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) p. 62.

face from us. There are times when God seems strangely silent, far off. More than a few of the psalms lament the absence of God in times when we need God the most. **“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart?”** (Ps 13). We will look more closely at some of the psalms of lament in the coming weeks.

The novelist Reynolds Price, who for years taught at Duke University, is no conventional believer. He admits to feeling uncomfortable inside a church. He says, “Like most people who are getting along in their daily life, I hadn't spent a whole lot of time paying attention to the spiritual aspects of my life.” At age 16 he dropped out of the church and didn't resume regular worship for a long time.

But all that changed in the spring of 1984 when Price discovered that he had a malignant tumor on his spinal cord. His doctors suggested he had 18 months to live, at best. They were wrong--25 years later he is still writing. After traditional surgery and radiation failed, leaving him a paraplegic, the experimental use of a newly developed laser scalpel eventually led to the successful removal of the tumor from his spine. Price now says openly, “I believe God healed me. The laser surgery was the method he used.”

During his illness and recovery Price experienced two strange, mystical experiences which he recounts in his memoir *A Whole New Life*. The first came at a time after the first surgery that was unable to remove the tumor. As he was lying in bed, suddenly Price says that he had a vision of Jesus “pouring water down this huge incision in my spine.” In the vision he heard Jesus say, “Your sins are forgiven,” and he thought to himself, “That's not what I want to hear,” so he asked, “Am I also cured?” and Jesus replied, “That too.”

Later when it appeared that Price was dying fast, he had another vision. “I certainly was going paraplegic fast,” he says. “I was lying there in the dark, and I just said, ‘How much more of this is there going to be?’ And this voice very clearly said, ‘More.’”²

I suspect the psalmist and Reynolds Price would understand each other well. Out of his own near-death experience, the psalmist was nevertheless able to give thanks to God for the ways by which God had heard and answered his prayers.

“I cried to you for help and you healed me.... You turned my mourning into dancing ... and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.”

Remembering the goodness of God in the past, the psalmist is able to see that God is still at work in his life. And so he continues to pray, and encourages others to pray with him, **“Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper...and I will give thanks to you forever.”**

The Apostle Paul, who surely knew by heart the psalms of Israel, understood all this well. Out of his own painful struggles, Paul could write to his beloved congregation at Philippi,

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice... Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:4-7, 13)

What does all that look like, “up-close and personal” in the midst of this congregation today? It looks like a wonderful card that Steve and I both have on the doors of our studies. On the card is a picture of Jack Huffman with a wonderful

² From an online interview with Reynolds Price, May 23, 1999, *New York Times*

smile on his face and his arms out-stretched, and beneath the picture are those very words, **“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”**

One final word from Reynolds Price. In an interview he tells of a note he received from an elderly woman in Pennsylvania who described an experience similar to his. Price says, “She'd been undergoing some frightening medical tests. She was in the hospital, lying there one night ... and all of a sudden she saw all these people gathered around listening to a man. She understood that the man was Jesus. And he looked up over the others, just looked at her, and said, ‘Yes.’ And she said, ‘Could you send someone to help me with the tests? They are very demanding.’

“And Jesus said, ‘How would it be if I came?’” At that point in the interview Price paused, surprised at the sudden emotion that had welled up in his voice, and said, “Isn't that beautiful? I have to believe that these things have come from God. That's what I want to believe.”

And so I, and so do you, as together we, too, pray with the psalmist, **“Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!... You have turned my mourning into dancing;...and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.... O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”** To God be the glory. Amen.

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