

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

October 25, 2020

"MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME"

Psalm 90 ~ 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 ~ Matthew 22:34-46

I am part of the clergy development groups that have formed in our Association. One of the purposes of these groups is to find a venue where pastors can meet together to discuss both their successes and their failures ... and believe me, most pastors have plenty of both. If I ever find a pastor who said that they never experienced failure I would immediately assume that they aren't doing their job. For all the highs that accompany this calling ... and there are many ... there are certainly days that are filled with lows.

This is actually my fifth clergy group. Now, before you assume that I was expelled from the others ... clergy are assigned to different groups. In my first group, pastors presented case studies ... a synopsis of an issue before them ... and the rest of us provided feedback ... our collective wisdom, so to speak, because many of us have experienced a similar issue. I'll never forget the meeting when a clergy friend said that he was sure that his church was about to split ... they had formed a committee looking for a new hymnal! Although he was kidding about the split,

everyone laughed knowingly. Churches change Bible translations easier than they change hymnals.

In every church, a few complain that their favorite hymns aren't sung often enough, though everybody has a different list of hymns that they like and hymns that they don't. And some people just don't understand the fuss and get irritated when familiar words are changed to make them more inclusive. Actually, the words to most of our hymns are not original and have changed several times through the years. But there are still people who sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a *worm* like me" instead of "a *wretch* like me." I don't know why it was changed. Is it better to be a "wretch" than to be a "worm?" Maybe it was the environmentalist lobby or some organization like "Save the Worms" that pushed for that change.

We need to take the sensitivities of our brothers and sisters seriously even if a particular wording doesn't offend us personally. But I have to admit that sometimes we go a little overboard. I wonder if our next hymnal will have titles like "What an Acquaintance We Have In Jesus" ... "Above Average is Thy Faithfulness" ... "I Surrender Some" ... "Joyful, Joyful, We Kind of Like Thee" ... "Take My Life, and Leave Me Be." I'm pretty sure we won't be going that far, and in all seriousness, I prayed for my friend's church as they sought to adopt a new

hymnal because they had a daunting task. After hours of work and research and prayer, they were bound to bring a recommendation that they would all mostly like ... but all dislike ... at least a little bit.

The Bible has its own hymnal, of course ... the Book of Psalms. Biblical scholars have long observed that while the rest of the Bible reflects God's self-disclosure to humanity ... the Psalms reflect the human response to God. The psalms are a good course in praying. All of the diverse emphases of the biblical faith are found in the psalter, so the Psalms are also a good course in theology. The psalms are our heart's home in the Christian faith. And just like every hymnal, we find in the psalms some offensive language ... some antiquated ideas corrected by later revelation ... and even, if I dare say so, some bad theology. Remember what Psalm 137 says about the hated Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem and dragged the people off into exile? "*Happy shall they be who take your little ones (meaning their children!) and dash them against the rock!*" (Psalm 137:9). Is infanticide ever an appropriate affirmation of our faith?

Of course, the psalms express emotion as much as they express thought. They are poetry and must be interpreted as such ... meaning they speak in metaphor and feeling ... and often cannot be interpreted literally because they weren't intended to be. At the same time, we should be careful when we reinterpret the psalms ... or

any other biblical text ... *figuratively* just because the theology makes us uncomfortable. Sometimes they mean exactly what they say, and it is *our* theology rather than the text's ... which needs to be corrected.

Our lectionary reading for today is Psalm 90. In part, it says, "*For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil* (Psalm 90:7-9, 15).

Do our sins make God "angry?" Is God a God of "wrath?" Whether we like it or not, if we take the Bible seriously as the Word of God, the answer is "yes."

Because we have been beaten over the head by preachers who had no love in them ... and bashed with human misinterpretations adapting the text to people's cultural points of view ... we are loathe to deal with the wrath of God. The Bible has been misused and people abused to support slavery, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and gross nationalism, to name a few. We are right to be wary of how humans use the Bible to take out their rage ... in the name of God ... against anyone who opposes them. There are too many Christians ... and far too many preachers ... who cannot distinguish between their own wrath and the wrath of God.

Our God is not hateful. But the Bible does say that God gets angry with us sometimes. But the wrath of God is always connected to God's love. Could a loving God stand by and watch the way we damage ourselves and each other without getting angry? Could a God with a passion for justice not care about the suffering we cause each other?

The Bible says that God does get angry, and that we deserve it. But the Bible describes God's anger as appropriate, situational, and temporary. In (Exodus 34:6-6). we find this word: *The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.* Now that's good news!

Psalm 90 asks a question that we need to take seriously: *"Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you"* (Psalm 90:11). I have always heard that "the fear of the Lord" in the Bible doesn't really mean "fear," but "awe," "reverence," "respect for God." But I believe "fear" is the better word ... like the fear children feel when Mom and Dad catch them red handed with their hands in the cookie jar ... like the fear we feel when a great storm breaks upon us and we realize we aren't in control. Says Annie Dillard,

"I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through their liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches they expect just that at any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom."

"Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you," says the psalmist. Therefore, he prays, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart (Psalm 90:12). The God of the Bible is loving and close. But the God of the Bible is also majestic and eternal, powerful, terrifying, transforming, holy. And like all good church music, this psalm puts us in our place in the presence of a God who is great. This is a God who is large and in charge. This is a God who can change our hearts. This is a God who can change our world through us. This is a God you can count on. This is a God who loves you as you are, but loves you too much to leave you be. This is a God who calls Abraham to leave everything behind in search of the promise. This is a God who appears to Moses in a burning bush and sends him to face down the Pharaoh. This is a God who meets Isaiah in the Temple so that he cries, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips," but God still sends him to face down the King. This is a God who asks a young girl to mother the Messiah. This is a God who comes in the flesh to

call ordinary women and men to lay down their lives to be disciples. *This is a God* who raises the dead and walks among us. *This is a God* who encounters us in the experiences of our lives and leaves us no longer the same.

The church is a safe place in many ways ... it is our family ... our home. We have worshipped here Sunday after Sunday until most of us feel comfortable and maybe a little too relaxed. *Psalm 90 says "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations"* (Psalm 90:1). The people sang these words in God's house, the magnificent temple in Jerusalem. But they *remembered* when they wandered in the desert places. They *remembered* when they met God in a travelling tent. They *remembered* when they were slaves in Egypt and exiles in Babylon ... when their Temple was in ruins ... but God was with them still. They *remembered* when they failed God and paid a dear price for their foolishness ... but God did not abandon them and gave them a second chance.

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." Or, as Paul told the Athenians, *"For in (God) we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28).

Well, by the love of Christ and the grace of God, we can feel at home here ... at home in God's presence ... where we have no right to be. But this is a dangerous place, too. *Don't come here* if you expect to get God to do your bidding. *Don't come here* if you don't want God to challenge the way you live ... the things you

say ... how you spend your money how you spend your time ... how you treat the people around you. Don't come here if you aren't willing to let God confront and change you. Don't come here if you don't want God to demand that you care about other people in need and do something to help them. This is a God who demands a lot from us ... who expects you to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,*" and to "*love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus didn't call these the two greatest "suggestions." He called them the two greatest commandments!

This is a God who deserves our praise. And when the eternal God takes hold of us ... as scary as that might be ... our lives are touched in a way that we cannot keep from praising. My friends, religion brings us order and comfort. But the God of the Bible sings us home! May we pray?

Almighty God, Composer of our lives, of whom the angels sing,

Let our praise be true, let our songs be hearty, let our harmony be beautiful. And may we work out our salvation with fear and trembling - and singing, in Jesus' name. Amen.