



“Prayer For Peace”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for this afternoon comes to us from Psalm 4. “Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies? But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord. There are many who say, “O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!” You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.”

I like that the scriptures give us so many vignettes about what it means to worship a risen Lord and a sovereign God. Really, depending on who you ask, the authors of the Bible have a lot to say about the kind of power that is available to those who believe.

For Sara it meant giving birth in very old age. For Moses it meant you could perform miracles in nature and mobilize an entire nation of people. For the prophet Elijah, being a disciple of the Lord God meant that you could call down fire from heaven on a moment’s notice.

The disciples are seen curing the sick and casting out demons in Jesus’ name. In the book of Acts that tells of the early church just after the resurrection, the apostles of the newly risen Lord tell a man who has been lame from birth to stand up and walk and a verse later we see him dancing through the streets.

The apostle Paul is emboldened with the power to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to the ends of the earth. To believe meant having hearts turned away from sin and lives transformed. And for the Psalmist that we heard from today, it meant getting a good night’s sleep.

Which, also depending on who you ask or where you find yourself on any given day, can feel every bit as monumental as the miraculous acts of the prophets and apostles and founders of our faith. “I will both lie down and sleep in peace” the author says, demonstrating what the apostle Paul would call the peace of God that passes all understanding.

It surpasses all understanding because if we just add up the facts of life based on our understanding, as you may have noticed they don’t always equate to peace- troubles at work, anxiety over your children or your marriage or finances or health, deadlines past due, how are we going to make this work? Will I be able to work? Is there going to be any work again? The Psalmist knows these feelings well.

To paraphrase our text for today, ‘Help me, God who sets things right- who gave me room to breathe when I was in a tight spot and was afraid- be merciful, and hear my prayer. How long will you people lie about me, build up yourselves and trample me in your path, spread malicious gossip and try to break me down? The Lord knows his faithful. He hears me when I call.’

There is a specific set of external circumstances that have a stranglehold on the author that could plague his mind all night, it’s clear. Some sort of injustice rising up around him not unlike Isaiah’s suffering servant prophesy would describe when he said, ‘I did not hide my face from insult and spitting, I did not turn away from those who would pluck out my beard.’

The issue seems to be slander- someone dragging the author's name through the mud to serve their own purposes, or perhaps he's been falsely accused in a trial. But in any case, there is reason to be afraid. He knows quite well just how destructive to a life and to the kingdom of God that a few suggestive morsels of gossip can be and this propels him to petition his God fervently.

And in this place of anxiety the Psalmist speaks of the universal human experience of being woken up in the middle of the night with thoughts and fears and scenarios running through your mind, that is, if you were able to fall asleep at all.

When that potent combination of what a friend of mine calls emotion plus imagination takes hold. You lay down or wake up at 2am with an emotion- like fear, or anxiety, or anger, or sadness and then your imagination kicks in and you start running scenarios that have not or may not ever take place and suddenly you are off to the races and chasing rabbit trails laden with feeling into the night. But, the Psalmist says, this is all in vain, and then writes a prescription for what ails us.

“When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord...You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.”

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr defines sin as ‘taking oneself too seriously.’ The Greeks define it as missing the mark like an archer. The Hebrews speak about it in terms of being separated from God. And the serpent in Eden, as Eve contemplated the forbidden fruit, suggested that sin was to seek to be like God, for that was the temptation before her. So perhaps if we put all of these definitions together a paraphrase for this might read, ‘Do not stray and separate yourself from God by placing you, your worries, your imagination for the possibilities at the center of the universe. Only God belongs there. Be still. Put your trust in him, and the joy that you will feel will be even greater than if all of your bank accounts were overflowing and every perceived wrong in your life was righted. Trust in the Lord, give yourself over to him, and sleep in peace.’

It is the security that comes with knowing who you are. The Psalmist speaks with the confidence and serenity of one whose identity is grounded in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. Of one who has wrapped himself in the shalom, the deep peace of knowing who is the creator and who is the created- who is parent, and who is dependent child. It is the peace of knowing that your honor comes only from God, your worth is handed to you by God, your future will be only pure gift from God, your past has been put to rest by God, your days are in the hand of God, your life is of inestimable value to God. So if God is for you, as Paul says to the Romans, than no one can be against you.

And if you are reviled and persecuted for his name's sake, as Jesus says in Matthew, then you are blessed. And if your endeavors are of human origin they will fail, as Peter says in Acts, but if they are of God nothing in the world can stop them. And if you are stripped of everything from your possessions to every expectation you ever had for yourself, your life, your career, your family, we see in the gospel of Luke that your life is still so much more when it is grounded in God. For we do not live on bread alone, according to Deuteronomy. So we are to trust and be still, the Psalmist reminds us, and know that the Lord is God.

As Easter people we look to the resurrection for our own prescription for peace. Because all of this is good and well, but how does it happen? If the reality that the Psalmist and so many others speak about is available now in Christ and we can have peace, than how?

If this was the sentiment that helped sustain the prophets in their persecution and caused the martyrs throughout history to have such resolute conviction and even sing songs on the way to their death, than how does this peace that passes all understanding in all things come about such that we can all sleep better at night?

On a practical level, the Psalmist seems to suggest that there is a connection between silence in our day and deep peace. A chance for stillness even if it is for five minutes a day in which we displace ourselves from the throne at the center of our universe and allow that seat to be filled by God.

Space to get clear, get focused, and get our hearts fixed on the Lord. Space in which we can notice our own reactivity to the assaults on our senses that come in from around us and on our emotions from within us and to make time to place them in the hands of God.

Silence in which we can be still and recognize the many ways that we are acting out of ourselves and our own needs and desires and expectations instead of God in us. A chance to see, as author and seminary professor Richard Mulholland realized, much to his dismay when he created time for such silence in his day, just how much we ourselves actually get in the way of the peace that we desire most when we do not take the cultivation of our spiritual life as seriously as we do our professional life, our personal life, our physical life, our social life, and so on.

In his book, "The Deeper Journey" he gives a terrific analogy for his own struggle with this issue. He says, "I realized that I was mud pie with a thin layer of Christian frosting trying to pass myself off as an angel food cake, but the mud kept seeping through! I needed God to take that mud and breathe into it the breath of life."

If we want to be changed by having more peace in our lives, than perhaps something about the routines of our lives needs to change in order to invite peace to come in and find its home in our hearts.

But perhaps on another level we need to think about the resurrection a little differently too. Or, at least, a little more deeply. For the power to turn the other cheek to our enemies and anxieties that seek to prevail over our lives, not as a form of passive resistance but as a form of active grace in which we strive to love them better and better reflect the face of God to the world has to come from somewhere else both far beyond and deep within. It has to come from God and it is that silence among many other practices just waiting to be picked up that can help connect us to that source.

But you notice that the object of the Psalmist's attention kept shifting- speaking at once to God, then to his aggressors, and then back to God. In this shift, he at once cries out against his enemy and in the very next breath says, presumably to them, 'when you are distressed, don't sin, but ponder those things on your bed, be silent.'

It is hard to imagine extending such grace to our enemies that we wish for them to sleep better at night too. But the clear eyed expression of such grace, and the resolute confidence that the

Psalmist exudes is rooted in the heart of God which we have come to know quite well in Jesus and the events of Easter.

Where yes there was a death for our sin and a resurrection to set us free, but there was also a decent to hell in which Christ put to death not just our sin but everything that would try to wield power and influence over our lives and hearts ever again thus allowing us to have any peace at all in the day to day and night after night.

For when Christ descended into hell and lived in that long, troubled, sleepless night of torment himself and rose again, he demonstrated that there is no darkness that can go untouched by his presence and grace. No experience of trial that is immune to his saving activity.

No night so dark, no sound so frightful, no shadow so menacing that it will not be dispelled in the light of Jesus the son of the new day ever before us.

There is no evil just out of your sight, no slander just beyond your hearing, no circumstance just out of your control that God is not present there providing the way through it so that you may know true peace. And share that true peace with others and the world. So that everyone can rest easy in him. Amen.