

Psalm 42:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16
Sermon Title: *For I will yet give you praise*

Psalm 42:1-5

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet give praise,
my Deliverance and my God.

Matthew 5:13-16

¹³ 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.

For Reflection:

There are all sorts of ways of talking about the community that is the Church. You can think of it as a people who share the same beliefs, or all those who have been baptized, or even all the people who more or less agree with the Pope. And so on. But I think that, first of all, the Church is the people who invite each other to rejoice together.

-Herbert McCabe

How do we become salt for the earth, fertilizer for the world? How do we become a light for the world?

If you have heard Jenna and I speak about our trip to northern Iraq with Christian Peacemaker Teams, then you have heard me speak a bit about this man, Father Jack, a Syrian Monk who was taken captive by ISIS. We have ended most of our presentations about northern Iraq with Father Jack because his story is such an amazing testament to peace, a saint we would probably call him. A former prisoner of ISIS but he is not bitter, you feel that from him right away – his warmth and his smile that comes quickly as he shares stories. His friends and fellow monks from the monastery where he lived and served are still missing, either dead or prisoners of war.

He has been asked to speak to the United Nations about his experience; he gets many requests to do interviews. But he declines, he does not want his experience to be used and twisted by others for ramping up military efforts – for escalating and condoning the violence – so he does not give interviews and he will not accept the invitation to the United Nations.

And, as I have shared before, in this interaction with him, I asked him, after all he has been through – friends killed, being a prisoner of war – how does he now, as man of God, think about Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount to “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.” And, his answer, that every time he interacted with someone from ISIS, he tried to look them in the eye, smile, and remember that they are as much a victim of this war as he is.

Many of us wonder how we might react in such a situation, would we, who claim to be people of peace, be able to respond to those who intend us harm with such love and grace; would we be able to see our captors through the eyes of God as beloved children of God? Would we be able to hold such a position of love despite whatever fear might be churning inside of us? Despite our tears being our food day and night?

Hopefully none of us here will ever come to know the answer to that question, hopefully it will always be a hypothetical question. But, what can easily be forgotten about someone like Father Jack is what prepared him to respond in such a manner – what allowed him to see that the person holding a gun on him was just as much a victim as himself. I don't know all of Father Jack's life circumstances, but I do know that he spent most of his adult life in worship and prayer – as a monk, everyday his rhythm of life included prayer, worship, and reading scripture. One could perhaps say that Father Jack had been preparing his adult for such an encounter – that a life of prayer in the monastery, had formed him to see as God sees; that decades of reading scripture, had been shaped him to show love to his enemies; that decades of worship, had molded him to remember that each person he meets, whoever they are, had the breath of life breathed into them by our Creator.

While Father Jack is a saint like no other I have met, I don't think he just happened to respond that way. I think he allowed God to shape and prepare him in this way – through daily prayer, and scripture reading and worship – to be molded to respond in love to all people, even those intending him harm; to be shaped to recognize the Divine spark in each person.

Worship matters. Rejoicing in the Lord, matters. Coming together to regularly offer our praise not to ourselves, but to our Creator, this matters. We, as people shaped in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, are a people who usually focus on action – on our work in the world – on right living; we say that “truth only becomes meaningful as it is lived out.” And while I deeply appreciate this piece of who we are, sometimes, in our efforts to live as people of mercy and peace – in our efforts to try to respond to the world like Father Jack did – we under emphasize the pieces that allow us to respond in such ways; we downplay the elements that shape us to respond to the situations of our lives with love and mercy and peace; we can under value how worship and praise work as sort of a corrective lens for the eyes of our soul, giving us the vision to be able to see that each life has within it the breath of life, just like us.

How is it that we become salt for the earth, a light for the world? Through worship, I think.

Worship matters. Giving praise to our Creator, this matters. Giving thanks, this matters. Researchers have shown that people who are grateful, people who have a practice of gratitude and giving thanks for things are their lives, not only have a more positive outlook on life, but are healthier. *“Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude have been shown to strengthen your immune system, to lower hypertension, to improve sleep, and even have a positive effect on the grades of teenagers. One recent study from the UC San Diego School of Medicine found that people who were more grateful actually had better heart health, specifically less inflammation and healthier heart rhythms. The study’s author says that gratitude essentially has the opposite*

effects of stress – gratitude helps us feel more connected to ourselves, to others and to our environment.

This is not a new idea, while they probably did not have the same clinical research, three thousand years ago our Jewish ancestors formulated blessings – *berakoth*, in Hebrew – blessings for every circumstance of their lives. Good or bad, victory or tragedy, the Hebrew people had a blessing for all circumstances. Most *Hebrew blessings* begin with the words *Barukh Attah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam* (“Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe”). Come wound or misery, they had a blessing. If it were good news, then “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe who is good and does good.” If it were bad circumstance or tragedy, then “Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe who hears the cry of the broken-hearted.” As far as they were concerned, humanity had a duty to pronounce a blessing on the bad in life as well as the good, because all life came from God. “It is forbidden,” says the Talmud, “to taste of this world without a blessing.”

Psalm 42, that we read this morning, it is probably a Psalm many of you are familiar with because of the praise song that became popular in the early 80s, “As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after thee.” I have sung that, as I am sure some of you have, around many a campfire. But what Martin Nystrom left out in writing those lyrics in 1981 was the depth of the Psalm, the pain of Psalmist. After the well-known first line about the deer, the Psalmist adds:

² *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

And while this sounds again like a pleasant line of praise, what we learn from the next verse is that the author is thirsting for God because he/she has, for so long, felt the absence of God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

³ *My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'*

“My tears have been my food day and night”; another translation says “my tears have been my *meat* day and night.” The main course of this poet’s diet has been sorrow, it has been pain. We do not know what has been the cause of these tears – be it death of one loved, a broken family system, loss of a dream, war or violence, being forced to flee their homeland to stay alive, illness, or poverty – the Psalmist does not give us the details, only the result, a steady diet of sorrow; a sense of God’s absence. And to make it worse, the Psalmist remembers when praise and thanksgiving to God came easy – when they were the one standing up front leading the whole congregation in songs of praise and thanksgiving. But now, their insides are churned up in sorrow or anxiousness.

And despite this, says the Psalmist, “I will yet give praise.” Sometimes this is all we have to say, all we can say, “I will yet give praise.” That there is a hope. It is hidden now, but I will yet praise God; on ahead things grow better. We are a “yet” people made so by hope. We shall yet praise God.

I have always believed that the people who truly change the world in significant ways, these are people who seem to be able to live without fear of death – people who are able to do what they feel called to, whatever the consequences – that they are able to stay strong in their faith and calling despite heaps of criticism; that they are able to keep going toward justice, despite threats against their life. We met a few people like this in northern Iraq – people who had received death threats for the work they were doing: a journalist who had put together a comprehensive report on the practices of the oil industry in his country and how his government was responsible for much of the taking and exploiting of the land. Threatened, but continued on in his work. A Muslim leader, a Mullah teaching that true Islam is about love for all people, that true Islam is about helping our neighbor, that true Islam is about peace. Threatened, told to hire security forces, and he continued teaching what he believed was right and true. These people were changing their country for the better – they are truly agents of love and change in a region of the world so torn apart by fear and greed and hatred.

And I can tell you, it was very clear to me, that I am not like them – I do live with fear – I am not living without fear of death. That was abundantly clear to me after my two weeks in northern Iraq. *But I want to be* – not that I want to put myself in harm's way, but I want to attend to where I feel God calling me without worry, and despite fears that arise – I want to be a prophetic voice and leader in spite of what fear or criticism might come my way.

How do I do this, how do I progress toward being faithful in spite of fear? Through worship. By coming together with you all and singing “Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear...”

How do we become a light for the world? Through worship.

How do we become more loving...through worship. Through remembering that the “love of God is greater far than tongue or tribe could ever tell.”

How do we remember to be about the common good for *all* the peoples of this world...through worship. “In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”

How do we become less self-centered, less self-focused...through worship. Through remembering that “it is God who has made us, and not we ourselves.”

How do we remember what God has called us to do...through worship. Through singing together “Whatsoever you do, to the least of my people, that you do unto me.”

How do we have peace, as our fears and anxieties over the direction our world is headed... through worship. By singing, even at moments when we are only trying to convince ourselves, that “No storm can shake my in most calm, while to that rock I’m clinging.”

How do we become a light for the world, a city on a hill? Through worship. Through praise, even when our tears have been our only food, we will yet give God praise, we will yet remember, “it is well with my soul.”

This past July my mom’s family was all together to celebrate my grandparents 60th wedding anniversary. It was extra poignant as my Grandma has terminal cancer, she not be around for many more anniversaries. When I first saw my Grandma after she had learned of her cancer diagnosis, she made it clear that she would not be doing chemo or radiation, “it has been a good life” she said.

My Grandma has not had the easiest life. Her sister died of cancer in her early forties; her brother’s alcoholism wrecked havoc and chaos throughout their family system; she lost a daughter, Becky just a few days after her birth; there is another daughter with whom they rarely speak. We were reviewing some of these life situations around the table at their anniversary dinner, reflecting on the past with an urgency and perspective that the end of life brings – there were tears, many tears – and some laughter too. And after the talking stopped for a moment, that occasional silence that comes in any good conversation, after a moment of silence, my Grandmother said, “God has sure been good to us, hasn’t He.” I will tell you, those were not the thoughts running through my mind at that moment, “God sure has been good to us, hasn’t He.”

I think that is what the Psalmist means, “to yet, give God praise.” To reflect over a life full of tragedy and still be able to say, “God has sure been good to us, hasn’t He.” That is what it means to be a “yet” people: a people who continue to offer praise, to continue to give *berakoth* – whatever life brings.

This is a life shaped in worship, a life which has offered praise, come wound or misery, to the God who promises not that all will be smooth, but rather to always be with us, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

How do we become a light for the world? *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Amen.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the Spirit of God go with you, empowering you to
Rejoice always
To pray without ceasing,
And to give thanks in all circumstances;
That healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Go in peace. Amen.*