

You God's Holy Ones
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 34:9-14

⁹ O fear the Lord, you God's holy ones,
for those who fear God have no want.

¹⁰ The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

¹¹ Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

¹² Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?

¹³ Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴ Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

I generally do not like to open with quotes from other people, especially two weeks in a row, but what Dean and Professor Richard J. Clifford has to say about fear of the Lord is foundational for any reflection on this reading. He says, “‘fear of the Lord,’ though traditional, is an unsatisfactory translation of a Hebrew phrase best rendered ‘revering YHWH’... ‘Fear’... does not mean ‘to be afraid of God,’ nor does it mean, as is sometimes said, reverence in general. The idiom ‘fear of [divine name]’ is widely attested in the ancient Near East. In polytheistic cultures, fearing a god meant singling out the god for worship and for loyal service and obedience. To revere a particular deity invited that deity to look with favor on the client and to bestow blessings – healthy and long life, children, wealth, standing in the community, and protection from enemies.”¹ It is within the context of ancient Near Eastern cultures that our psalm was also written. Saying “fear of the Lord” was as culturally influenced as the forms of bread used in communion throughout the world.

For the Hebrew people, and for us, we need not single out a god among many, but instead we worship the one God and promise our loyal service and obedience to God alone. The psalmist addresses the Hebrew people as “you God's holy ones,” not pointing to specific people within the Hebrew peoples but to the people as a whole, for they understood themselves to be God's chosen people, not set above as is sometimes misunderstood but set apart for God. To be holy is to be set apart for God, not, by any stretch, to be perfect. If they, or we, were perfect, there would be no need for teaching. To be set apart,

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p.347.

though, does not eliminate the need for teaching – I’d even say it demands it more – and that is what we have in this psalm.

“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” I will teach you how to revere God, says the psalmist. If that invitation wasn’t enough to draw the psalmist’s listeners in, the next line is sure to do it: Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? If we were watching an infomercial, we might hear the one being questioned reply, “Why, yes, I do desire life and I do covet many days to enjoy good. Tell me, good sir, how do I attain these?” The psalmist replies: Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

Those who depart from evil, do good, seek peace, and pursue it have no want and lack no good thing, as we come back to verse nine. This may sound like doing right results in getting what we want, financially or materially or even relationally. It would be wrong of me to promote this, for to have no want and lack no good thing looks very different from the human perspective than from the heavenly perspective. Should we need examples, we need look no further than the life of Jesus. Indeed Jesus departed from evil, did good, sought peace and pursued it AND Jesus had little to his name and relied on the generosity of others for both meals and shelter. Professor Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi explains it this way: “Because the psalmist interlocks praise, plentiful life, and justice, we are called not to confuse material acquisition and capitalistic individualism with a simple lifestyle that gives us freedom to praise, live abundantly, and do justice.”² God chose that simple lifestyle through Jesus’ life, a life filled with praise, abundant living, and not just the pursuit of justice but the actual doing of justice.

Today, we have the privilege of participating in God’s baptism of a child of God. In that baptism, we as a congregation make promises alongside his parents and his godparents. We will promise to guide and nurture Maxwell, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church. In that promise, we commit to teach as the psalmist: Come, listen to us, we will teach you how to revere God. Maxwell, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Do good, Maxwell, and seek peace and pursue it. Now you know as well as I do that teaching is only in part what we say; that’s the guiding and nurturing by word. We must also teach in what we do; that’s the guiding and nurturing by deed. As a church and as individuals we must be sure to do good, to seek peace, even to pursue it. And we must keep our tongues from evil and our lips from speaking deceit.

You know I stand before you to offer a conversation starter, **not** a word that begins and ends here in this pulpit. What conversation may come is entirely in your hands; I offer but a suggestion. How

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p.346.

would you explain to another how it is that we as a church do good? How do we seek peace and pursue it? How do we keep our tongues from evil and our lips from speaking deceit? As individuals? And how **else** might we do good? seek peace? pursue peace? How might we want Maxwell to understand the ways in which we behave as those set apart for God, as God's holy ones? Those are a lot of questions. May God be with us all as we seek to answer them, and live them.

Let us pray: Strengthen us, O Lord, that we might revere you all the days of our lives, we pray. Amen.