

God's Ears Are Open
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 34:15-22

- ¹⁵ The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and God's ears are open to their cry.
- ¹⁶ The face of the Lord is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
- ¹⁷ When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
- ¹⁸ The Lord is near to the broken-hearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
- ¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all.
- ²⁰ God keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
- ²¹ Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
- ²² The Lord redeems the life of God's servants;
none of those who take refuge in God will be condemned.

With this reading we finish the thirty-fourth psalm. I can appreciate that the readings were broken up by the lectionary planners across three weeks because there would be too much to absorb and reflect upon in just one reading. That said, it is also important to study the psalm as a whole. This psalm is said to be written by King David after he had been delivered from a difficult situation, one where he pretended to be mad in order to be sent away by the one he feared. Flawed and fabled David, one and the same. As I said a couple of weeks ago, this psalm of thanksgiving is meant to be one of encouragement. The overall character of David and the intent of the psalm are important to remember as we come to this final part of the psalm which declares that God will protect the righteous and condemn the unrighteous. If we know anything about grace, we recognize the gift that grace is because of all that God has done for us in spite of our unworthiness. None among us are wholly and always righteous, save for Christ alone. So the whole scope of this song must be considered if we are to understand how it could boldly declare "Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned" and expect to have anyone listening who could nod and agree without the slightest twitch of discomfort.

Last week we read that the way to fear God, to devote oneself to God, was to "keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit." Now, let me recap again the circumstances under which it is believed this psalm was written: David pretended to be mad in order to be sent away by the one he

feared. And let's not forget that Jacob tricked Esau into giving over his birthright and then tricked his father into giving him his brother's blessing.¹ Oh, and Abram told King Abimelech that Sarai was his sister because he thought he would be killed if he told the truth that she was his wife.²

We may want to receive this psalm as a blueprint or an outline of steps to take to "get it right," especially after hearing last week "come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" but the whole of the psalm forces us to receive it in much greater complexity. Two weeks ago we began with praise to and for God, with the encouragement that we each "taste and see that the Lord is good." Last week we were taught how to behave as ones whose lives are centered on God and told that right living brings life and many days to enjoy good. Today, we have an acknowledgment that even the righteous suffer. Last week I quoted Professor Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi who said, "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."³ Living righteously guarantees only one thing – not wealth, not happiness, not power – that one thing is relationship with God, deep, intimate relationship with God.

"The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and God's ears are open to their cry...When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears...The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." Are there days when I would rather God swoop in and take away the bad, the suffering, the hatred, the cruelty, the violence, the oppression? Oh my, yes, and many. But I remind myself that the free will which gives us the freedom to act in these ways is also the free will that lets me choose to worship God, to seek God, simply, to choose God. I cannot enjoy selective free will; we cannot enjoy selective free will. To have a true relationship with God, one that is chosen and not forced upon or coerced, we need to have the ability to choose. And so, rather than relying on God to fix the messes we make, we must work on bringing light, and thus revealing God's goodness, where there is bad, suffering, hatred, cruelty, violence, and oppression.

And the greatest comfort we have in all of this is that "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and God's ears are open to their cry...When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears...The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." When we need help, the Lord hears. When our hearts are broken open, God is near. Even as they are breaking, God is already there gathering up the pieces as they break off in order to make something new. God is gathering up the scraps and the shards because they have not lost their use but are about to gain a new one. God, our God the creator, is making new, taking what we would discard as useless or damaged to invent again. When our spirits are crushed,

¹ Genesis 25 and Genesis 27.

² Genesis 20. Isaac also did the same thing with Rebekah in Genesis 26.

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

each and every time, the deeply intimate God, who looks at and listens to us, reshapes them, revives them, recreates them. I think of the ingenuity that accompanied the Depression or the movement known as “found art” – in both, care is taken to make something out of what might otherwise be considered nothing.

We affirm that God knows our prayers before they are even spoken. We read in Psalm 139: “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.” Because God’s ears are open. Psalm 139 also says: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.” Because the eyes of the Lord are upon us. To be seen, to be heard – is that not what each of us desires? God offers that at all times – no cell phones, TVs, Brewers / Packers / Badgers games as distraction. At all times, the eyes of the Lord are upon us and God’s ears are open. Some days I may yearn for wealth or blissful happiness or power but what I want most deeply, and what is far more lasting and satisfying, is to be seen and to be heard. The more we center upon God, the more we sense God’s full attention. And so that is my prayer for us all.

Let us pray: Many are our afflictions, O God; be ever near, we pray. Amen.