

Sermon
March 17, 2019
Lent 2C
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Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3.17-4.1
Luke 13.31-35

Scholars dispute aspects of Psalm 27, which we just read. Most see it as two independent psalms which, at some point, were combined into one. Verses one through nine (in the Prayer Book's numbering*)—is considered to be a "song of confidence". The psalmist seems clearly beset by adversity: those who would "eat up [his] flesh", an "army encamp[ed] against [him]" (vv 2, 3). Despite his predicament, the psalmist begins, with hope, not despair: "The Lord is my might and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" (v 1). And, he concludes that he "will offer in [God's] dwelling an oblation with sounds of great gladness" (v 9). Without that assurance, there would have been no hope at all, no reason for prayer.

The second portion, according to scholars is a "lament". "Laments", in the psalms, follow a fairly predictable pattern, evident in what we read. Verse 10 is a cry of despair and request to be heard, "Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me". We then hear the cause of the misfortune—the psalmist feels forsaken by all (including his parents! - v 14) in the face of adversity. But, ultimately, there is hope, even if only found in patient waiting (vv 17-18).

Whether, originally two psalms or not, however, they seem to work pretty well together; at least one thread binds them: the idea of "seeking the Lord" in the midst of some kind of trouble. In both cases there are "enemies" or "adversaries"; complicated, in the second, by a sense of abandonment. Isn't this the rather consistent human situation? That is, aren't we all, at some point, faced with adversity—either directly—as with identifiable enemies/adversaries, or, more indirectly—as with a sense of being forsaken. Aren't we all focused on finding answers to life's hard questions—to "make meaning", in the terms I used last week?

Clearly the poets behind this morning's psalm (or psalms) wanted answers. Indeed many of the psalms reflect, in one way or another, an intense quest to know God, to engage God as the ultimate answerer to difficult, but basic and persistent, questions. This is what we've wanted all along, from the very beginning of time: we've wanted to know where we are going; we've wanted to know what legacy we will leave; we've wanted to know how to live right. In short, we've wanted to know God.

Our corporate faith story—our search for answers—begins with Abram. We are introduced to him in the early chapters of Genesis, right after the Tower of Babel story, when the peoples of the earth were scattered after their ill-fated attempt, physically, to

reach the heavens—that is, ‘to know God’. Abram, that “wandering Aramaean” of which we heard last week, in Genesis 12, was told by Yahweh (Who, as far as we know, he’d never encountered before) to go to a land where he would be blessed, and from which all the the earth would be blessed. We read that he journeyed to Egypt with his wife Sarai — there to have some pretty bizarre encounters with Egyptian leaders. In the next chapter, he returned to Canaan, where he finally “invoked the name of Yahweh” (v 4). After he and his nephew Lot took each other’s leave (setting up a different story line), Abram settled in Hebron.

After a battle of four neighboring kings, and Abram’s eventual victory over those kings, cementing his claim on the land, we arrive at the passage we heard this morning. Yahweh’s word came to Abram, promising him again that he would be the father of many offspring, comparable in number to the stars of the sky. And we learn that it was at that point that Abram put his faith in God, and that faith was reckoned as righteousness. BUT, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t have doubts: “Wait, O God! I have no real offspring! How will this happen!?” God assures Abram, somehow, through a rather macabre vision of a sacrifice, and with an equally disturbing prediction of a 400-year exile. And, then, God established the covenant with Abram.

The short “story” here is that God called Abram (along with his father and nephew) to leave home and to travel to an unknown land, into an unknown future—one with strange trials and significant battles. That’s a story with which many of us could identify — it is the story most of us face: where will we live? With what, or whom, will we struggle? And we want to know what is the arc of the story; why are we on this journey; and Who is accompanying us? What is distinctive —yet, oh so familiar—about Abram is that he had little promise except God’s word, a word that promised hope that there would be a good outcome. Something in his experiences told him WHO was leading him, and that that “WHO” could be trusted despite adversity. Part of his quest to know God had been achieved; more would come, certainly, as he became a father and grandfather—indeed a father of many nations.

A slightly different story was reflected in the experience of the members of the church at Philippi. As the first congregation of Europeans to respond to Paul’s preaching of the gospel, we have to assume that there was something in his preaching (or his miracle-working, according to the book of Acts) that spoke to their interest in knowing God. Clearly they were intent on finding answers, as Paul saw evidence they might even be looking in the wrong direction, perhaps giving credence to the “enemies of the cross of Christ”. “Oh, their message is attractive,” Paul implies, “given their appeal to the god of the belly! But they do NOT have the answers you REALLY seek! You want . . . you will find answers . . . in your citizenship in heaven. What do you

seek? What do you want to know? You want to know Jesus Christ, who ‘will transform the body of [your] humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory’” (Philippians 3.21). The Christians at Philippi wanted to know Jesus, to sense his presence in their life’s journeys. Paul’s goal was to help them look in the right direction, that they, ultimately, might be “conformed to the body of his glory”, that is, not conformed to the designs of the false prophets.

Struggling to find the right direction, again, is the goal of most of us. We are drawn one way and another, following that “god of our belly” . . . or some other passion. Further into Christian history we find another great example in literature’s first autobiography: Augustine’s *Confessions*. If you’ve not read it, I highly endorse it, not only because a full reading provides context for the famous line “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet” (Book 8, Chapter 7), but because it clearly tells the story of ANY of us who want to know God. For that is what Augustine’s story is all about: he was on a search for God . . . and, as that famous line suggests, it wasn’t an easy search.

Augustine begins the book with an equally famous line. In the opening sentences of the book, he sets out his thesis:

Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. And [we], being a part of Your creation, [desire] to praise You. . . . You move us to delight in praising You; for You have made us for Yourself, and **our hearts are restless until they rest in You.**

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in You”. As people of faith, this is our goal, our hope. Abram set his hope in a God he’d not known before, yet a God who promised him a future based on offspring he didn’t have. He accepted a covenant with God and set out to know that God more fully. The Philippian Christians left their cultural ways of thinking about life to embrace that of an odd Jewish preacher from Asian Minor. They left behind those whose “god was the belly”, who appealed to their most base nature to learn of a God who promised radical transformation. And we restlessly search for God; we seek the Lord’s face (Ps 27.11 - BCP). This season of Lent offers us a context for looking within ourselves, and beyond, to recognize that face.

We do not search alone; that seeking of God’s face, for the meaning of our human journey, is not an individual quest. We search as a human people, as well as a people of faith, for answers to very difficult questions. Yes, there is our need to know where we will go, what will be our legacy. But there is the question, too, of how we move into an unknown—yet, we must believe hopeful—future when we are confronted by uncertainty, resistance, and a fear that finds its expression in hate and violence.

Several days ago, as most of you know, dozens of praying people in New Zealand were gunned down in their “temple”, where in the words of today’s psalm, they had no doubt hoped “to behold the fair beauty of the Lord”. Those offspring of Abraham—every bit as much as we are—felt that they would be “safe in his shelter”. And they were set upon by those whose “god was their belly”, that is, whose god was fear, whose god was their belief that they were better than their Muslim neighbors. We cannot point to New Zealand with any kind of cultural, or national, hubris. Our own sins are ever before us, as our own acts of domestic terrorism, and ethnic and religious bigotry, mount. We, clearly, are still seeking the Lord’s face, and have a long way to go.

We, in the words of the psalm with which we began, have “an army encamped against us” . . . and that army is not one of our Abrahamic religious cousins. On the contrary, it may be that members of our “immediate family” have forsaken us (v 14). But it is God who will sustain us; it is Jesus we must seek. Our common task as Abraham’s offspring is to “seek the Lord’s face”. As Christian offspring of Abraham, it is our task to see the Lord’s face in those around us, whether their “temple” is called a “church”, a “synagogue”, or a “mosque”—or even the marketplace. Our Lenten task is to begin our work claiming, as did the psalmist, “The Lord is our light and our salvation; whom then shall we fear”! Yes we lament our situation, but claim our confidence in the God who summoned Abram to leave the “old country” for a new land.

Abram’s offspring—as Yahweh promised—are as numerous of the dust of the earth (Gen 13. 16), as numerous as the stars of the heavens (Gen 14.5). Abram’s offspring—we Christians, as well as our Jewish and Muslim cousins—all seek to know God. We are in it together when “evildoers come upon us to eat up our flesh”, evildoers who can be so seductive, who’s appeal to our bellies is so logical. Our common search for the knowledge of God, however, is grounded in our common belief, our assertion, that, in knowing God, we will “see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!” (Ps 27. 17- BCP), not in the house of the dead.

Amen.

* In more traditional numbering, the “first” psalm comprises vv. 1- 7. The “second” psalm are the remaining verses.