

Lenten Vespers

Reflections on Psalm 25

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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During the season of Lent, it is my hope that we reflect on the psalms as a way of allowing their vivid language to inform our faith and direct our hearts toward God. I would like for us to begin our reflections during these Wednesday evening vesper services, taking advantage of the opportunity to slow down and allow the beauty and serenity of the psalms to penetrate our hearts. The psalm that is the focus of the midweek vesper service will be the text that is the main focus of the sermon on the following Sunday. And so it is my hope that our reflections this evening will continue through the rest of the week and prepare our hearts for our worship on Sunday.

Tonight we begin with the 25th Psalm. If there ever was anybody in the Bible who could appreciate the pain of personal failure, it would be David. You know the story: the whole incident with Bathsheba and the way he had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed; then later in his life he went through tremendous turmoil and conflict with his rebellious son Absalom.

If ever in the Bible there was someone who realized that his way wasn't working, and that he needed a new direction in his life, surely it would be David. And if you read the verses in the Psalm, you get the idea that David reached a point when he was fed up with dealing with all the shame in his life. Shame is the open door through which David begins the process of turning his life toward God.

The biblical notion of shame is not the same as our contemporary understanding. Normally, we think of shame as embarrassment, or feeling foolish. The dictionary defines shame as a painful emotion excited by a consciousness of guilt, disgrace, or dishonor. But the Old Testament word translated as shame carries with it the idea of "disappointment, or being let down, or of having trusted in something that in the end proves unworthy of our trust."¹ And so when David talks about the shame of his former life, he is saying that it has let him down, that his way of doing things apart from God has failed him miserably.

There comes a time in all of our lives when we realize that our old way of doing things just doesn't cut it; we need a new direction, a new foundation that won't let us down, that won't put us to shame.

That's why the 25th Psalm turns our hearts toward God. One writer has noted that the 25th Psalm is "a thoughtful prayer by one who knows that the only adequate foundation for any worthwhile life is God."² The opening words indicate a complete surrender to God: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust."³ In Biblical terms, the soul is not some nebulous cloud of being within us that can be separated from us; rather, it is the complete self, it encompasses all of one's being. And so to lift up one's soul to the Lord is an act of complete surrender of all that we are, a giving over of ourselves--heart, mind, body, spirit--into the loving and mighty hands of God. This psalm, then, becomes instruction on what it means for us to put our lives in God's hands with complete confidence and trust.

There are a few things that I want to lift out of the psalm for your reflection this week:

Make note of how many times in the psalm David uses the words “You,” or “your”; in addition, look at the verbs, and notice how many times the subject of the verb--the one who is to perform the action--is God. This will help reinforce the totality of trust in God to which the one who utters the words of the psalm is committing. Can you read the words of the psalm as if it is your prayer to God?

What does the psalm tell us about the character of God? Where do you find evidence of God’s faithfulness, God’s steadfast love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness, God’s righteousness? How do these things affect your ability to place your trust in God?

How would you characterize the attitude of the psalmist as he prepares to receive the blessing of God? Do words like “humble”, “obedient”, “reverent”, “expectant” accurately describe the spirit of the one who prays this psalm? Do those words resonate with you as you seek God?

In the first Psalm, we are told that they are blessed who delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on God’s law day and night, and that such people are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit and prospering. It would be easy to conclude that we simply have to choose the right road, and our life will be easy from that point on. But you and I know that the right road is not an easy one. It is lined with enemies of God’s way, difficulties that weigh heavily on us, doubts that tempt us to try another way. The essence of the right road is this: it is too difficult to walk without the companionship and friendship of God.

I urge you, fellow traveler, to seek the presence and guidance and help of God. Let your prayer be, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; In you I trust, O my God...” Amen.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, Psalms: An Expository Commentary, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), p. 223.

² Boice, p. 222

³ Psalm 25:1