

## ***Trust and Obey***

Psalm 25

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Today we resume our Lenten study of the psalms. There is a beauty in the spirituality of the psalms that makes them universally appealing. It is as if we were eavesdropping on the spiritual conversations between the ancient ancestors of our faith and God. But it's even more, for there is a sense that we are participating in the conversation, that words inscribed in stone or written on papyrus thousands of years ago still apply to us today.

I remember a TV commercial many years ago, advertising Nestea instant iced tea. The commercial began with an image of a young man working at a construction site on a hot summer day, with the hazy image of the sun glowing in the background. The construction worker stood up and wiped the sweat off his brow. Then he took a glass of the refreshing instant iced tea, took a long gulp, breathed a deep sigh of relief--aaahhh--spread his arms wide and fell back into a sparkling pool of water. It was called the Nestea plunge.

When I read through the verses of the 25<sup>th</sup> psalm, that image of the plunge came to mind for me. It came to mind in that the plunge, to me, is an image of one resting delightfully and without reservation in the hands of God. "To you, O Lord, I lift my soul; in you I trust, O my God." The opening words of the psalm profess an unabashed trust, a complete surrender of the self into the loving care of God. It is as if the psalmist has taken the Nestea plunge.

The psalm is replete with the language of trust. But it is not a "just trust God and everything will be fine" kind of trust of which the psalmist speaks. It is a trust in the midst of adversity and trials. Throughout the psalm we find references to trouble in the psalmist's life: something is afflicting him, he finds himself surrounded by enemies, he is overcome with a sense of guilt. We don't know the specifics, but we can surmise what might be going on, for the psalm is attributed to King David.

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. It is out of this sense that his life was not properly oriented that David realizes he needs a new orientation in his life, and so he declares his trust in God. Even more, David surrenders himself--body, mind, spirit, will--to the will of God and the way of God's righteousness.

In the Hebrew this psalm is an acrostic. The first word in each verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. As a literary device, an acrostic had several different uses. For one thing, an acrostic would add a certain beauty or structure to poetry, much as rhyming does in modern English poetry. An acrostic also served as a mnemonic device to aid in memory; this would be very useful in a culture that depended largely on the spoken word.

But an acrostic would also be used to indicate that the poem was covering some subject matter in its totality, as in from A to Z. And I think that is the case here in the 25<sup>th</sup> psalm, when the subject the psalm addresses is that of instruction in God's way. You see, if one is to lift up one's soul to God in trust, then learning God's way must be part of that trust. We need learning as part of our dependence upon God. Our trust in God is incomplete unless our trust in God includes the prayer, "Teach me, instruct me, guide me, show me the way..." The theme of this acrostic poem is instruction in the way of God. From A to Z, from birth to death, we are to trust in the way of God. According to one of my former professors from seminary, the petitions in the 25<sup>th</sup> Psalm for learning the ways of the Lord use virtually every available verb in the vocabulary of instruction.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not blind trust in God, is it? For you see, David has come to know God throughout his lifetime. He has come to see that God is faithful, even when David has been less than faithful. He has come to know that God is characterized by truth. He has experienced God's saving grace through the dark times of his life. He has seen that God is bent toward mercy and forgiveness and steadfast love, and not condemnation.

Is not the psalm full of adjectives that point to the supremacy of God as the object of our trust and faith? Don't you see--the reason to utter the prayer, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you, O my God, I trust," is because there is no one or no thing greater than God in which to put our trust. Who else is loving and faithful like God? Who else is full of grace and truth like God? Who else deals with us, not according to our sinfulness, but according to his steadfast love?

Who else?

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David shows us that the kind of trust of which he speaks hasn't really taken root until there is obedience. He says that "all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful," but he doesn't say that without a condition attached, for he continues: "all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of the covenant."<sup>2</sup>

Do you hear what David's saying? He's talking about obedience. He's saying that trust is nothing if it is merely intellectual assent; you have to start taking steps in the direction that God directs you. Trust means listening to God's instruction and guidance, and then doing it. Faith means trusting in God, and obeying God.

Trust does not convert to faith, until you do it.

Trust and obey.

And that's not always easy. In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he will be crucified. They are unwilling to accept that truth. But Jesus goes even further, for he says that anyone who would follow him must travel the same road: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."<sup>3</sup>

Trusting obedience--the kind of which David speaks, and the kind Jesus demands of all who would follow him--takes us down a difficult path. The path is not easy, for those who choose to listen to God's instruction and walk in God's ways will quickly learn that God's ways are often counter to the ways of the world. It is easy for us to love our neighbors, to love those who love us; but can you love your enemies, because that's what Jesus commands of us? It is easy for us to think that our security is lodged in the world economic markets, but can you store up your treasure in heaven, because that's what Jesus tells us to do? It is easy for us to condemn others for

their shortcomings, but are you first able to pass judgment on yourself, because that's what Jesus demands of us?

Trusting obedience--the kind of which David speaks, and the kind Jesus demands of all who would follow him--takes us down a difficult path. Those who choose to trust in the Lord and listen to his instruction will meet resistance and even rejection in the world.

Historically Lent was a season of preparation for new converts to the Christian faith. It is a period of learning the ways of God, and then committing your life to those ways. In modern times, we're a bit easier on one another. The Lent of the early church looked nothing like the new member classes you find in contemporary Christian churches. The early Christians were, like Jesus, brutally honest about the cost of trusting in God and walking in God's ways.

My friends in Christ, the kind of faith to which you and I are called, the kind of faith of which David speaks when he says, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God...", the kind of faith that Jesus shows us cannot be a part-time venture. It requires a total commitment of the self. It is a complete surrender of who we are--body, mind, will and spirit--into the hands of God.

Are you ready to trust and obey?

Are you ready to take the plunge?

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 25:10

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:34b-35