

Lenten Vesper Meditation

Psalm 86

Wednesday, March 11, 2009
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

Life is not always neat and tidy.

But then, you didn't need me to tell you that, did you?

Why is it, then, that the Christian church, especially in modern times, has tended to emphasize the happy and the joyful, but we deny or ignore the pain and the suffering? Why is it that people have to pretend that everything is okay, when you know that under the surface they are a mess? Why do you think the church insists that we, as the song says, "accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative"?

Of the 150 psalms in the Bible, more than one third are psalms of individual or community lament, psalms that cry out with complaints to God and demand that God make things right. Yet we don't ordinarily include those psalms in our public worship, and we even feel uncomfortable at the thought that someone would shout at God.

Some have suggested that in a disoriented world we continue to emphasize the positive because our faith insists that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Some have suggested that in the midst of pain and confusion we continue to emphasize the positive because to do so is to proclaim a great evangelical "nevertheless"--yes, there is trouble and chaos in our world, NEVERTHELESS, God continues to govern and to make all things work for the good.

And these statements are true. It is true that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is true that God remains in control and continues to govern the universe.

But if we're honest with ourselves, these faith affirmations are not the real reason we don't focus on the darkness, on the pain, on the suffering. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we're uncomfortable with the notion that suffering and faith go hand in hand. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll acknowledge that fear plays a role in our turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the dark, confusing, and painful realities in our lives.

The truth be told, though, there is a boldness in the faith found in the psalms of lament. For one thing, these psalms insist that the world must be seen as it really is, without artificially sugar-coating something that isn't so sweet. There is a bold realism in the psalms of lament, recognizing that life is messy, that life hurts sometimes, that the world does at times seem to be falling apart all around us. The psalms of lament are also bold in that they recognize that all experiences of disorder are a proper subject of conversation with God. We do not need to hide the pain and confusion from God, because God already knows about that. Indeed, our faith is more authentic when we open up and share our feelings honestly with God.

You see, ours is a resurrection faith, which means that out of death God has brought new life. Suffering is real, and ought not to be ignored. Instead, we ought to join with the psalmist in affirming that it is out of the depths of suffering that new life is given by God. The suffering becomes part of the brickwork with which God builds our lives. Walter Brueggemann says this of the psalms of lament: "The

presupposition and affirmation of these psalms is that precisely in such deathly places as presented in these psalms new life is given by God. We do not understand how that could be so or even why it is so. But we regularly learn and discern that there--more than anywhere else--newness that is not of our own making breaks upon us.”¹ Suffering is an opportunity for us to engage with God, to ask God the hard questions. And it is suffering that reminds us that we need a savior, and so our faith turns us toward God.

Psalm 86 is a psalm of lament. There is a general, non-specific acknowledgment of trouble in the life of the psalmist. For your reflection this week, I hope you will focus on these things:

What are the words or phrases that reflect the disorientation of the psalmist? Where in your life can you relate to the notion of being “poor and needy”? Can you identify with the feeling that you are surrounded by a band of ruffians? Do you find yourself asking God to “preserve your life”, because just making it from one day to the next is enough of a struggle for you?

Focus also on the psalmist’s use of the second person pronoun. In the Hebrew there is the sense of the emphatic in the constant personal appeal to God; the struggles and the doubts and the petitions raised are raised by someone who is not a stranger to God, but one who has a history of trustful interaction with God.

Finally, focus on the arguments the psalmist makes to convince God to act on his behalf. Notice especially the characteristics of God to which the psalmist appeals. When you wrestle with God, when you plead with God to deliver you, on what do you base your appeals?

My friends in Christ, our faith is not one that says “Don’t worry, be happy.” It’s not a faith that is blindly optimistic. Our faith looks at the world through the lens of the human struggle. It is only in the context of our suffering and pain that the good news of God’s love and mercy and power truly becomes good news.

Embrace God in the midst of the pain, and the sorrow, and the grief. Then--and only then--will the words “Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” become more than just words. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 52.