

The Passion of the Psalms: Thankfulness

August 31, 2008

Year A: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Next Sunday, is the unofficial start to Fall. This weekend is a busy time for families. One more vacation to squeeze until the grind of a new semester, a new school year, a new job, etc. Next week we start again our Sunday School program. Just coming off of Labor Day we tend to think of starting something new. The Fall doesn't have the pomp and circumstance of a New Year's resolution but just think of the energy that comes when we start our Fall program. We feel it in this town when our college students return. We sense it as we watch our children start a new grade. And we find it in our own spiritual life. We are coming off a summer of busy travels, busy weekends, and a busy time visiting friends and family. That is why next week we start a really exciting sermon series I am calling *The Start of Something New*. If you are in my house you know this song comes from the popular Disney Channel *High School Musical*. I thought of that song – mainly because I hear it all the time in my house – as I was looking at the travels of the Hebrew people. Next week, we begin with “Start Packing.” Before we venture out into anything new we must prepare. You are all invited to come next week for *this is the Start of Something New*.

Now on to today's sermon – our last in our summer series on the Passion of the Psalms. Today, we examine thankfulness in Psalm 124. But before we share the scripture let me tell you a story.

Recently I heard about a mom who around Christmas time wanted to instill in her children the sense that it was indeed Jesus' birthday. She told her daughters that Jesus only received three gifts so do not be disappointed in what lies under the tree.

When it came time for worship on Christmas morning she asked her children what they thought Jesus would think of Santa and all the hype. She asked them what kind of question do you think Jesus would ask Santa. The youngest daughter replied, “I think Jesus would ask, how come I only got three things and none of them were toys?”¹

Norwesca: read it / Sanctuary: Hymn #846

[Psalm 124:1-8 \(NRSV\)](#)

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side --let Israel now say -- ²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, ³then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; ⁴then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters.

¹ “Jesus only got 3 things.” *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 12.

⁶Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Wow! Now here are some reasons to be thankful. When our enemies attack us, when people are angry with us, when we lose everything in a disaster, such as water as it says here (Louisiana knows something about that), or try fire, hail, drought! But if God was not on our side then all of these overwhelming events would simply be too much. But listen to the focus of this Psalm. "Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth." This passage tells us that God is on our side. And I'm not talking about during a sporting event, or in some political contest, or even with the idea that God favors our group over another. No! This is a different perspective on God. Our focus should not and can not be upon ourselves when it comes to choosing and taking sides. This is a God that sees both sides and will be there for you so that you will not be overwhelmed by life's problems. God will be there so that we can handle what this world throws at us. God will be there so that no matter what happens, we know, we believe, we are assured that we are on God's side.

Judy Hoff in her book *Psalms from the Heartland* has an excellent interpretation of this passage. Listen to her words:

We are in his office,
Seated across the desk from each other.
He is a righteous man
And believes that God is on his side.
I am your servant
And know that you, God are with me.
In spite of that, we quarrel.
We argue over what is proper,
What is right.
Pushing a frayed thread
Through a needle's tiny head
Is easier than convincing him
To see my point of view.
In the Psalms, it appears clear
Whose side God is on.
I want it to be that clear
To me today
In this room.
Surely we each can say,
"You, God, are for me
And embrace me as your own."
Are we so certain
That you embrace what we do?
Self-righteous,
Self-serving,
Can you embrace that?

Living God, let our concern be
That we are on your side,
Not the other way around.
Gran us wisdom to understand your will
And courage to follow it.²

The true meaning, the central message of this Psalm is not having God on our side. The central message is blessedness. It is gratitude. It is about thankfulness. It is seeing life on the side of God. I like to call it seeing life through the lens of God. When this happens, I believe, we will know freedom. We will know thankfulness. We will know God.

Some years ago in Dallas, Texas, before the Salk vaccine was available, a young man named James C. McCormick was stricken with polio. He was totally paralyzed, totally helpless, and in great pain. He could not move; he could not swallow; he could not breathe; he had to stay in an iron lung. He wanted to die. He prayed, saying, "Lord, I'm so helpless that I can't take my own life. Please take it for me."

But God chose to ignore that prayer.

Then he prayed, "If I can't die, please take away this awful pain."

The doctors gave him drugs to ease the pain, but he was becoming dangerously dependent on them.

So he prayed, "Lord, please take away this craving for drugs."

Gradually, the craving left him.

Then he prayed, "Please let me be able to swallow again. Let them take this tube out of my throat and these needles out of my arms. If I can just drink a little water, I'll try not to ask for any more favors."

And he became able to swallow, but he was not able to stop asking God for favors.

So he prayed, "Lord, let me be able to breathe a little bit on my own. Let me be able to get out of this iron lung just for a little while."

And this, too, came to pass.

After a while he prayed again, "Heavenly Father, I'm so grateful for all Your favors. Can I ask just one more? Let me be able to leave this bed just for an hour, get into a wheelchair, and see the world that lies outside this hospital room."

This request, too, was granted. Then James McCormick asked to be given strength enough in his arms to move the wheelchair himself. And after that, he asked for the ability and the stamina to walk on crutches. And finally, after a 20-year struggle, James McCormick could walk with two canes, and he was able to marry and have children and lead a close-to-normal life.³

A first reading of this Psalm and you would think it is only about God's presence or maybe a Psalm about getting you through adversity. But that is not what this passage is about. Listen to these verses again now from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson: "Oh, blessed be God! He didn't go off and leave us. He didn't abandon us defenseless, helpless as a rabbit in a pack of snarling dogs.

² Judy E. Hoff. *Psalms from the Heartland*. (Carson, ND: self published. 1999.) 72.

³ Norman Vincent Peale. "God choose to ignore his prayer." *Seth's, Part I*. 42.

We've flown free from their fangs, free of their traps, free as a bird. Their grip is broken; we're free as a bird in flight." This is a Psalm of extreme, incredible, indescribable BLESSEDNESS.

Looking around this room I am guessing that you probably do not know the feeling of being trapped. But I want you to imagine hearing these words if you were in prison. Or imagine a few hundred years ago in a dark time of our nations past. It's the time of slavery and you've snuck out of your plantation and go deep into the country into one of those secret churches in hopes to hear the hope of God and you hear these words.

A few years ago my wife worked in a shelter for woman abused in domestic violence situations. These were women literally trapped in their marriage, isolated by their abusers from family and friends, threatened with physical, mental, and emotional abuse, and told: "If you leave, you will never see your kids again." Now imagine reading this Psalm.

Or maybe you are trapped in a job that is not fulfilling. Or maybe you are trapped in a financial situation and this economy scares you to death. Or maybe it is something as simple as being trapped in a lifestyle that you know you can not keep or trapped because you can not be the person that God wants you to be. Now imagine reading this Psalm. ⁶Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Now imagine this scene: You are on the Florida coast. The sun is setting like a gigantic orange ball. It's the cool evening on a vacant, isolated stretch of beach. The water is lapping at the shore, the breeze is blowing slightly. There are one or two joggers and a couple of fishermen. Most people have gone home for the day.

You look up and you see an old man with curved shoulders, bushy eyebrows, and bony features hobbling down the beach carrying a bucket. He carries the bucket up to the pier, a dock that goes out into the water. He stands on the dock and you notice he is looking up into the sky and all of a sudden you see a mass of dancing dots. You soon recognize that they are seagulls. They are coming out of nowhere. The man takes out of his bucket handfuls of shrimp and begins to throw them on the dock. The seagulls come and land all around him. Some land on his shoulders, some land on his hat, and they eat the shrimp. Long after the shrimp are gone his feathered friends linger. The old man and the birds.

What is going on here? Why is this man feeding seagulls? What could compel him to do this – as he does week after week?

The man in that scene was Eddie Rickenbacher, a famous World War II pilot. His plane, *The Flying Fortress*, went down in 1942 and no one thought he would be rescued. Perhaps you have read or heard how he and his eight passengers escaped death by climbing into two rafts for thirty days. They fought thirst, the sun, and sharks. Some of the sharks were nine feet long. The boats were only eight feet long. But what nearly killed them was starvation. Their rations were gone within eight days and they didn't have anything left.

Rickenbacher wrote that even on those rafts, every day they would have a daily afternoon devotional and prayer time. One day after the devotional, Rickenbacher leaned back and put his hat over his eyes and tried to get some sleep. Within a few moments he felt something on his head. He knew in an instant it was a seagull which had perched on his raft. But he knew that they were hundreds of miles out to sea. Where did this seagull come from? He was also certain that if he didn't get that seagull he would die. Soon all the others on the two boats noticed the seagull. No one spoke, no one moved. Rickenbacher quickly grabbed the seagull and with thanksgiving, they ate the flesh of the bird. They used the intestines for fish bait and survived.

Rickenbacher never forgot that visitor who came from a foreign place. That sacrificial guest. Every week, he went out on the pier with a buck of shrimp and said thank you, thank you, thank you.⁴

Folks, this Psalm is about that feeling that comes over when you are free. And what happens when we gain freedom, we must give thanks. For we are grateful. This Psalm represents that kind of passion - the passion that can only come when we are let loose of those chains, when we gain freedom from bondage, when we do not feel trapped any more. It is in that passion that we must, and should, and ought to give thanks. And when we give thanks, when we are grateful, we will see and we will know God. Amen.

⁴ Wayen Rice. *More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995).153.