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The Emptiness of Self-Sufficiency

Psalm 27 & Revelation 3:14-22

A sermon by William M. Klein

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14 "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: 15 "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. 20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. 21 To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (Rev. 3:14-22 NRSV)

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh - my adversaries and foes - they shall stumble and fall. 3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. 4 One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple. 5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. 6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord. 7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! 8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek. 9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! 10 If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up. 11 Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. 12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. 13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. 14 Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27 NRSV)

1

I am a slow reader. When I was a kid I remember hearing that President Kennedy could read 2500 words per minute.¹ I tried all sorts of schemes to help me read faster... but progress was modest. Since I will not give up reading, I suppose I must settle for plodding along at snail's pace.

Richard Lischer, emeritus professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School, believes there is value in a slow reading...particularly a slow reading of things worth reading in the first place. He says there are two ways of reading. One is a **consumerist** method -

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which is like gutting a book the way you gut a fish...swiftly and efficiently. Lischer calls the other way a **religious** method – and it has the look of a more careful reader who allows the light of the text to illumine his or her own life and that of the larger world.²

If this sounds like I'm trying to justify my slow reading, you are right. I would like to read at a faster pace...particularly those things that do not merit much investment of time. But I have learned a slow reading can be valuable – at least for me. I have also learned that as slow as I read, there are times a second or third reading gives me a better grasp of the matter.

2

Such could be said of the psalm we read a minute ago. It requires a slow reading – in fact, several readings. By slowing down – by reading and re-reading this psalm – I find myself drawn into what 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth called, “The strange new world within the Bible.”³ I also find that with a slowed pace, that which at first seems strange can also be mighty familiar.

When I consider this psalm, I get the feeling I'm listening in on an intimate conversation the writer is having with himself. He has confidence in God to deliver him from trouble – even as the trouble swirls around him. He trusts God will come to his aid...but he doesn't say this from the safe side of things. He says it while standing knee-deep in the midst of turmoil.

His sense of inner struggle comes through when he pleads with God not to hide his face but to deliver him from distress. The writer talks about enemies round about him pressing in upon him, threatening him. He asks God to cause these enemies to stumble and fall. The writer tells us his parents walked out on him – and begs God not to do the same. Then with eyes closed tightly and finger's crossed, he seems to say, “I believe...I believe...I believe!”

We've been there, too, haven't we? There is something so authentic about what the psalmist shares because his struggle sounds so...familiar. The enemies that surround us do not tend to be people – though at times we do have human enemies who are gleeful when we fail. There's a shadowy German word for the pleasure derived from the misfortune of others...that German word is **schadenfreude**.⁴ And it reveals a particularly repugnant heart and soul...or should I say lack of heart and soul!

By and large, though, the enemies that surround us tend to be things like illness, grief, death, depression, loss, hardship, fear, and temptation. These enemies are every bit as fearsome as any flesh and blood enemy – aren't they?

The psalmist begins by stating an absolute truth. In the long run, God truly being our light and salvation moderates and calms our fear. When we let the Lord be our shepherd, then we shall not want.⁵ When we realize God is for us, who can be against us!⁶

It is one thing, though, to make this claim when life is going well – when the table is piled high with food – when those people dear to us are safe and healthy and happy – when we have 10 fingers and 10 toes all in good working order – when we dwell in peace and plenty. It is quite another thing to make this claim when we cannot find employment – when we have insufficient funds to keep the heat on in our home – when the son or daughter we love so much is bullied and battered for being gay – when the CAT scan shows cancer has spread.

I marvel at people who manage to be positive and cheerful and thoughtful no matter what is going on in their lives. Bryan Stevenson (who is to be the law school graduation speaker this year) has spent his adult life defending people on death row. Again and again he has defended people who were innocent... people who were incarcerated because someone bore false witness. Imagine being in prison for ten years, twenty years, for something you did not do. What would that do to you? Stevenson tells story after story of how inmates deal with the injustice while they are incarcerated...and how, when the truth comes out and they are set free, some do not seem to carry a grudge and do not seem to harbor the sort of bitterness I only hope I could resist.⁷

I remember reading about a lady in Ohio who lost a leg in a traffic accident. To be sure she went through a very dark time adjusting to her loss. But, according to her pastor, it was not long before she greeted him warmly and offered him tea from her Spode tea service. When he asked about her cheerful disposition, she replied, "I decided that if I am going to live a one-legged life, I am going to live the best, damned one-legged life in Columbus, Ohio."⁸

The challenging question Psalm 27 puts to us is this: is our confidence and trust in God dependent upon the absence of trouble and illness and heartache and distress? Can we praise God only when life goes well? When hardship befalls us (or befalls those dear to us) do we suppose God doesn't care, that God has abandoned us...or do we choose to trust God is near, that God will never let us go?

3

A person's faith is shown for what it really is during adversity. To be sure, the depth of one's faith is also on display when life goes well...in terms of gratitude, humility, generosity, compassion. But the thickness, the depth, of a person's faith is shown for what it really is during times of adversity - "when all hell breaks loose."⁹

With his life in shambles, the psalmist writes, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Then turning to look each of us in the eye, he says, "Look to the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; look to the Lord!"¹⁰ For if we scan the horizon and search under every rock and in every bird song and in every human face...then we look and wait in an active voice.

4

Some time ago Deb, my wife, came across the following prayer that stopped me in my tracks. Listen to it and see if you agree it has a lot to do with actively "looking to the Lord." Here's the prayer: **"Thank you, O God, for anxiety that exposes the emptiness of my self-sufficiency."**

It's the sort of prayer that ought to stop us in our tracks because in our culture self-sufficiency is strength and anxiety is weakness. Self-sufficiency is encouraged and rewarded in individuals, the market place, families, nations, even churches. If you are self-sufficient you are successful and possibly very productive. You see the danger don't you? Self-sufficiency so easily seduces us into thinking we don't need God any more than we need anyone or anything else.¹¹

The prayer doesn't just ask us to think about self-sufficiency in a new way...it asks us to do the same with anxiety. The prayer gives thanks to God for anxiety. In our culture

people go to great lengths to avoid anxiety, even taking pills to avoid it. Are we to give thanks to God for something we so desperately want to avoid?

The prayer would have us give thanks for a **type** of anxiety - a type that helps expose the emptiness that comes from being so self-sufficient that God is irrelevant. Self-sufficiency is standard operating procedure to such an extent that daily we need to be reminded how beguiling and barren it can be. To pray that God might fill us with the sort of anxiety that helps us identify the emptiness in our lives so we can refocus our lives upon serving God...Wow. What a powerful, challenging, and discerning prayer.

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The psalmist did not fall under the devilish sway of self-sufficiency. He knew he needed God. He trusted God. And because he trusted in God's ability more than his own, he found that **hardship he faced was not the only reality**, the only truth. A greater truth motivated and informed his present experience. That greater truth was that God did not and would not abandon him. In this he trusted.

This trust is at the heart of the gospel message. This trust alters how we see and therefore who we are and how we live. The gospel tells us that in spite of evidence to the contrary...God is with us - God loves us - God's love for us is inexhaustible - God's intention for us is life, full and abundant life. Even though the waters roar and form and the mountains shake in the heart of the sea... God is our refuge and strength; our present help in trouble.¹² Even when we feel as though our circumstance is hopeless, the gospel message tells us God will never leave us hopeless.¹³ The gospel tells us that in life and in death we belong to God¹⁴ - that we are sheltered under God's comforting and almighty wing¹⁵...now and always.

The psalmist says, "Look to the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; look to the Lord!" Such is life...true life. Amen.



Lexington Presbyterian Church
120 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450
www.lexpres.org

Endnotes:

¹ See: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0448123/bio>. Other web sites suggest he could only read 1200 wpm.

² Lischer, Richard. 2005. The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 67-68.

³ Davis, Ellen F. 2003. "Teaching in the Bible Confessionally in the Church" in The Art of Reading Scripture. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 12.

⁴ *Schadenfreude* is a compound of *Schaden*, "damage, harm," and *Freude*, "joy."

⁵ See Psalm 23:1.

⁶ See Romans 8:31.

⁷ Stevenson, Bryan. 2015. Just Mercy. NY: Spiegel & Grau.

⁸ Sweet, Leonard I. 1995. Strong in the Broken Places. Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 32.

⁹ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 941. Citing Psalm 27:3.

¹⁰ Berlin, Adele and Brettler, Marc Zvi. ed. 2004. The Jewish Study Bible. NY: Oxford University Press, 1312.

¹¹ Sometimes it sounds as if God is a "thing." Obviously God is not a "thing." God is a "person." But when we are self-sufficient we have a way of treating everyone and everything as a "thing," as bit-players in the story of our lives... God included.

¹² See Psalm 46:1f.

¹³ That is why one of the gravest sins for Christians is despair.

¹⁴ See Romans 14:8.

¹⁵ See Deuteronomy 33:27.