Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

April 14, 2024

Psalm 4

One of the 1st things I do as I prepare for a sermon is to look at my notes from previous years and my old sermons, see what I was thinking 3, 6, 9 years ago.

I was surprised when I did that this past week and saw that I’ve always preached on today’s Psalm. It’s not one I’d name quickly as being one of my favorites, so I was puzzled about why I keep coming back to it.

But it quickly became clear to me that I do that because I keep finding something I need in the words there.

My notes from 6 years ago include the phrase “babysitting the world.” I don’t know where I got them, but I like the phrase.

How often do we lie awake at night, babysitting the world? Fretting over the things we certainly can’t fix at 2 am, if at all.

It’s not that we *shouldn’t* be concerned about the things we can’t fix. But dwelling on them at 2 am is rarely helpful for anybody involved. It keeps us from the sleep we need and maybe keeps us from seeing how we’re already doing things that are helping the people around us.

Too often, the bad crowds out the good in our minds.

There’s more than babysitting the world, though. There’s the responses we craft in our minds about what other people have done to hurt us, like what we see the Psalmist do in verse 2: “You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory; how long will you love illusions and seek after lies?”

I don’t know about you, but what keeps me awake all too often is revisiting conversations in my mind. Reviewing my mistakes from the day. Overthinking *so much*. Finally thinking of the clever comeback I wish I’d had, which would have felt satisfying momentarily, something that proved I was right and someone else was wrong.

But, if I’m honest, sometimes what keeps me awake at night is wondering if it’s all true. Wondering just how it’s possible that a man dying on a cross 2000 years ago was something that can be what ultimately liberates us from all that works to keep us from flourishing.

Because I can’t prove it’s true. I just have the word of people who lived 2000 years ago and recorded those promises. Who said that they saw that man alive after he had died, and said he was God incarnate, the Messiah come to set humanity free.

Which is what I had been thinking about all week as I prepared for today. We don’t get any explanations, not really. The Evangelists don’t record Jesus telling his followers, “So this is exactly how my death and resurrection will bring about your salvation.”

What we keep seeing in our readings during Easter is just an *insistence* that Jesus was crucified, died, buried, and raised from the dead. The insistence that people *saw* him. That he *ate* in their presence, proving that he wasn’t a ghost. That he *showed* them the marks from his suffering, proving it was him and not someone who looked a lot like him. And that, ***somehow***, there’s a connection between his death and resurrection and our salvation and forgiveness.

That lack of explanation about that connection has bugged people over the years, and some of them have come up with a variety of explanations, atonement theories. And that’s fine. If that’s what you need for your faith, by all means.

But, as I talked about with the quilters the other day, the older I get, the less I need those explanations. And there’s a pretty simple reason for that.

I’m wrong about things far more than I’d like to admit.

It’s not that I’m saying I’m not going to dwell on atonement theories because I think they’re unnecessary or because I think it might be proven wrong.

I feel like it’s more a “stay in your lane” kind of thing for me. It’s not something that I have to figure out, because I have come to trust in the promise that it’s what God is taking care of. *Has* taken care of.

You see, all throughout my 12 years of ministry, I’ve read the Bible. I’ve talked to people who have devoted their lives to studying Scripture. I’ve heard and read about how people have experienced God in their lives. Their *witness* to God’s presence.

And given a lack of explanation about how it all works, given a trust in the idea that there’s a God who could create all that is out of the primordial chaos, I’ve decided that, at this moment in time, I have enough.

Like the psalmist, I’ve come to the point when I can “offer the appointed sacrifices and put [my] trust in the Lord,” that “in peace I [can] lie down and sleep,” because God is taking care of the big things.

And that doesn’t mean I don’t have any work to do. I’m still standing *here* and talking to all of *you*. I still have a to do list and a pile of books to read and visits scheduled.

And it doesn’t mean that you have to agree with me. That what works for me has to work for you. I don’t believe in a one-size-fits-all experience of God, a one-size-fits-all for faith.

I have simply come to the point where I have heard enough times that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That God forgives me when I fall short. That my salvation is something God has taken care of, once and for all. That the ways I serve others, the ways I offer *agape* love to my neighbors, are the ways I serve my God.

I have heard all these things enough times that I have learned to trust in them. I *want* them to be true.

And what I seek now from my faith is guidance and wisdom about how to live so that my life is a witness to others about what I believe about God.

Because it seems to me that the Bible makes it pretty clear that God is in the business of liberation for creation, so that what God has called good can thrive.

Ultimately, I think the appeal of faith for many of us is that it tells us there’s something better than the life we’re experiencing. The despair and the fear and the many, *many* ways they are made manifest in the lives of people…that’s not the way it needs to be. We *can* learn to be people who take a regular break from the consumer culture we live in. We *can* see that there’s *enough* for everyone to have the opportunity to thrive if we let go of our fear that we won’t have enough if our neighbor gets what they need.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus’ life and ministry was God breaking into the world, “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Our calling is to bear witness to that good news. With our *lives*, by following Jesus’ example.

I can’t prove to you that it’s true. But I believe it. Or at least I do today. Tomorrow may be another story. I hope that my life, in my imperfect ways, bears witness to my trust. To the trust I have come to have that God is God, which means I don’t have to babysit the world, and I can lie down in peace, resting securely.

Mary Oliver, “I Worried”

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not how shall  
I correct it?  
Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?  
Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.  
Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?  
Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang.