

August 15, 2021 Reflection
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Folks, it's been a challenging week. The IPCC report on climate change was termed "dire" in the news -

Though the earth should change (Psalm 46)

Just yesterday, Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake -

Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea (Psalm 46)

And Delta means we are back to masking everywhere, changing plans, and fearing for our neighbors' wellbeing -

By illness we are bowed down and brought low. (Psalm 38)

Among us we have household moves, job searches, worries for our children, illness....

Lord, we wait for you.... (Psalm 38)

Did you catch me quoting the Psalms there? The worship book of ancient Israel, the only part of the Bible that is a collection of prayers for us, covers the spectrum from praise and thanksgiving, to doubt and lament. There are wisdom psalms and psalms for coronations; there are psalms that confess. From Ancient Israel through now, the psalms have brought "individual anxieties, hopes, sufferings and salvation" into communal worship with "meditation, adoration, and instruction." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, Psalms, p. 813) Ellen Davis says "the Psalms are the single best guide to the spiritual life in print." (Quoted in Taylor), and David Taylor says that "to pray the Psalms is to pray ourselves into wholeness,...by praying our honest joys and our honest sorrows." (Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*). When we are honest, that leads to grace.

I've been thinking about the Psalms because I think they are where we're going to start Bible Study this fall - Tuesday mornings - let me know if you're interested in joining our fearless band of folks. I don't think we use the psalms enough in worship and I'll be working on that this year. This week, the lectionary suggests Psalm 34:9-14 and that's our text for worship today. Listen for God's word to you - and listen for the Psalmist's wisdom in this beautiful bit of instruction:

Psalm 34:9-14, NRSV, adapted for inclusive language:

34:9 O fear the LORD, you God's holy ones, for those who fear God have no want.

34:10 The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

34:11 Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

34:12 Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?

34:13 Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

34:14 Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

I want to explore these particular verses a little more.

The Psalmist calls on a community. This is not just an individual commission to honesty, goodness, and shalom. This is an invitation for the worshipping community to act toward the common good. A Pilgrim this week reminded me that our faith points to communal ethics, and that sense of right living in society is foundational to our faith. Walter Brueggemann says these verses - along with many other psalms - are a call to a new orientation, a new way of being, “not a call to law and order, rather to the revolutionary ‘good’ that is antithetical to those who order[ed] society.” (*The Message of the Psalms*. P. 134)

The Psalmist calls their community - and our community - to do something we hear over and over in the Psalms. But most English translations are a little off when they ask us to fear the Lord. The Hebrew is more nuanced - we’re to fear, revere, honor, and respect the Lord. We put God first.

The Psalmist invites us to seek peace - again, not an adequate translation of Shalom. This is an invitation to seek wholeness and fullness of life for our neighbors and ourselves.

We are to do good, which is interesting, too. This good is the welfare of all, the common good. We are told in the creation story in Genesis that we are part of God’s good creation, that God saw that we, humanity and all creation, was good. But in this verse, we’re not called good, we’re called to do good. And there’s something to that for me:

God is good.

Creation is good.

And yes, we are good, because we are part of God’s beautiful creation.

But do we always do good? If we could answer yes, we would be perfect, and only God is perfect.

Tell me to practice good, to attempt good, to aspire to good, and that’s something I can work with. And there’s good news here, “those who fear God have no want.”

Revere God, take refuge in God and find hope in God’s presence -

Even in the midst of turmoil -

And from that foundation, turn from evil, pursue shalom for all, do what you can to do good -

That’s the wisdom of these verses of Psalm 34.

Now, before we turn to today’s prayers, let me offer one more thing. Some of our modern poets are Psalmists, I think. One of the most inspiring is Mary Oliver. I want to share her poem *Wild Geese*:

Wild Geese – Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Film: <https://vimeo.com/399432463>

For the wisdom of psalms ancient and modern, thanks be to God. Amen.