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Season after Pentecost
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Co-Creators with God

Psalm 127:1-2 *Unless God builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain;
unless God watches over the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for God gives sleep to her beloved.*

Let us reflect on just these two verses today from Psalm 127. The first verse we might entitle “Being part of what God is doing.” Listen again to the psalmist’s words:

*Unless God builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.
Unless God watches over the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.*

The psalmist’s sense of reality is different from popular religion. Often we undertake some project or mission, and then ask God to bless what we are doing. We do it in the church, and our nation does it whenever we launch a military campaign. This is not reality, says the psalmist. In truth, what we undertake must be rooted in and flow out of who God is and what God is doing. Otherwise it is empty of meaning. We may succeed, but not in terms of what God desires for the world. For the psalmist, the true order of things to first understand who God is and thus what God is about, then to place ourselves within that movement of God’s creating power in the world.

For this, we need different and fresh images of God today, actually ones that are very ancient and more in touch with scripture. God is not “out there” or “up there.” God is not separate from us and the world. God is in the world, in the depths of life, as the Power of new life. The German mystic Meister Eckhart lived in the thirteenth century. He was part of a group called the Rhineland mystics, which included two outstanding women theologians, Hildegard of Bingen and Mechtilde of Magdeburg. To his credit and uncharacteristic of his day, Eckhart was greatly influenced by these women. These Christian thinkers spanned a couple of centuries in medieval times, and were mostly written off by the male-dominated orthodoxy. They were not sin-oriented, but creation-oriented. They affirmed experiences of God in nature, in all things, for God is, after all, the Creator. God is not detached from what God made, but in everything, and everything, including us humans, is in God. We can awaken to God and to our life as part of all that God made. Our life in Christ is the way we “wake up.”

Meister Eckhart spoke of God as “a great underground river that no one can dam up, no one can stop.” (quoted in Wrestling with the Prophets, Matthew Fox, p. 83) This is a useful image when it comes to the words of the psalm. God is already present in the world, working deeply within all things to bring new life. Our spiritual work is to awaken to God’s presence and the movement of God’s spirit, and then to give our lives to that “great underground river” as it brings new life into the world. The psalm doesn’t say that God alone builds the house. It says that the activity of God’s creating spirit is prior to our work. It is the fountain of what we undertake, what we give ourselves to. What we do in our lives can be grounded in and flow out of what God is doing.

Our spiritual journey is our awakening to fuller understanding of who God is and becoming more in touch with the nature of God—compassion, steadfast love, desire for justice, mercy and forgiveness. As we grow in this spiritual awareness of God, we then come to know how we can live out of that awareness in ways that make us co-creators with God. That’s what it means, I think, that unless God builds the house or watches over the city, we who build or guard do so in vain. If our living and working, the things we give ourselves to, are grounded in that “great underground river” that is at work in the world, then what we do becomes fruitful. I did not say successful. That word has too much contemporary baggage with it. We are not after success, but faithfulness.

So, how do we do this? How do we ground ourselves in God, placing our lives in the flow of that “great underground river” that is God?

This is the work of the inward journey. The discipline or practice of daily times of silence, prayer, meditation, study, is not about fulfilling a spiritual law. It is more serious than that. It is about the fullness of our lives, growing in our awareness of God, the world, and our relationship to God in the world. The inward journey should not be a preoccupation with our sins and shortcomings, or even our personal pains. The work of our inward journey is to bring about a new birth in us, an awakened spirit, so that we know ourselves in God and in God’s world, so that we come to see more clearly the unique ways in which we can be co-creators with God. Otherwise, we get stuck in a self-centered spirituality rather than a creation- and Creator-centered one. Our life in Christ is the centering of ourselves in Christ who is the center of a new creation, as Paul put it in his Letter to the Colossians (Col. 1:15-20). To be focused only on our personal sins, even our own pains and struggles, is to miss the greatest salvation that God offers—our re-union with God and the world as God’s creation.

The goal of our spiritual journey is the return to our true home, or the awareness that we are home already. It is to wake up from our numbness to the life God has given us. The spiritual journey is the awakening of our sensitivity to God and the movement of God’s creating spirit in the world. Then we find our “place,” our niche, as Elaine Marie Prevallet puts it, the particular ways God has given us to be in the world, to be part of God’s redeeming, restoring, healing and creating presence. I think that sin must also have a new meaning for us these days. It must mean all that keeps us from connected living, living in a faithful relationship to God, to others, and the creation itself. This is faith, and the biblical meaning of faith is trustful following of God, of Christ, moving through and beyond our fears, to let ourselves be part of what God is doing.

What is my “place” in life, in God’s good creation? What are the gifts God has given to me that can be channels of God’s spirit giving life to the world? What is the call I feel tugging at my soul, that draws me to give in a particular direction or to a particular need? These are the questions that guide us on our journey toward being co-creators with God, being those who build the house in full awareness that God is building the house.

As we give ourselves to the call God is sounding in our lives, there are at least a couple of dangers. One is that we will get out in front of what God is doing and start thinking that everything depends on us. Our egos become caught up in success or failure. We may become compulsive and not see that God is moving in a new direction altogether. Then we need to go back to the inward journey, touching again the waters of that “deep underground river” that is God. A second danger is that of despair or fear when things aren’t going as we thought or hoped they would, when everything seems to be falling apart. Then we also need to go back to the inward journey, work to let go our fears, and let our spiritual sensitivities become aware again of what God is doing, that the “falling apart” may be the birth process of something new.

The second verse, which we might put under the very important theme “Resting in God”:

*It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for God gives sleep to her beloved.*

Another translation, perhaps more literal, is this: “for God provides for his beloved during sleep.” God not only builds the house and watches the city, but also guards us, watches over us, gives us rest. This rest is both physical and spiritual. Do we serve God’s purposes by wearing ourselves out? Does all of our worry or spiritual anxiousness accomplish anything for God’s purposes? This verse is a Sabbath teaching. As Tom Gutherz reminded us last Tuesday night, the seventh day in the first creation story finds God resting, enjoying the creation, stepping back and drinking it all in. That’s the meaning of the Sabbath and the reason for the ancient laws protecting the Sabbath rest—so that we don’t forget who is Creator, so that we who are co-creators with God can appreciate the beauty, the bounty, the joy of all life. As Matthew Fox reminds us in his book Original Blessing, we are to live out of the basic sense of the blessedness of life. Just as God’s doing is first and foremost, and must precede our doing, so not-doing must be the ground of doing. Rest must be the fountain of activity.

There is a psychological term that applies here: hyper-vigilance. To be hyper-vigilant is to be always on our guard, always on edge, feeling that if we are not always “on” something will go wrong or fall apart. The truth is that things will go wrong and fall apart, or go right and come together, quite well without our constant hovering. This verse is a call to take our hands off God, off the creation, off each other, and off ourselves. We are not in control and the more we try to be in control, the worse we make things. We see it on the personal level, the damage done when people try to control each other. We see it on the national level, whenever a nation, including ours, persists in controlling other nations for its “national interests.” Hyper-vigilance is a practical denial of God’s reality and care. It is the opposite of faith, meaning trust.

The psalmist is telling us, “You can rest. You can sleep. You can stop and let go your tight grip on everyone and everything, including yourself.” God is providing for you even while you sleep.

What a wondrous journey this is! Being part of what God is already doing in the world, letting our lives become the channels of God’s new life for the world, being co-creators with God. And all of this through discovering and affirming the gifts God has already given us or will give us along the way. Being free from notions of success and failure, always keeping ourselves grounded in God and what God wants to bring about. Then doing our work, living out our callings, with spirits and bodies resting in God. Letting go of all anxiousness so that we are unencumbered by the weight of worry and stress, putting all things in God so that we are free to do our best and be our best. What a wondrous journey God in Christ calls us to be on!