

Find Out for Yourself

Psalm 34 *Find out for yourself how good the Lord is.*
(Today's English Version)

Three words from Psalm 34 stood out for me this week.

The first is found in verse 8, and seems to me to be the core of the psalm: *O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.*” The Today's English Version translates it this way: *Find out for yourself how good the Lord is.* Taste and see. Find out for yourself. Don't take someone else's word for it. Try living by faith and see what you come up with. This is the biblical meaning of faith. Not a head-trip. Not clinging to ideas about God or Jesus or the Bible or anything else.

Faith is the LIFE of trusting God, taking refuge in God. Taking refuge does not mean running away from the world or from life or from ourselves. It means seeking within the reality of ourselves and our lives what is most real, the very source of life itself—God. Faith is not “blind faith.” Faith in the biblical meaning doesn't really mean accepting something you can't see or prove. Faith is EXPERIENCE. It is living our lives fully, discovering within the sometimes confusing and painful experiences of our lives the presence of God and God's power and love. Taste and see that God is good. Do it for yourself. Don't take someone's word for it. Don't live vicariously through others who seem to have it all together or some winsome religious leader. Make the life of faith your own. Those who take refuge in God, who root their lives in God, experience a happiness, a joy that goes deeper than circumstances of suffering or pleasure that come and go.

The Church of the Covenant was founded upon this understanding of faith. Faith is not something someone else can give you. Faith is not agreeing to a set of beliefs or never experiencing doubt or struggle. Faith is not just a matter of having one's name on a church membership roll and being part of a religious institution. When we talk about faith as an inward journey of prayer and self-understanding, and an outward journey of discovering and doing what we feel God is calling us to do with our unique lives, we are talking about taking responsibility for our own spiritual lives. It is about finding out for ourselves how good God is.

We don't come here expecting someone to provide us with all the answers or to do our thinking for us or to tell us what to do. Or, if we do come with such expectations, we are soon disappointed. We assume that each of us can undertake and is called to a personal spiritual life, discovering for ourselves our relationship with God and living out of that relationship to the best of our ability and insight. What we offer is the opportunity to make a commitment to “find out for ourselves” that God is good. And we offer a minimal set of spiritual disciplines, or practices, that can keep us on the journey and help us awaken more and more to our own lives in relation to God, other people, ourselves, and the world.

When the psalm says taste and see that God is good, it doesn't mean that we find God's goodness only in the good experiences, the pleasant things in our lives. Most important is to find God's goodness in the experiences that cause us suffering. This is the second word I heard in Psalm 34. If we think God is only present in the things that make us feel good, then we will have a real crisis of faith. We will run from things that are difficult and sink into despair when something painful happens in our lives. The psalm encourages us to have a wide-open heart, open to all experiences in our lives, the good and positive things, and the things that bring struggle or pain.

The psalmist talks about the cry of the poor and humble that goes out to God. Within their suffering, God is present and responding with care. They find that embracing their difficulty and expressing their need open the way for God's response. Later in the psalm we read these words: *Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.* In the version of the psalm we just sang, I wrote it this way: *Even the faithful will suffer, but God will bring them through.* If we are on the journey of faith, working seriously with our commitments and spiritual practices, we will experience difficulties and suffering like any other member of the human family. The life of faith is not a Teflon coating against bad experiences. It is a different way of receiving those experiences and working with them so that they create compassion in us, so that they can teach us love and generosity of spirit, and so that they open us up to community with others.

Recently a man who has become a friend at the Festival Center was in worship. He is from the neighborhood and has a far more challenging life in just about every way than others of us. Usually he is very quiet, sometimes offering a prayer. That day we were reading together the words of Psalm 34. After the time of silent reflection, he was the first to share his response to the scripture. He called attention to

verse 6: *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.* That's what I've experienced, he was saying. That's me. To learn what faith means in experiences of struggle and suffering, we can be taught by those who are poor or terribly sick or wounded by life. Somehow at the depth of their pain and difficulty they have tapped into a gratitude and joy that underlie the changing experiences of life.

Finally, the third word from Psalm 34 that stood out for me had to do with verse 5: *Look to God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.* Looking to God makes us shine! Looking to God means we never need to feel ashamed! Kaye described to me how her mother looked a few moments before she died. Kaye and her sister had gone into the kitchen for just a brief time. When Kaye came back into the living room where Mildred lay in her hospital bed, she looked at her mother's face, which had become radiant and completely at peace. "You look beautiful, Mom," said Kaye. And indeed she did. She was looking to God. All the strain of her life, all of what might have caused her any shame or fear or guilt had evaporated.

We can not only die this way; we can live this way. Looking to God means to turn our living toward our spiritual life as the most important dimension of our lives. It is making our spiritual connection with God the core of what we do and what we seek. It means taking that journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions, tasting and seeing for ourselves, finding out for ourselves. We are not living to please people or to meet society's expectations. Nor are we living out of fear and guilt. We are recognizing and exploring and deepening the relationship with God that is at the center of our being. And through that kind of journey, though it certainly involves moments of struggle, discouragement, and bewilderment, our face nevertheless shines. It is the reflection, the image of God in us.

No shame. Christianity is not meant to be a religion of shame and guilt. It has been made into that, no doubt. And some of us have felt the sting of religion used as an instrument of instilling shame and guilt. But the psalm declares what is most basic to the whole of scripture, that we are made not to live in shame but in joy and freedom. It comes from our relationship with God who made us and loves us, who seeks our well-being and calls us to be the unique and precious persons we were made to be.

All of this comes together somehow in the story of the blind man crying out to Jesus. Bartimaeus sits at the roadside as he probably did everyday, begging for enough to sustain him, relying on the pity of

others. He has heard about Jesus of Nazareth and that he is coming down the road. He starts crying out to Jesus for help, for healing. Everyone around him tries to hush him up. They seem to be ashamed of him and his need and his condition. Maybe it is embarrassing and uncomfortable. Maybe they just wish Bartimaeus would go away. But he keeps on crying out. *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.* Jesus summons the man, "Call him here." Jesus isn't ashamed of anyone—children, women, the poor, even the rich. He is the embodiment of God's welcoming love. "What do you want me to do for you?" says Jesus. "Just let me see again!" Jesus says: "Go on your way; your faith has made you well." His faith, his finding out for himself, his acknowledging his need and opening himself up to healing. His faith brought him wholeness, not only the healing of his sight, but more importantly his following Jesus on the way, his taking up the life of faith.

Taste and see. Even in the pain and struggle of life. Let your face shine. And don't be ashamed. Find out for yourself how good God is.