

Waiting and Watching: Spiritual Alertness

Psalm 130 *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope....*

John 11:1-45 *Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." Each of us has known that place where the psalmist is. The depths. In Hebrew it is *tehom*, the chaotic primeval waters that threaten to overcome us. It is the place where the light of joy or hope has gone out, where there seems to be no door or window. The opening words of this psalm speak directly to our hearts. We have been where the psalmist is. We may be there right now.

Psalms like this are spiritually important because they confirm our own real experience. We don't know the specific circumstances in the psalmist's life, perhaps very different from our own. That doesn't matter. What matters is that the outcry is from the same spiritual "place." The words speak of the moments when we feel completely swamped by our own inner chaos or that of life around us.

There is tremendous spiritual value in admitting you are lost. Out of pride and pretense, we resist doing what the psalmist did--cry out to God, admit that we are lost, that our life is a mess and we don't know what to do about it. However, this can be the turning point of an authentic spiritual life.

The fall of my senior year in college, I came to a point of emotional and mental collapse. Kaye and I were to be married that Christmas, and I was very anxious about whether or not I was up to a committed, long-term relationship. I had relinquished my exemption from the draft as a pre-ministerial student and would be available for the lottery. The Vietnam War was intensifying and I knew I could not be part of that or any war. I was unable to concentrate on my studies. My future opened up before me like a vast desert. I felt those depths, the swirling chaotic *tehom* all around and within me. I phoned the chaplain of Lynchburg College, Newton Fowler, whom some of you may remember. He came right over. What a relief it was just to acknowledge how lost I was and to open myself up to a trusted human being! To me, this is the same thing as crying out to God, when we reach out to another person and share with them the condition of our soul. That is the point that life begins to open up again.

Sooner or later we learn that the spiritual life is about "not knowing." It is not about being sure of ourselves or having answers or reading all the books. The spiritual life is grounded in our own real experience, including those times when we feel lost and our hearts open wide to God.

"If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered." The psalmist has an acute awareness of his own sinfulness and perhaps of the sinfulness of others around him. We don't much like the word sin anymore. Maybe we need a different word, but let's not give it up quite yet. The main definition of sin put forward by Christianity has been "original sin," the idea that we are born sinful, separated from God. We can do nothing good, and must rely on God's grace to put us right. The dominant biblical view is that we are created originally good, or blessed. Jesus never said anything about people being no-good, deserving only God's disfavor. If he believed that, he would never have told the crowds, "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." [Matt.5:13ff] He would never have called people to change their lives and live the life of God's kingdom if he did not believe that we have it within us to do so.

However, this does not mean that "sin" has no real meaning in our experience. There is our destructiveness and cruelty—the wars we perpetuate, the deprivation of the majority of the world's people, the violence that pervades our society, the greed that permeates our economy, the destruction of our own home, the earth. There are our personal experiences. The hatreds and grudges that we nurse. Our desire to hurt back those who have hurt us. The ways we try to control others, convinced that we know what is best for them. We withhold love and treat the call to forgive as though it is not really expected of us. We are always busy assigning

blame to others or ourselves. And where does all this get us? Does it make us happier or feel more fulfilled? It gets us precisely where the psalmist was—in the depths, the *tehom*, the pit. It doesn't really matter whether things are our own or others' fault, or nobody's. For whatever complex of reasons, we get lost, separated from ourselves, other people, God, life, and the only way to begin to find the way out is to recognize it, accept it, and open up our hearts to God.

The way out is not just thinking that we've made a few mistakes and all we have to do is make ourselves better, fine tune ourselves a little here and there. The real power of change comes from acknowledging that relying on our own wits and wisdom is not enough. The psalmist has found that only by facing the reality of his own situation and opening his life to God will he find renewal, touch again his own true self and his relationship with God.

Here is the spiritual wisdom of 12-step groups like AA. They understand the paradox at the heart of life. We have to take responsibility for our own lives and, at the same time, recognize our powerlessness, opening up to our Higher Power, to God, to the Source of Life itself. That's what the psalmist is experiencing. It is a recognition of the reality of our own lives, our experience of being powerless to change it by our own sheer effort, and opening our lives completely to God.

The psalmist then makes a remarkable statement about the nature of God. If God were a God who kept score, recording our deeds and misdeeds in a heavenly ledger, then we would be truly hopeless. But that is not who God is, says the psalmist. God does not keep score! How different this is from popular Christianity that tells us if we do well, we get a reward, if we mess up, we face eternal consequences. God does not mark iniquities. God is forgiveness. God is mercy and steadfast love. This is the dominant view of scripture. We are not the prisoners of our own accumulated actions, or those of others. There is always the possibility of a new beginning.

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning." Waiting is not our strong suit. We think that waiting is doing nothing. It is so hard to wait, especially when we feel sunk in the mire of hurt, anger or discouragement, and we will clutch at any remedy or anesthetic. But the psalmist knows that waiting is at the heart of the spiritual life. This kind of waiting is not "doing nothing." Waiting comes from awareness that God is real and active in our lives and the life of the world. It is therefore a watchful waiting, a spiritual alertness in the midst of our own real situations. We do not have to be overcome by where we are, but are able to cultivate spiritual awareness. We keep watch.

Real, basic change in our lives does not come by sheer effort, by exerting ourselves as hard as we can. It comes from awareness, from alertness, from the kind of watchful waiting the psalmist is talking about. This is where our spiritual practice becomes crucial, that inward journey we talk about and work with. Our work becomes embracing the pain, the circumstances, as a real and important part of our lives. This is what our life is about at this point, and this is where we will see God, will learn what we need to learn. So we begin to watch and to wait.

The psalm does not end with a resolution to the psalmist's problems. It ends with an expression of two things. First, the psalmist resolves to wait for God and God's word. His soul will wait for God more than those who keep watch through the long, dark night, anxious for the first hint of daylight. Second, the psalmist says this is where our hope lies. In our waiting and in God. Why? Because as bad as things are or seem to be, God's very nature is still steadfast love, love that never gives up. And God is the source of new life, of power to make things new.

I found the Gospel reading to be the psalm in story form. We did not listen to the whole story this morning. Jesus gets word that his friend Lazarus is very ill and perhaps at the point of death. These are his friends—Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. What does Jesus do? He says that this illness is not fatal. It is for God's glory. A strange response. Instead of rushing to Lazarus' side, Jesus stays two days "in the place where he was." Then he tells the disciples that they are going to Judea. The disciples are upset. That's where some folks tried to stone Jesus. Okay, says Jesus. Then let's go to Bethany, because our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep and I am going to wake him up. Another strange response. Jesus just seems to be living out of a different spiritual place.

Jesus is in no hurry. He doesn't rush off to the distraught family. He dawdles around, spending at least two days before he finally decides to go to Bethany. This is all very puzzling. If we acted like this, not responding quickly to someone who is ill or in need, we would be accused of not caring. Jesus seems fairly untroubled about the situation. There seems to be in him an awareness of something that is deeper than the circumstances of our lives that throw us into anxiousness and fear.

When he finally gets to Bethany, Mary rushes out to him. Remember that earlier story of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary? Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listen to his every word. She was the one who anointed him out of her love for him. Mary's grief at her brother's death must have been intense. She had great faith in Jesus, and when he didn't come earlier, she was deeply disappointed, perhaps hurt. Mary pours out her grief as she expresses her disappointment: If you had been here, our brother would not have died! We do the same thing sometime when we feel tremendous hurt and it comes out at somebody as frustration or impatience or anger.

Jesus is not unaffected by everyone's grief. Twice the text says that he was "greatly disturbed." He asks where the tomb is. We'll show you, they say. Jesus finally breaks down, which is the literal meaning of the word translated "weep." He is not above feeling what we feel—grief, sorrow, pain. They come to the tomb. Jesus tells them to open it up in spite of the fact that the body will be smelling to high heaven. He cries out to Lazarus, and Lazarus walks out, bound in grave cloths. Set him loose, says Jesus.

Jesus lived as one who was fully aware of the pain, the struggles, the chaotic waters of human life. At the same time, he was fully aware of God and the power of life that is deeper than the depths we find ourselves in. His dawdling when called to Bethany was not unconcern but the kind of unhurried compassion that is rooted in awareness of God. Jesus did not heal everyone. He did not raise everyone who had died. What he did was really more important than that. He lived the life of faith in the most complete way. Faith that embraces the depths of life into which we feel ourselves plunged. Yet faith in God who, if we learn to wait and watch, will bring new light, new life, a new way. If we stay close to Jesus, we will learn how to do this in our own lives. His life will empower us to live with the same faith.