

Psalm 4: An Evening Prayer

Psalm 4 is a wonderful evening prayer. In a different way, the psalm invites us to continue our reflection on what I spoke about last week, how we as individuals and a community live in and out of the peace that Christ gives.

Evenings offer us the opportunity to look back on the day, assess the condition of our spirits, see what baggage we are carrying from the day's encounters, and then rest. But we do not always sleep well. Our minds are sometimes full of worry, frustrations, or anger carried over from experiences of the day. Yet sleep can be our ultimate trusting of God's care of us when we are able to place all things, including our own lives, into God's keeping. Evening is a spiritually rich time of the day, and Psalm 4 serves well as an evening meditation, or for whenever we need to get back in touch with our lives in God.

Answer me when I call, O God of my right!

You gave me room when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

The psalmist experiences anxiety or distress and feels up against a wall. The only way to turn for help is to God. We feel that way sometimes. We've run out of answers. Experiences have shaken us deeply and we don't know how to respond. All the tools we've accumulated for handling life don't seem to work. We feel hemmed in, suffocated. The psalmist remembers that there were times when he experienced God as giving him room, pushing back the darkness, the walls, the floods. And so the psalmist comes back to himself and his relationship with God. Even in his distress, the psalmist remembers that he can go home to himself and his relationship with God.

We practice regular times of silence, meditation and prayer so that we come back to ourselves and our relationship with God. It is best to make this a daily discipline or practice, not just when things get bad. That way we are always grounding ourselves in our relationship with God even when things are very challenging and distressing. I have seen so many times how important such spiritual practice is in a person's life. When a crisis comes, those who have some kind of regular spiritual practice are better able to enter into it so that they are not completely undone. They are able to be open to what the experience brings to their spiritual learning and growth. The psalms speak of this as "taking refuge" in God. It is not an escape from life but going deeper, touching the very source of our life. When we do this, we experience what the psalmist means by God who makes room for us when we feel suffocated or hemmed in. We are able to begin to get a better perspective and deeper understanding of ourselves and the situation.

How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?

*But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.*

The psalmist has been the brunt of unkind rumors or attacks on his character. He feels shamed by others' treatment of him, feels hurt and rejected. It is a personal experience of injustice. The psalmist speaks to those who are wounding him—You people, how long will I have to suffer your treatment? How long will you engage in lies and words empty of truth? Like many other psalms, this one includes a complaint about some hurtful or threatening experience.

We may experience this kind of thing at times. Others' disrespect or misunderstanding of us, even their hostility toward us. Even when we know that it comes out of their own insecurities or woundedness, such actions and attitudes still hurt. We could also expand the psalmist's words to include how caught up we are as a society and a human family in loving empty words and living out of illusions and lies about what is truly important or of value and importance. The important thing here is that the psalmist feels free to acknowledge and express hurt and frustration.

Yet, the psalmist remembers God and his relationship with God. He knows that God is faithful to those who are trying to be faithful, and that God is very close to those who suffer. Prayer could be described as our opening ourselves to God so that God can make room for us when we feel hemmed in. When life gets constricted, we can breathe in God. So the psalmist begins to turn from complaint about things that make him feel powerless to his relationship with God.

When you are disturbed, do not sin;

ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

Now the psalmist seems to be giving himself spiritual advice. He has not completely sunk into his feelings. He is able to remind himself what he needs to do to take care of the situation. We have this capacity for self-awareness. We are more than our experiences and the feelings they arouse in us. Through awareness, we are able to detach ourselves from what we are experiencing so that we see what we need to do. Sometimes we have others to help us do this, a friend or spouse or someone in our faith community who encourages us to become quiet and look at what is going on in us. But we can also do this for ourselves. This self-awareness is an important spiritual tool.

The psalmist is saying to himself—and to us—when you are disturbed, when you are angry and hurt, don't act out of it. When we are feeling hurt or upset by something or someone, our initial reaction is to strike back or get even. This only perpetuates and escalates the situation. In the psalmist's view, this is sin—actions that keep the cycle of injustice, hate, or violence going.

Society says, Go ahead and hit back; get revenge. Psychologists say, Express your anger; get it out. Pound a pillow or yell. But the psalmist points us in a different way. The anger, the feelings are real. Don't deny them or suppress them. Don't push them down as though you are ashamed of having them. Accept them. Embrace them as you would a child that needs caring for. Then look into them. Ponder or meditate on them while you are lying down, or sitting, or walking. Be silent and still. Then you can see into your anger, your fear or whatever it is. Then you can understand where it is coming from and it will not control you and cause you to hurt others or yourself.

Paul gives the same advice in his Letter to the Ephesians: *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (4:26)*. Don't deny your anger or try to drive it away. Anger is not in itself evil; it is a human response to hurt or injustice. Just don't let the anger control how you respond to others. Deal with it through understanding and compassion, and don't carry it from one day into the next.

The psalmist also tells himself to keep offering right sacrifices and putting trust in God. When we experience turmoil of some kind, it is helpful to continue practices that keep us grounded in our faith. I have known many people through the years who, while they were going through difficult experiences, kept coming to worship even when they didn't feel like it, when they would rather stay home and just pull the covers over their heads. And over time, such practices or disciplines provided the grounding they needed to get through it. It kept them in touch with God and with life, even when they felt out of touch. It was an act of trust, of faith that though things seem so impossible now, one must keep open to what might become, what might emerge. Trusting God means staying with our experiences, as hard as they may be, believing that at some point, in some way, new life will emerge. To that end, we continue our practices of prayer, giving, worship, and so forth even when we don't feel like it.

There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"

You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

The psalmist comes to a wonderful insight. He looks around and sees how discontent people are. Always wanting more, never satisfied. A consumer society. People measuring happiness by accumulation—bigger cars, salaries, TVs, weapons, and on and on. There is also a consumerist religion, wanting God to always give us more things or experiences or whatever. But there is not really any happiness. We may get the next thing we think we want, but soon become dissatisfied again. We feel only anxiety and an inability to enjoy life. I think the psalmist has seen his own discontent as well. He has been complaining about other people and how they mistreat him. He wants them to change, to be different. In the end, he has remembered that he cannot change other people. He can only change himself, only control how he responds and lives his life. Now through coming back to himself and his relationship with God, the psalmist recognizes that he already has everything he needs for fullness of life. The joy in his heart arises from simply being alive and touching his relationship with God. How fortunate he is! How rich he is!

Our peace and happiness do not really depend on circumstances or people around us. That is where we get messed up. When we are angry, hurt, disappointed or generally dissatisfied with life, it is usually because we want the world and other people to be different from what they are. We blame something or someone for our unhappiness. The spiritual wisdom of this psalm is that we can have

peace, a sense of deep security and happiness any time and all the time, even when situations cause us anger or fear. We can see more deeply into reality and ourselves and come to fuller understanding. Most of all, we can simply come back to that place of peacefulness where we touch our relationship with God.

At our Chrysalis retreat center mission group meeting the other night, Dolly Cardwell shared an important insight. I asked her permission to share this today. She spoke of her discovery that our times of prayer, meditation, and being silent—what we call the daily inward journey—are not just so that we can have the energy we need to serve others and the world. We practice the inward journey for its own sake, so that we can be peaceful and joyful. And if we are touching the peace and joy that comes from awareness of ourselves in God, then our living, the things we do, the ways we relate to other people will communicate the reality of Christ's peace in us.

The psalmist closes with a declaration and a prayer:

I will both lie down and sleep in peace;

for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

We can face our distresses. We can embrace them with compassion and come to more insight. We can come back to ourselves and our relationship with God. We can return to that place of reality where we know that all things, including our own lives, are in God's hands. Coming again to this place of peace, we can now get some sleep. That kind of sleep, that kind of peace makes us able to live in ways that truly benefit the world.