

Sermon for October 17, 2021

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As I read the scriptures assigned for this week, I found myself repeatedly drawn to Psalm 91 verse 14, “I will deliver those who cling to me.” The NRSV translation of the Bible creates a vivid image: “those who *cling* to me.” I immediately think of a young preschool child wrapped around the body of a beloved parent, “clinging” to the one they love. The child becomes all arms and legs, buries their head in the parent’s neck, finds fingerholds around articles of clothing, locks legs and develops incomprehensible strength if an outside teacher or relative tries to pry them away from their parent. This is what it means to “cling.” Other translations of Psalm 91 simply read “I will deliver those who love me” or “those who hold fast to me in love.” But there is this intense action, this desperation, to the image of “clinging” to God. Our Psalm today acknowledges the saving acts of God; God will be our refuge, God will guard and bear up, deliver and uphold. But, like many of the Psalms, the words also acknowledge the reality of hardship. There will be evil. We will encounter lion and viper. There will be trouble. And in the midst we call out and “cling” to God.

A few weeks ago I attended a theological conference. The speaker shared a powerful youtube video of a Pastor sharing a message with his congregation after unimaginable loss. The Pastor’s son and his young family were on vacation in Florida when a semi truck hydroplaned across the freeway, hitting them head on. His son and his two grandsons were killed on impact. Speaking to his congregation, you could feel his tangible “clinging” to God. He emphatically preached that pain is not the absence of faith; faith does not exempt us from pain. Rather, as he stood before three coffins, feeling the depth and reality of pain, one clings to faith in God’s self-revelation in Jesus, faith in the promised resurrection. He invited their contemporary band to sing a song holding great meaning for him in his grief. While a praise song, it was sung as a slow lament song, and one could feel the longing, the “clinging”, his arms wrapped around God, neck buried, legs locked, grasping for fingerholds *“Even when my strength is lost, I’ll praise You, Even when I have no song, I’ll praise You. Even when it’s hard to find the words, Louder then I’ll sing Your praise. Even when the fight seems lost, I’ll praise You. Even when it hurts like hell, I’ll praise You, Even when it makes no sense to sing, Louder then I’ll sing Your praise. Take this mountain weight, Take these ocean tears, Hold me through the trial, Come like hope again.”* Psalm 91 verse 14, “I will deliver those who cling to me.” This is to cling.

Our Gospel text today provides a contrasting image. In this text, the disciples have just listened as Jesus predicts his coming crucifixion. Clearly not understanding what they have just heard, James and John make a request, “Jesus – we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Oh if only this was faith! What if we had a genie God? A God who granted whatever it was we requested. Jesus asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” Imagine how we might answer that question on any given day.

James and John request “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” And while they try to reassure Jesus they are able to receive their request, Jesus stresses that they do not even understand what it is they are asking for. Jesus states “to sit at

my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Only a few days later, Jesus will hang dying on the cross, a man hanging on his right and on his left.

James and John stand before Jesus and long to lead, to pull Jesus in the direction of their requests. Can you see the posture difference between Psalm 91 and our Gospel text? “Cling to me” versus “we want you to do for us.”

“I will deliver those who cling to me.”

For we do not fully know or understand. We will not be delivered through our own requests and ability to manipulate God. Rather we put our trust in and cling to the almighty God. God who reveals Godself in Jesus, who as our Isaiah text states “borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities...was oppressed and afflicted...taken away and cut off from the land of the living...poured out himself to death...” that we would be made whole, be healed, and be made righteous in him alone. Jesus - God who “clings” to us, even through suffering and death, that we may be saved. Our Gospel reading ends today with Jesus saying, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Leslie Brandt in her book “Psalms Now” writes her own translation of Psalm 91. It reads “Those who focus their faith on God, who find their security in Him, do not have to live in fear. They are not left untouched by the tempests of this life, and they may be wounded by the onslaughts of evil, but their great God does not leave them to suffer these things alone. The Lord cares for his own and delivers them even in the midst of the conflicts that plague them. Our Loving God has promised “Because my children love me, I will never let them go, I shall feel the pain of their wounds and bear their hurt and shall transform that which is ugly into that which enriches and blesses. And when they cry out in agony, I shall hear and answer them. I will be close to them and will deliver them and I will grant them eternal life.”

“I will deliver those who cling to me.” Picture that image of the young child clinging to their parent once again. I remember being that parent standing in that school entrance feeling those chubby little arms around me, feeling my child’s warm breath on my neck, and grip of those little fingers around my clothing and that strength of their legs clasped onto my side. My arms did not fall heavy at my side but wrapped around them with a firm embrace, tears rolled down cheeks and my heart ached for them to know I would never leave them abandoned.

Picture that Pastor standing before the three coffins of his beloved, clinging to his God. God does not stand unmoved but has rather dwelt in our very flesh and experienced our suffering that we may feel God’s embrace and know with certainty that our God will never leave us abandoned.

While our desire is often to make requests of God, to struggle to gain control and set the course, faith urges us to cling and to know that we are clung to in life and in death. Amen.