

MY PORTION AND MY CUP

PSALM 16

Second Sunday of Easter | April 19, 2020

Community CRC, Kitchener ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Rev. Kathy Smith, one of my seminary professors, has a wonderful book called *Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times*, which I have been finding so wonderfully insightful for our current reality even though it was written almost 15 years ago. And one of the things that she talks about in this book, which is something I've heard again and again in my theological upbringing, is the importance of the psalms for shaping Christian worship. The Psalms are the songbook of the church. The poems and lyrics contained in this longest book of the Bible carry the weight and breadth of human emotion, spanning the whole spectrum of feelings, from anguish to joy, despair to hope, and wrath to trust. In one Psalm we read "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" And in another we read "You have my friends and neighbours from me—darkness is my closest friend." In one Psalm we read, "Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will receive me." And in another we read "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In one Psalm we read "Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him." And in another we read "Blessed is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Truly, we see here the full scope of human sentiment, expressed in prayers and songs that the Holy Spirit inspired. Songs of faith and songs of doubt, songs of hope and songs of despair, songs of confidence and songs of fear, songs of anger and songs of forgiveness. God has given us a great gift in the book of Psalms, especially in times of crisis, in times of transition, in times when we cannot say with confidence, "all is right with the world" or "God is good, all the time."

Psalm 16, our passage for today, is unique among the Psalms, and almost all biblical scholars recognize this. Psalm 16 reads almost as a confession of faith. One scholar describes it as jarring, when we read through the book of psalms. He said it's like flipping through a book of emotional poetry and coming across the Apostles' Creed. The psalmist here has developed a beautiful confession: There is only one God, the Lord, the God of Israel. I will serve no other. I am his, and he is mine. And my whole body rejoices in him, for he has shown me the way of life.

The placement of Psalm 16 in the book of Psalms is also important, because Psalms 13-16 form a kind of progression, a kind of unit, moving from lament to faith. If you have time this week, I'd encourage you to pray out loud through Psalms 13-16, so you can experience this progression for yourselves. When we read these Psalms together, we see the story it tells, a journey from the question "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" to the declaration "You fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

The power of Psalm 16's statement of faith is a comfort to many, and I've heard it used as the preaching text in many funerals. My grandpa chose Psalm 16 as the passage for his funeral, and Vic Vandermolen, the late clerk of Classis Huron, held Psalm 16 as his kind of life-passage throughout his struggle with cancer. The Apostle Peter uses it in his sermon on Pentecost to point to the reality of the resurrection of the dead. It is a powerful, powerful psalm. In the face of crisis, of despair, of death, Psalm 16 declares with faith and hope that the Lord is trustworthy, that our inheritance is sure, and that we will not be abandoned to the grave.

The journey of the Psalms from lament to faith, from questioning to trust, is a journey that we are all on. But it's important that we not skip the journey. We have such a problematic tendency in our culture—even in the church—to stay positive, optimistic, upbeat, that we often skip over the difficult work of wrestling with dark emotions. My worship professor John Witvliet used to joke that if churches have "praise bands," they should also have "lament bands." But I don't know any churches that do. To people who are struggling, it can often seem like the church has nothing to say that connects to their life. Even when people are faced with the spectre of death, most people don't seem to know what to say other than vague encouragement and empty clichés.

And in our current reality, of course, the actualities we now face in the midst of a global pandemic, sentimentality is not enough.

Which raises the important question: When we read Psalm 16 as the end of the journey that starts with Psalm 13, is it enough? What makes Psalm 16 anything more than empty words? Anything deeper than an escapist fantasy? Anything better than the vague promise of pie in the sky when you die by and by? What comfort is the declaration that the Lord is our inheritance when we see everything crumbling around us?

Maybe it's easy for David to say. David's the King of Israel. He lives in a palace. He has everything he could ever need. "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places." Sure, his boundary lines are the entire Kingdom of Israel. His cup is the throne. His inheritance is the Kingship. It's like a retired millionaire self-isolating in their cottage with a pantry full of imperishable foods saying, "I'm just trusting in God to get me through this crisis." Empty words.

But it's not clear that David is the author of this psalm. The superscription "of David" might mean that David wrote it, or it might mean that it's written in a Davidic-style—sort of like when we see a "Shakespearian sonnet," it doesn't mean that it was written by William Shakespeare. My sister writes Shakespearian sonnets, and that's not confusing to anybody, nobody thinks that she's being deceptive or trying to pass her work as the original writings of the great bard. It's just a specific style of writing poetry.

And scholars actually have really strong arguments for questioning the authorship of this Psalm, because it uses some really uncommon words, which makes many scholars think that it was written by someone from the northern part of Israel (David was from the south), and a number of scholars, because of the specific language used here in verses 5 and 6 about portion and lot and boundary lines and inheritance, a number of scholars make the educated guess that this Psalm was actually written by a Levite, which should make us hear these words very differently than if they were written by a King in a palace.

You see, the tribe of Levi was unique among the tribes of Israel. Of all the twelve tribes, Levi is not given any portion of land. A Levite has no boundary lines, no portion, no lot. The Levites were consecrated as servants of the Lord, serving as priests and scribes and teachers of the Law throughout the land of Israel, and especially in the temple in Jerusalem. They lived off the tithes of the people, and so their well-being was based entirely on the faithfulness and piety of the general population. They had no inheritance to pass on to their children, other than their duty to teach the people the Law of God.

So hear these words again, from the perspective of a Levite, who has no land, no steady income, whose well-being is based on the religious devotion of the people around him: *Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.* A Levite, with no land, no steady income, nothing to leave his children, says he has a delightful inheritance in the Lord.

Sisters and brothers, if we've learned anything over the past month, it's that earthly things are fleeting. Jobs, homes, investments, family, health, even life itself—all of these things that we spend our whole lives pursuing, all of these things that we find our security in—all of it can be swept away in a moment. Nothing is sure. Nothing is secure.

In that sense, we should all strive to be Levites. Hold our possessions loosely, knowing that nothing lasts forever, so that when the day comes that everything is stripped away and we have only God, and nothing else—no income, no family, no health, no money—that we can truly say, “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.”

As I said earlier, the Apostle Peter quotes this Psalm in his Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2 as a prophecy about the resurrection of Jesus. And this Psalm is particularly appropriate for reminding us of the sure hope that we have in Christ's resurrection, and the assurance of our own resurrection. It's easy for us to see in verse 10 in our English translation: “You will not abandon me to Sheol, to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see The Pit, or the grave.” But what is the nature of this resurrection? So often we tend to fall into sentimentality and empty words when we speak of the resurrection—like the resurrection is about your soul going to be with God in heaven when you die. But the Biblical story isn't interested in disembodied souls. We aren't given much (if any) clear biblical teaching about what happens to a person's soul when they die. Our hope is not in “going to heaven when we die.” Our hope that we confess is in the *resurrection of our bodies*. And the verses that precede verse 10 make this abundantly clear. We miss it a bit in our English translation, because there's a cultural translation that has to happen as well. The peoples of the Ancient Near East had a complicated and specific system of assigning a variety of mental and emotional functions to the various organs of the body. They didn't know about neurons and synapses, and so functions that we we now understand as having their root in the brain, they assigned throughout the body. Thought came from the brain; willpower from the heart; conscience from the kidneys; emotion from the intestines; faith from the liver; strength from the right hand; life from the blood. And in the Hebrew, the second half of this Psalm sounds kind of like a litany of the organs:

I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my kidneys teach me.

I keep my eyes always on the LORD.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my liver rejoices;
my flesh also will rest in safety,
because you will not abandon me to Sheol,
nor will you let your faithful one see The Pit.
You have made known to me that path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

You see, sisters and brothers, the full-bodied redemption that the doctrine of resurrection promises us leads the psalmist to full-bodied praise. It's not just heart and mind that praise the Lord, but liver and kidneys and flesh! If the gospel has nothing worth saying to suffering bodies, it has nothing worth saying at all. But here's the truth, as Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren put it so eloquently this past week in her article in *Christianity Today*: "The truest fact of the universe is an empty tomb."

The truest fact of the universe is an empty tomb. The truest fact of the universe is that this story, whatever twists and turns it may take, ends in the resurrection of our bodies! In life and in death—in times of prosperity and times of crisis, in times of stability and times of transition, in times of peace and times of conflict—our fate is bound up with the Resurrected One! He is our portion and our cup! He has made our lot secure! The boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places, and our inheritance is a delight! He has made known to us the path of life, and even in the face of death, we will trust in him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.