

Waiting for the Dawn

March 29, 2020

Psalm 130

Our nation is in the midst of a pandemic. At this point, COVID-19 has spread to most, if not all, of the 50 states, and is in practically every country on our planet. Many countries, including our own, have declared a State of Emergency, many closing down all travel into and out of the country and limiting travel within their boundaries. Many restaurants, hotels, stores, schools, and churches have shut down out of fear of spreading the virus faster. Those stores that have remained open have been picked clean of cleaning products, toilet paper, paper towels, and non-perishables. Many United States citizens are currently working from home at least until the end of this month, if not longer. Racism and xenophobia directed at Asian Americans has increased, and the Stock Market has greatly declined. In short: our nation has sunk to greater depths than many alive can remember.

While in these depths, we find ourselves greatly affected by fear, sadness, anger, and hopelessness. Many in our congregation are categorized as “high risk,” and we are afraid of getting it for fear that we might develop greater complications or may not make it, causing us to self-isolate and disconnect from our friends, families, and neighbors. We are grieving the loss of life as we knew it and loss of plans that have been (at best) postponed and (at worst) canceled. We are angry at our government on all its levels and at news outlets for only feeding those fears and strengthening that sadness. We might feel angry towards God for letting this virus exist, let alone spread to our homeland. Through all this fear, sadness, and anger, we sink into a state of hopelessness, as if these emotions have kidnapped us, driven us out into the middle of an ocean, tied a cinderblock to each foot, and thrown us in, watching as we sink deeper and deeper, wondering if we’ll ever see the end of this. Yes, we indeed have sunk into great depths.

In these depths, unable to do anything on our own, we do the one thing we know we can, the one thing we have left in us: we cry out for help to God, saying, “God, protect me. Help me through this trying time that I might continue to see your light and make it through this deepest of valleys.” In other words, we do much the same as the psalmist in today’s reading does. We don’t know what is troubling this psalmist, or even how long they have been suffering. All we know is they are crying “out of the depths” to God that He might hear their prayers. In fact, the first three verses are all mournful cries. Then we get the fourth verse, and we see a change. “But with you is found forgiveness. For this we revere you.” Then, verses five and six speak of waiting, watching for the morning that follows the night. Put another way, the psalmist is in the dark looking, hoping, searching for that light out of a hope that has not yet been extinguished. Finally, we reach verses seven and eight, which instruct all Israel to do much the same as the psalmist, to cry out to, look for, and wait for the Lord our God, as if to say, “This too shall pass.” This is not a theme unique to this passage, though.

Just as all “psalms of mourning” begin with sadness and/or anger then progress toward praise and faith, so too do both the Old Testament and Gospel readings for today make that movement. In the Old Testament reading, Ezekiel is put in a deep valley, a low place covered in the bones of those long dead. Ezekiel is told to command the bones and the wind/breath/Spirit itself (depending on the translation you use), and sure enough, bones reconnect, skin forms,

breath enters these previously lifeless forms. Out of the depths of this valley, out of death, came renewed life. So too is that true in the Gospel reading with the resurrection of Lazarus. By the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. Mary and Martha both reprimand Jesus and express their mourning the loss of Lazarus. Jesus, having had others roll away the stone covering the tomb and “wept”, commands Lazarus to wake, to rise again to renewed life. Sure enough, Lazarus rises from his deathly sleep, full of life once again. In both of these texts, we have a progression from “death” and “the grave”, the deepest of depths, to life, to the greatest of heights. We go from mourning and hopelessness to renewed life and hope restored.

So too shall it be the case with the current pandemic. At this point, we are grieving the loss of life as we knew it. We are scared because of just how unknown this virus is and not knowing if we’ll be able to weather this storm. The media hasn’t exactly been the most helpful in this situation, given that different outlets, each with their own political leanings, each give us only part of the story, leaving it for us to piece this all together. We might be angry, looking for someone to blame in an attempt to self-elevate ourselves above our own feelings of vulnerability and mortality, things that we as humans are not always the best at coming to grips with and accepting. Yes, it is true what they say, that “the night is always darkest before the dawn.” Granted, we don’t know how far into the night we are, nor do we know how deep we are in this storm of very strong emotions. However, something we can say for certain is that the dawn will come. At some point, the darkness will cease to get darker, and all shall begin to be light again. At some point down the line, a cure or vaccine will be found, the number of sick people will decrease, and we’ll be able to gather in groups of more than ten people again. Yes, indeed, the dawn is coming, and I know the Lord our God will shepherd us to that dawn, to that new day. All we need to do is wait, to make the best of our situation for the time being, and to await the coming of the new day to which our Triune God brings us. So, I ask you all: will you wait with me for this new day, looking to the horizon as watchmen awaiting the break of day?