

SOME CURES FROM THE PSALMS

1. "Cure for Worry"

Psalm 55:16-23, Matthew 6:25-34

June 7, 2015

W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Today's sermon is from the book of Psalms. The psalms have been addressing human issues for us for a long time. Worry is our topic this morning from the psalms. I am not going to ask you to raise your hand if you are a worrier but I know that lots of us are. We can't help it. It's in our DNA, it is the way we are built. Some people worry and others live with worriers. It is a nice thing when you have someone else to do the majority of worrying for you or your family. My wife does it for our family. I turn all of the worries over to her and she gladly worries about them. I don't worry about anything over which I have no control and I don't worry about something out of season. I'm not bragging or complaining it is just the way I was built.

The Bible says a lot about worrying. We could have landed any number of places in the psalms, gospels or the writings of Paul if we needed a verse or story about anxiety or worrying. The Matthew 6: 25ff story about "Today's worries are sufficient for today" is a good reminder that worrying about the future doesn't help us much. The book of Psalms is a particular good place to begin. The first psalms come from the time of Joshua and the conquest of the land of Canaan around 1150 B.C. Almost half of the psalms are attributed to King David or inspired by David. Patrick Miller writes, "The Psalms have never ceased to be the hymnbook of Jewish and Christian communities. That helps to build an unbroken chain between the ancient words and the present. The words have not only been read as scripture from the past but have been sung as words in and for the present." (Interpreting the Psalms, P. Miller, pg. 22)

The best way to read them is quietly in the privacy of our own space. The psalms are generally addressed to God or speak about the will or purpose of God. Some psalms are a complaint spoken from the heart straight to God. Some are very personal confessions of sin, which the writer knows has separated her/him from God. You may find one as a shout of praise ("Make a joyful noise to the Lord") Some psalms give the impression they were composed on a sick bed, others at the approach of death ("The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear not evil").

The psalms express a deep awareness of the grace of God. Every psalm writer is conscious that what he is, what she thinks, feels and believes, depends entirely on the God who has acted first in their life. It was for humanity that God created the heavens and the earth ("Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting you are God"), for us that God revealed himself and the loving plan to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob/Rachel. Maybe that is one reason why the psalms still speak so clearly to us today. They are filled with God's grace, in tune with the everyday activities that fill our days.

So today we are beginning a summer sermon series on the psalms. I am calling it “Some Cures from the Psalms.” That title probably promises more than it can deliver but my point is to get your attention, to ask the question, “Why do I allow some of these things to bother me so?” Today it is the cure for worry, next week we take on “Fear”, we skip a week of the series because of Father’s Day and on the 28th we take up “Depression.” In August we will pick up “Doubt” and “Indifference.” Let me give you a little assignment for the summer. If you have gotten out of the habit of reading the psalms why not pick it up again. Read one psalm a day and you’ll be two-thirds through the Psalms by the end of August. For the overachiever read two psalms a day and you will have read all of them by the 23rd of August just as I finish this series. Now don’t get discouraged at the longest psalm, Psalm 119 and its 176 verses, but Psalm 117 with 2 verses is the shortest.

Burdens, cares, worries ... the Bible knew the human heart well, didn’t it? Everyone has them. It has been determined by case studies that 92% of the things we worry about never happen. Can you remember the things that troubled you ten years ago ... or even six weeks ago? So we are left with 8% of our worries that might be legitimate causes for concern.

A husband was awakened by his wife she worried that she heard a burglar downstairs. He slowly got up, went grumpily downstairs and found himself staring into the business end of a gun. The burglar ordered him to hand over all of the household valuables, then started to leave. The husband stopped him. “Before you go,” he said, “I’d like you to go upstairs and meet my wife, she’s been expecting you every night for over 30 years.”

German theologians had a word for it, especially during the WWII—they called it “angst.” It’s what we have always called anxiety or worry. Earlier generations used the word “fret” and they were always fretting about something. Whether it’s called angst, anxiety, worry or just plain fretting, we all recognize it and have experienced it.

One person bragged, “I only worry about two things—whether I’m sick or well. If I’m well, no worries. If I am sick I only have two worries. Am I going to get better or die? If I get better, no worries. If I die, I only have two worries, am I going to Heaven or to Hell? If I go to Heaven, no worries. If I go to Hell, I’ll be so busy greeting my friends I won’t have time to worry!” Or the little children’s poem about the “Worry Cow”:

*The worry cow would have lived till now
If she hadn’t lost her breath
But she thought her hay wouldn’t last all day,
So she mooed herself to death.*

Worry is something that we can joke about. It is something that all of us can identify with. We know that it is not all that helpful to worry. But we still do it anyway. It is something that the writer of the Psalm 55 knew more than just a little about. As your cerebral wheels are turning about yourself, let me take you to our scripture and words of the Psalmist.

We don't know much about the person who wrote this lamenting Psalm, we do know enough to say he is a person in need of help. The text tells us he was feeling dejected because of the open hostility of his fellow citizens and especially the betrayal of a close friend.

Second, let's move on to the Psalm: *Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself from my supplication! Attend to me, and answer me; I am overcome by my trouble.* (Ps. 55:1) We have a person suffering from the pain of abandonment. Most of us can identify with this experience at least momentarily a terrible awareness of emptiness. The experience has been called "the dark night of the soul." The Psalm teaches us to turn back to God if we do have such a brush with the abyss—if only, adds the Psalmist, *if only God would listen and answer!*

And worse, he was having doubts about God. That's the agony to end all agony. He has to face this final moment alone, feeling that nothing has been accomplished, that no reconciliation has taken place that somehow it was all just rolling along, going God-only-knows-where-like tumble weed across the Kansas prairie, churning up a little dust, bumping into a few bushes, but mainly nothing. "Reverend, what do I have to show for the years I've lived, and decades? It's vanity all vanity."

You see, the Psalmist was reflecting; his life was nearing its end. There was no time for more worry and fooling around about doubts, no time left . . . no time for planting, for plucking, for holding, for building, for weeping, for laughing, for mourning, for dancing, no time to embrace or even to refrain from embracing, no time left to win or lose or keep or rend or sow. No time left for all the other things which the times of God are made for. The writer is down to the essential business of what it means to be alive.

The city he was living in was wicked. His former friends were using trickery against him. They were saying things behind his back. And he offers up a self-righteous prayer to God calling on God to avenge the psalmist.

*Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan
and he will hear my voice.
He will deliver my soul in safety from the battle that I wage
for many are arrayed against me.
God will give ear, and humble them, he who is enthroned from of old;
Because ... they do not fear God.* (Ps. 55:17-19)

Then comes the answer. In the best fashion of the psalms the answer is spoken not by the writer but is sung by the congregation. After hearing the lamenting Psalm for twenty verses the congregation sings the response:

Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you. (Ps.55:22)
Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you, he really will. Can you hear the congregation in the temple singing this great declaration of faith? We sang them this morning, "Trust the rich promises of grace, so shall they be fulfilled in thee, God never yet forsook at need The soul secured in trust indeed." (Hymn No. 282, vs.3)

That means we are to tell God our things. We are to tell God our problems, our tensions, our pain, our sorrowing tales of life. We are to allow God to carry every burden for us, and he is able to do it.

One more story and we are done. There was a very successful business man who almost worried himself to death. He was overly careful about everything. At mid-life he became so tormented by anxieties that he couldn't eat or sleep. He was worried about his investments, his marriage, his family. He even had three little dogs that he obsessively worried about. If one of them went off their feed he would call home 10 times a day to ask about it. He went to doctors and they gave him anti-anxiety pills but then he worried about the pills and the side effects.

One day he was in a hotel room and was feeling so terrible that he couldn't dress to go downstairs to dinner. He didn't know how he was going to get through the business he was supposed to transact that evening. He said out of his anxiety: "Life is not worth living this way; I wish I were dead." Then he worried what God thought about his statement? He yelled out, "God, it's a joke, isn't it? Life is a joke!"

That was the first time he had talked to God in a long time. And it did something to him. As he lay there he began to pray. At least he thought he was praying. He just talked out loud to God, what a mess he had made of his life, how tired he was and how much he would like things to be different.

And you know what happened? He heard this voice say, "It doesn't have to be this way." That's all. "It doesn't have to be this way." He sat straight up in bed. He looked around and listened, but it didn't happen again. He laughed at himself, said he was hearing things. But he knew that he heard it.

That person's life was changed by a remark he thought he heard but still wasn't entirely sure of. He went home and told his wife about it and thought about it for days. He called his pastor and they spent hours together talking about how Christ could re-orient your life if only you surrender to God.

He did it. He committed his life to God. He simplified his business, became more active in his church and community; turned his worries over to God. Every Saturday morning he would go to the Cathedral in his hometown. And there he would sit for about an hour. "It clears my head and reminds me of whose I am," he said.

Cast your burdens on the Lord, wrote the Psalmist, and he will sustain you. He says in the last words of the psalm, because I will trust in you.