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Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church
Psalm 27: 1, 4-9
“Seeking God’s Face”

Preaching on a psalm is a tricky thing to do. In my short tenure as a preacher I don’t think I have ever done it. It is a tricky thing because there is no real story line compared to just about any other book of the Bible. There aren’t characters saving the day or living in anguish, there are no disciples whose progress we can track, there are no lectures to churches in places like Corinth or Rome.

The Psalms can be so unpredictable. They go from breathtaking beauty to head-scratching confusion.

Psalm 137: verse 1, listen to the nostalgia: By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. By verse nine we wonder how we ever got here: Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock. Psalm 139, verse 13, listen to the intimacy, the care: for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb, I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. But by verse 19 listen to the revenge: O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. If nothing else, the psalms are real, expressing the full range of human emotions.

The Psalms are just so gut-wrenchingly honest. They go to the bone, to the core, to the heart. Psalm 38: My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning. For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a preacher said in a sermon I heard a few months ago that preaching on a psalm is like preaching from an entry in someone’s diary.

And I certainly wouldn’t want anyone looking in my diary, let alone to find anything to preach on. Yet we have the insides of the hearts of the psalmists exposed for us to relate to and give us confidence and company on our struggles.

Psalm 27, the Psalm for today:

With such assurance the author begins: if God is on my side, there is nothing to fear! And then verse three, Though my enemies are surrounding me my heart shouldn't fear, even though war is all around I will be confident. I hear her trying to convince herself of God's confidence. War is all around, the wars of her thoughts of her heart, the wars of men battling for nations and she must remind herself to feel confident.

God will hide me in shelter when trouble hits, God will hide me from danger in a tent.

And then I imagine the psalmists' breathing, waiting, listening for a response. Maybe she doesn't think God answers, give her the assurance that she needs, that God will really be there at all to protect her, there is too much silence and so the journal entry comes out, pouring all over the page, here is where it really begins:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me Exclamation Point!
Hello, is anybody home.

And then her heart calms her, she is given a moment of peace, the rhythm shifts and she remembers, something in her consciousness brings her back and her heart takes over. It is her heart that speaks in this Psalm, not her voice or her head or some voices that she couldn't quite shake out of her body. Her heart, outside of her body, her heart beating, says, "Seek God's Face."

It is just a fleeting moment though and the diary entry turns back to doubting, pleading demands: "do not hide your face. Do not turn me away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.

I wonder today how often you doubt if God is around.

There is of course the question of how there can be a God when bad things happen, how there can be a God when injustice feels like a giant ocean with waves strong and persistent, trying to bring us under, but that isn't the question I am asking, that is a sermon for another time. I am asking how it is that you know that God is there and hasn't abandoned you, how do you feel God, how do you know how to tell and call it God. And when have you cast a prayer into the universe and sat in silence, waiting for a response, maybe bargaining with God, the journal entry not ready to come out until you give God a fair chance to make God's face known to you.

I recently read a book by Kate Baestrup, a Pastor who lost her husband to a tragic death. She writes of when the news first came to her:

Perhaps forty minutes after I had heard the news of Drew's death, I was sitting in the living room with my friend Monica when the doorbell rang. The sergeant was on the telephone, so Monica sprang to answer it.

A young man stood on the front steps, clad in a spiffy dark suit, his hair neatly combed, exuding a scent of soap and virtue. Holding out a pamphlet, he beamed at Monica. "Have you heard the Good News?"

For a long second, Monica glared at him, not sure whether to punch him or laugh hysterically. She compromised by slamming the door.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again. This time, I answered it. It was my neighbor, an elderly woman I had exchanged no more than a dozen words with in the ten years I'd lived in Thomaston. She had pot holders on her hands, which held a pan of brownies still hot from the oven, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I just heard," she said.

That pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me, a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew's death. I didn't know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front steps with her brownies and her tears: she was the good news.

She continues, "I could see my brother, [who strongly doubted belief in God] striking the keys sharply, [writing an email]:

And if your God existed, I would tear out his all-seeing eyes for what he has done to you and to your children.

But there is no God. Gaze up at night and you will stare into a vast, black universe, a place in which our neurons spark to no effect, like signal flares no one will ever see.

"I wish I could do more," my neighbor said, and all I could think as I gazed at her, shining before me in the electric air, was What more need there be on earth than this? Than you?[1]

For one moment, she knew God's face. There was one moment of peace. God would not abandon her. God would hold her warm in a tent through her neighbors and friends and ones she loved her heart would continue to beat.

Seek God's Face, says the Psalmist's heart says.

Is this not why we come to church, to Seek God's Face, to feel God and find some words to place to the moments of the heart when God is?

Perhaps some of you find yourself here in church in that same way that the author of the Psalm found that one moment of peace, of her heart outside of her body. I know people here today whose heart had to be outside of your body if you were going to darken the door of the church again. For some, especially those folks I serve on a daily basis, if we were listening to our experiences of church in the past, some of which are tremendously painful and even violent, spiritually, sexually, physically, we would be far, far away from this place on this morning.

And so if we listened to our head or our voices that have made up our mind for all of what church is we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't believe that God would show up or protect us, or hold us safe in God's tent, or show God's face.

It's our heads that should keep us from seeking a God who has no physical body except our own, no physical birth place except for the most mundane of places, no phone line except in the recesses of our imaginations and our desires. But it is our hearts that keep us seeking, experiencing, naming.

In praying this psalm this week I was reminded of a Presbyterian Youth Conference in North Carolina. We were camping, much to the chagrin of the teenagers. The blessing of camping was the discovery of a river going by our site. It was August and hot, and we were all in middle school, awkward, confused and rarely let our guard down. The river though was freezing cold, the water crystal clear, the sun poured in between the leaves of the trees right onto my face. As we were so awkward, skinny dipping was out of the question so a small group of us lay in the stream fully dressed, the water splashing around me and moving through the fibers of my clothing.

I wasn't really sure if God existed at that point and I am not sure if I cared. I was more concerned about being cool enough to be with the cool kids than finding Jesus. I cared more about teenager things than about seeking God's Face. I was down on myself for not being pretty enough and skinny enough and smart enough and certainly hadn't given a thought that God made me with fear and wonderment, Psalm 139.

Somehow through the trees it happened though. It was God's lips I could feel kiss me with the sun on my nose. It was God's body holding my body in the river with the rocks. It was God's voice breaking through all of my well-formed voices with the voice of sweetness, of assurance, that I had no one to fear, not even myself. Fear not, my child. I hide you from all your adversaries in my tent I keep you warm.

So I ask you, how do you know God? Where have you seen God's face?

[1] *Here If You Need Me*, by Kate Braestrup, pgs. 53-54. Little, Brown and Company
New York 2007.