

You may be surprised by my choice of scripture to preach on today. Each week we are given a lectionary selection of scripture from the O.T. (or during this season Acts); from the N.T. Epistles; from the Gospel; and from the Psalm. I rarely preach from the Psalm unless it amplifies or informs one of the other readings which I select to preach on. Well, this week as I read this Psalm I was really drawn to it. It reminded me of all of the most current events, all of the catastrophic weather patterns which have caused so much distress and pain and loss of life and made me contemplate the possibility that through it all, we can still praise the Lord who has blessed America.

Listen again: ⁸ Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of His praise be heard; ⁹ He has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. ¹⁰ For You, O God, tested us; You refined us like silver. ¹¹ You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. ¹² You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but You brought us to a place of abundance.

¹³ I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to You—
¹⁴ vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble. ¹⁵ I will sacrifice fat animals to You and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats.

Selah

¹⁶ Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what He has done for me.
¹⁷ I cried out to Him with my mouth; His praise was on my tongue.
¹⁸ If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;
¹⁹ but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.
²⁰ Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld His love from me!

During the past weeks, and even before, the most frequently asked question I receive as a pastor following any disaster is “Do you think that God caused this disaster as a judgment to the people.” My standard response is that I do not like to think that it is possible as I believe God is a good God who loves us and would not arbitrarily inflict such tragedy on a people. But then I am haunted by the shadow of the judgment that was sent upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and on nations that mistreated Israel and I hesitate to go there. So I began to look at this Psalm and to face the dilemma of this question directly. “Does God cause disasters as a judgment to the people?”

The first time I was asked this was when I was in Biloxy working to clean up right after Katrina hit. Well, actually I wasn’t asked the question. I was told by the people I talked to that they believed it was a matter of judgment since the whole area had been built up around the gambling industry. Of course these people did not have the power to change this and the storm actually afforded the industry to grow as the little people of the area did not really have the money to start over again making available large tracts of land for the development of more entertainment facilities. But I respected the opinion of the people who were saying this. I guess that is what is one of the most important factors.

Not so much did God send it as judgment but do the people, themselves feel that their neighborhood was in need of such a judgment. Yet, I did not rest easy with their conclusion.

Recently we have further experienced world catastrophe in the Tsunami that hit Japan and the subsequent melt down of the atomic energy plant. And only in the last week or so, our own nation has been hit with violent tornados that practically wiped out a whole town in our own Midwest. Again, the question, "Did God cause this as a judgment?" arose.

So I began to look at some of the judgments in the OT starting with Sodom and Gomorrah. What happened there prior to the earthquake that destroyed that area? And this is important. Abraham went to Lot to warn him of the impending disaster that God was sending. But even prior to going, he bartered with God for the two cities. "God if I find 50 righteous men will you spare it? 45? 30? 10?" God agreed and Abraham went to Lot to warn him. Lot warned the people but not even 10 would listen to him. But the important thing was that there was a warning and a chance to repent prior to the quake.

In Noah's day, God told Noah to build the ark... early. He told him there would be a flood and to round up any and all who would listen into the ark. But no one but his family would heed his voice. Again, a warning and a time to repent.

Israel, before they were cut off by the Assyrians and taken captive by the Babylonians had prophets to every king who warned of the impending conquest and urged for repentance,.

In every case of judgment there was a warning of what was to come...an opportunity for those being judged to repent. The judgment was not for punishment but always to eliminate the sins that had become rampant. So unannounced catastrophe would serve no Godly purpose since there would be no opportunity to change the offending ways. I learned when I studied logic that you can make a true statement but you cannot simply reverse that statement and think that it is true. In other words, I can say God is love and that is a true statement but I can not say Love is God and still have a truth. Well the same with judgment. I can say that all judgment may be catastrophic but I cannot say all catastrophes are judgment. The things that have been happening, whether Hurricanes of Katrina or earthquakes of Haiti or Tsunamis of Japan or the most recent tornados are catastrophes for sure, But unless they had come with a clear warning of a specific offense that God was dealing with and an opportunity to repent they cannot accurately be viewed as judgment. No. I believe that they are just what they are. Natural disasters. Unplanned natural disasters.

But whether a disaster is a corporate disaster where a whole community, nation, or the world suffers or it is a personal disaster with a much smaller sphere of influence, we need to look at God's activity through it and this Psalm helps us do just that.

First of all, there is blessing in getting through any disaster. Haven't we all faced something in our lives that if we imagined it, we would imagine it as something we could not endure? Things like the disasters I've been talking about or the unexpected loss of a child or even a more expected loss of a life partner at an old age? All of these things when they dwell within our imagination seem like things that would be too big for us to endure. But when they actually happen we are able to live through them. We find strength within us that we don't really know where it could possibly come from. I remember when my sister-in-law learned she had ovarian cancer and that it was untreatable, she was in awe of this phenomenon that she was experiencing – finding the strength to go on and to face her own annihilation. God meets us when we least expect it and perhaps when we cannot even identify it. But God is there. The Psalmist talks about this same thing. That when his community faced catastrophe they found their help from God. God kept them among the living and did not let their feet slip.

I know when I was in several earthquakes, you never knew what the outcome would be, how big the quake would be, how well the house or building you were in was to withstand the shaking, and wouldl you live through it? Coming out on the other side one experiences the same kind of relief that he describes here. Such a relief to be kept among the living. Such a relief not to have had your feet slip. You can sigh a big sigh of relief when you realize you have lived through anything that threatens your well being.

For whatever reason, we do go through trials and tribulations in this life, the blessing is in surviving. And even more. If these traumas do cause us to take stock of our own thoughts and behaviors, then not only do we survive, but we can grow from enduring them. The Psalmist says that we are tried as silver is tried and when it is over we are brought to a spacious place – a place where we can rest and breathe deeply and thank God for getting us through.

Then he talks about all the bargaining that goes on during days of uncertainty. When we realize what we are facing, the danger we or someone we love are in. I was surprised (though I probably shouldn't have been) that thousands of years ago when this Psalmist wrote this, that people even then tried bargaining with God for good. Making vows to do right if only God will spare them. Usually though what happens is that folks make all sorts of promises while going through the trial but once they get through it they go on their way and never give another thought to it.

“Oh, God, if you let my loved one get better I promise I will go back to church, I will devote my time and attention to you, just let them pull through.” Then they recover and the one who made the vows may come back to church for a while but soon lapse into their regular habits. Not this Psalmist. He does go back and make good on all his vows and all the promises he made while he was in trouble. But he doesn’t stop there.

The trouble is over, he is thankful, and he calls all his community together and he begins to testify to what God has done for him. Even more important than keeping his vows is his willingness to tell others about the Glory of God and the wonderful acts that God had done on his behalf. “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him ...God truly listened. He has given heed to the words of my prayer.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day ... a day to remember; A day to remember all the folks who have given their lives to keep America free. Well I would like us not only to remember them but to remember God. God has continually been with our nation. Not that we are any more of a deserving nation than any other. Why should we be blessed by God? But we have been. God has truly caused this country to fare well since it was founded, despite all the wrongs and injustices the people of this country have done, from displacing and annihilating native Americans to importing human beings from Africa and forcing them into captivity and servanthood to trafficking

women and children into prostitution and all of the other injustices we have inflicted on others, despite all that, God has blessed us. Why? For no other reason than grace. And that is the basis of this Psalm. Why did this psalmist and his community survive and thrive through their catastrophe? Because of God's grace. God's blessings. Why do we in America survive? Also because of God's grace. God's blessings. Yes. God has blessed America. Now,zzzzAS can we be as wise as this Psalmist and come out on the other side of our trials and tribulations as tried and tested silver. Made more righteous because of what we have experienced? Willing to pay our vows of justice and blessing to others and praise to God? Willing to speak up and tell others all that God has done for us, in our nation, in our community, in our families, and in our own lives? God has blessed America. Can you say Amen?