

The Mystery of Mercy

Meta

Date: July 7, 2024; Pentecost 7B

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Ezekiel 2:1-7

Psalms 123

II Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-6

Opening

Small is beautiful. It's both a quotation and the title of a book by E.F. Schumacher. It's an idea that has remained with me ever since a librarian recommended Schumacher's book of the same name.

In our hands this morning we have a brief psalm, a small prayer. (By the time we've sung the refrain # times, the psalm is done!) The Psalms embrace the beauty and wisdom of small prayers. The Psalter includes several psalms with 5 verses or less. Within a small number of lines, we plumb the depths of our hearts and speak to God from those depths.

The Anglican poet-bishop Jeremy Taylor instructed the saints saying, 'I would rather you pray often than long.' Our Lord Jesus taught us that God will not hear us because we reach a high word count. The Lord's Prayer is as concise as some of our smallest psalms.

Our smallest psalms aren't dispersed throughout the Psalms. They're collected in one place—the Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120-134. If you were here a month ago, you may recall we were in the Songs of Ascent at the beginning of this Psalms series. Since we've returned to the Songs of Ascent, let's recall the structure and pattern of these psalms. The Songs of Ascent are composed in triads, a group of three psalms. Though one psalm stands alone, it's often speaking in a kind of series of prayers. That's one reason why these psalms are smaller.

The pattern of this triad follows theme throughout the Songs of Ascent. The first psalm in each triad prays from distress and despair; the second psalm remembers God's power and past faithfulness; the third psalm in the triad finds safety and security in God's presence. Each set of three psalms takes us on a journey. This is how we make an ascent: we praying from our deepest distress, we pray remembering who God is, we pray on the other side of our trials, experiencing the Lord's rest and safety.

The Prayer of the Discouraged and Downcast

Psalm 123 is the first psalm in its triad. (Open pew Bibles page ###). The opening line of the psalm doesn't *begin* with distress, which is noteworthy itself. The signs of distress aren't revealed until the end. That's an interesting way to pray from deep distress. At the end of the psalm, we finally hear what has troubled our psalmist, why he's crying out for mercy:

*We have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*¹

Our psalmist speaks not only of his own suffering. He speaks on behalf of his people. *Our soul has had more than enough* of the scorn from those who have it easy. Israel not only endures pain and hardship. Her suffering happens in public; and the public has turned her suffering into a joke. Perhaps the reason for her mockery was similar to the experience of exile expressed in Psalm 137:

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. **For there our captors requires of us songs, and our torments, mirth, saying 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'***"

The very means of hanging on to life in the shadow of death—the psalms—become the means of ridicule. 'Sing us a psalm' so we can laugh at how pointless your faith is.

That's where our psalmist and his people are in Psalm 123. They endure pain in a world empty of compassion, full of cruel humor. They are a laughingstock because they have set their hope on the Lord.

The Accuser and His Harassment

Even if you have not endured cruel mockery in an outward form, I imagine you've known it in an inward form. That is because we have an Adversary, an Accuser, who harasses us in our thoughts.

And here we find a living example of Psalm 123 in St. Paul, specifically in the experience he shares from our reading in Second Corinthians. Second Corinthians is a letter where Paul bares his soul. Here is Paul at his most vulnerable with his churches. He confesses an experience in Asia with Timothy when they were 'so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death.'² N.T. Wright suggests Paul may be referring to an experience that we would describe as a nervous breakdown.

When we come to 2 Corinthians 12, today's reading, we hear Paul share his inner persecution:

*A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*³

Much has been debated for 2000 years about what that thorn in the flesh really is. My own theory is that Paul's thorn was persecution from false apostles. That makes the most sense to me from the letter itself, especially the weakness he describes at the end of today's reading.

¹ *Psalms 123.3b-4*

² 2 Corinthians 1.8

³ *2 Corinthians 12.8*

Nevertheless, we are meant to see the effect more than the cause of this thorn. Paul endures an interior oppression. He describes his oppression as *harassment* from a messenger of Satan. Isn't that the way it goes when our Enemy targets our soul? There's no let up. He harasses the soul, sending a barrage of words and shame and ridicule so that we will give up.

The Threat of Despair

His goal is despair, to cast our eyes downward and inward on ourselves, to look within ourselves for help. Our Enemy knows that if we give ourselves over to despair, we will be in his grip. The desert fathers, those spiritual athletes who waged unseen warfare with Satan their whole lives in the wilderness, teach us that despair is one of the most dangerous temptations of all. Satan wants us to focus on the weight of our troubles. He wants our undivided attention directed to his accusations, his condemnation, and his lies. Grace is his enemy. The devil throws the kitchen sink of harassment into our souls so that we will forget the power of God's grace in our hour of darkness.

Ascent Begins with the Eyes

Back to Psalm 123. Remember the cruelty the psalmist endures here. Knowing that's the *reason* for this prayer, look at how this prayer *begins*:

*To you I lift up **my** eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*

The ascent out of darkness begins *with the eyes*! Oh, I wish we had time to look at a theology of the eyes in the Psalms! I simply recall another psalm nearby that begins with the eyes, Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.⁴

The Psalms teach us to pray with our eyes. Prayer itself begins with your eyes. 'To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!'

Where is your **gaze**? On the problems, the trial itself? On the accusations, the harassment, the lies the Enemy speaks?

St. Paul had the same instinct as our psalmist. When the Enemy was assaulting his soul, Paul lifted his eyes to the Lord. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." Like the psalmist of Psalm 123 Paul's eyes were fixed on the Lord until he gave his mercy.

Maybe you can recall times in your teenage years when your mother or father was trying to speak to you and said, 'Let me see your eyes!' Words are meaningless without **attention**. We need spiritual eye-contact with the Lord.

Longing for Mercy

When we lift our eyes to the Lord, we so often have to wait for his mercy.

⁴ *Psalm 121.1-2*

Notice here that the psalmist speaks about waiting on the Lord without using the word 'waiting.' But what word stands out in those first two verses? Eyes. Not only does prayer begin with the eyes, lifting my eyes to look upon God Almighty enthroned above my troubles, it means *keeping my eyes fixed on the Keeper of my soul.*

What does one do when we wait on the Lord? Watch the eyes of your heart. Don't let your eyes drift elsewhere.

Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us.

This is what I can do when I'm embattled. I notice where my spiritual eyes are fixed. I wait for the mercy of God. Be wary of your instincts to scramble for solutions, to save yourself by your own wit. Apart from his grace, there is no health in us.

Here is the testimony and the Gospel St. Paul experienced. With his eyes fixed on the Lord while enduring attack, Paul pleaded his case three times. Which meant still keeping his eyes on Jesus after three rounds of silence; still waiting for deliverance from the hand of his master.

And then the Lord Jesus said to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'⁵ Oh, the longing for mercy was finally fulfilled, and fulfilled in a way that Paul had not requested. If my eyes are fixed on the solution I desire, then I may miss the glory of God. Mercy *did* come to Paul, but the glory of Jesus' mercy far exceeded Paul's imagination.

Paul received the power of God that could only be perfected *through* weakness. When Paul heard that word from Jesus, Paul said, 'I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The root word for 'rest' in Greek is significant. It means 'tabernacle'—that the power of Christ tabernacle upon me. Remember when Israel was in the wilderness after the exodus. Israel was taught to wait for the Lord's presence to descend on the tabernacle with power. Then he would come in the sign of a cloud, infusing the Holy Place with his power. Now he descends on the tabernacle of Paul in his weakness, perfecting him with the power of God. How else can you explain a man who could say in good conscience,

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I weak, then I am strong.

What is scorn from those who are ease, the contempt of the proud compared with the mercy of God that tabernacles upon us in our weakness? Why would we look for help anywhere else?

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heaven!... Our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us!

And so with our gaze fixed on the Lord who sends his perfect mercy, we glorify his threefold Name:

*Glory be to the FATHER, Who dwelleth in the heavens; glory be to the SON, the Hand of the LORD; glory be to the HOLY GHOST, Who hath mercy on the despised. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.*⁶

⁵ 2 Corinthians 2.9

⁶ J. M. Neale and R. F. Littledale, *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediæval*

Writers: Psalm 119 to Psalm 150, vol. 4 (London: Joseph Masters, 1874), 190.