

*Singing the Lord's Song?*

Psalm 30

February 12, 2012

Whitefish UMC

- ✦ In case you hadn't noticed, the year is 2012, and we're still here. Despite the movie being replayed over and over on cable movie channels these days portraying the end of the world, as predicted by the Mayan calendar, we're still going about our business of ordinary living. I had almost forgotten about the importance of this year on the calendar, until a friend who is into native and new age spirituality mentioned it.
- ✦ An article from this week's *Christian Century* begins with the title: "It's 2012, another year for 'doomsday' chatter." On December 21, 2012, the Mayan calendar reaches the end of its 5,126-year epoch. That's a cause for consternation among some end-time adherents—and for amusement among some descendants of the Maya. Fresh from having survived one end-of-the-world prediction—a two-stage affair covering 2011's drop-dead dates of May 21 and October 21—we now plunge into the countdown for End-Time 2012.
- ✦ Should you be inclined, you can use your smartphone to check how many days are remaining before a date that was carved into rock by a pre-Columbian civilization. You can blame—or credit—the Maya for the commotion. Or, more likely, their New Age adherents.
- ✦ When we were in Belize last year for our son's wedding, the Belizean natives, descendants of the Mayans and still known by that

- categorization, didn't seem preoccupied with anything other than making a living and feeding their families.
- ✦ “The Mayan who surround me have no idea that some calendar their ancestors created indicates that a great change is to occur in 2012. They are just hoping their corn and cacao crops will be plentiful so their family won't starve in 2012," said Anne-Michelle Marsden, a Rutgers University professor who lives in Belize.
  - ✦ About a decade ago, Marsden spent her sabbatical year in Belize producing a documentary called *The Living Maya*. A father named Choc travels to the coast by bus along unpaved roads twice a week to work as her groundskeeper. He has eight children; the oldest boy had to stop his schooling to help on the family cacao farm. He's Catholic but participates in the Mayan Deer Dance ceremony when it is celebrated in his village.
  - ✦ Choc is not concerned about the world ending any time soon. He's mostly concerned about supporting his family. School fees are very expensive, wages are low and job prospects for nonfarmers poor.
  - ✦ Even if you don't pay much attention to predictions about the end-times based on the calendar, you may have, like me, been troubled by increased references to a coming war with Iran, or talk of an impending strike on Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel.
  - ✦ Maybe it's because we have a new granddaughter that I am increasingly aware of all the scary things going on in the world. I don't want any of them to threaten the future for little Charlie and the other precious children on earth.
  - ✦ Let me ask you a question. You don't have to answer it. *How many of you are frightened by these times we're in?* Me, too, sometimes.

- ✦ So what are we going to do about it? And where is God in all of this?
- ✦ We turn to today's scripture, from the collection of psalms, the prayer book of the Bible. Why, you may ask? For in truth, many of us feel that these psalms are simply songs from a distant past, not relevant to these perilous times. But if we look closely, we find that the psalms reflect the whole range of human emotion—from gratitude, wonder, joy, boredom, abandonment, anger, fear, and despair.
- ✦ Do you experience these emotions? Then the psalms are for you, for all of us. For we have much to learn from our ancestors, the people of Israel, who understood that God was active in all of life—loving, protecting, rebuking, guiding them. So they went to God with all their feelings. They prayed in their anger, hatred, frustration. They talked to God of their pain of being exiled from their lands, their powerlessness before their enemies, and the depths of their fears. They also went to God with their hearts full of gratitude for mercy and grace received.
- ✦ And Jesus, in the Gospels, prayed the psalms. Most notably, he prayed them even on the cross: “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And so the Psalms become our prayers, too, as we seek to follow Jesus.
- ✦ Today, we can identify with the psalms, just as Jesus did. We move from despair to surrender, from telling God how abandoned we feel to placing our lives in God's hands. Just as Jesus understood who he was and what he was called to become by praying the psalms, so we can find our connection to the mind of Christ, to the heart of God

- through the psalms. Just as Jesus found his journey in the wilderness, in fearful times illuminated by the Psalms, so can we.
- ✦ But when we consider our psalm for today, Psalm 30, we find it is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. And what does such a psalm have to do with times of uncertainty and fear like those we are in?
  - ✦ For here we are, in the middle of February, at the confluence of several events: the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, Valentine’s Day, and the coming of Lent. What do these days have in common, other than proximity on the calendar, and how do they help us get through this time?
  - ✦ The answer is that they all call into memory other times of crisis, of difficulty, of fear, of uncertainty. And they all call us to turn to God, and to prayer, and to our highest values instead of to the fearmongers and to those who would have us abandon these sources of strength.
  - ✦ Today, February 12<sup>th</sup>, is the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. Here is a remarkable parallel to our times. Apparently in the early days of World War II, the wonderful American composer, Aaron Copland, was commissioned to compose a work to fortify and comfort people during that time of national distress and crisis. Copland felt overwhelmed by the assignment, but he eventually turned to Abraham Lincoln, who himself faced a time of fearfulness and trial in the Civil War. Copland composed a work that has since become a touchstone in times of crisis—one of the most enduring works in American music, “A Lincoln Portrait.”
  - ✦ Copland used excerpts from different Lincoln speeches, combined with musical quotes from American songs, such as “Camptown Races.” Lincoln’s words ring so true, even today: “Fellow citizens,

we cannot escape history. We of this congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or disgrace the latest generation. We, even we here, hold power and bear the responsibility.” (Message to Congress, Dec. 1, 1862)

- ✦ Copland quoted Lincoln in his defense of democracy, in his opposition to tyranny and oppression, in these timely words: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.” And “That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom—that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this time.”
- ✦ Lincoln’s commitment to these values remain a touchstone for us today in times of crisis, for they emerge out of a strong connection to God, to the sure knowledge that God is faithful and present even in times of fear.
- ✦ For Lincoln struggled to find God’s direction in the midst of brutal and unrelenting war and misery across the nation. In his second inaugural address, perhaps his greatest speech, he struggles with how to explain that both sides are praying to the same God, each invoking God’s aid against the other. “The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.”
- ✦ Finally, after concluding that the judgment of God would prevail, he offered these stirring words: “*With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his*

*widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”*

- ✦ And if you can believe it, when we jump from February 12, Lincoln’s birthday, to February 14<sup>th</sup>, that rather silly holiday, Valentine’s Day, we find a similar connection.
- ✦ How many of you know that Valentine’s Day originated during a time of stark persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Claudius in the third century? The Valentines were priests who performed marriages against the edict of Rome. One night, a Valentine was caught, thrown in jail, and sentenced to die. But many young people came to the jail to visit him. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. One of these young people was the daughter of the prison guard, and he allowed her to sit and talk with Valentine. This is not a fairy tale, though, and things did not end happily ever after. On the day Valentine died, February 14<sup>th</sup>, he left a note for the young woman, and he signed it “Love from your Valentine.” They were not a young couple in love in a romantic way. Rather, Valentine loved the woman for her compassion and her friendship. She loved him for his commitment to his faith. Legend has it that she and her family became Christians. Not because of romantic love, but love of God in Jesus Christ.
- ✦ Across the world our Muslim and our Jewish brothers and sisters, too, seek to stay close to God—the God of Abraham, the God of our ancestors—in fearful times. Imagine what it must feel like to live in the Arab world, as they too feel the fear of impending war. Imagine what it feels like to live in Israel, where leaders threaten to take out Iranian nuclear facilities.

- ✦ For the truth is, friends, that we are not alone in our fears. Our ancestors have faced fearful times. And the only thing that has kept them from sinking into the pits of Sheol, of hell, was their faith that God would be with them, would lift them into God's compassion and redemption. Would turn their mourning to dancing, and sorrow to joy.
- ✦ Can we express our feelings to God? Can we stay connected to God's promise even in uncertain times?
- ✦ It's possible to hear Psalm 30 in a very simplistic way—that is, pray long enough and God will make everything all right. We know in our hearts and through history that this isn't always true. This week also marked the bombing of Dresden in 1945 in which tens of thousands of people were killed and an entire city was destroyed, for no apparent military reason. Surely the residents of Dresden prayed the psalms, too, in the face of the firestorm.
- ✦ But it is also possible to hear Psalm 30 differently. The psalmist's new orientation of praise to God means a new understanding of suffering and joy—God is present and near and helping in all of life. So suffering need not be an indication of the absence of God for those who find refuge in God. The existence of suffering and fear does not negate the good news that life is a gift from God.
- ✦ And if this is the case, then joy is possible in the depths. And praise is not reserved for times of prosperity and good times. Instead, it becomes a way of life at all times. Praise is the way the faithfulness of God becomes real and is heard in the Lord's world. For us, it is the language of joy and gladness that goes with life and *is life*-- in contrast to the silence of death.

- ✦ In other words, the psalmist **prays to live and lives to praise. Can we?**
- ✦ Can we make our whole lives into a praise of God, even in difficult times? It's a challenge, to be sure. Yet if we put our trust in human security—in duct tape, in our smartphones, in homeland security—we will be disappointed. And we have reason to despair in the face of uncertain times.
- ✦ But we can learn from Abraham Lincoln, from St. Valentine, from the writer of our psalm, from our ancestors who faced times even more difficult than these, and especially from our Savior Jesus Christ. All of them emerged, despite suffering and even death, into God's promise that God would never abandon them, with praise on their lips. We too, can sing the Lord's song in a strange and fearful land.
- ✦ Let's try it together—**read Message version of psalm together.**
- ✦ Hear God's promise to you, and remember to praise God, to sing the Lord's song.
- ✦ Amen.