

With Sighs Too Deep for Words

Psalm 90; Romans 8:26-39

Whitefish UMC

July 31, 2011

- ✦ Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" The King James Version of (Psalm 90:1) proclaims. What a marvelous image, idea, vision of God—not as father, not as mother, not as rock and redeemer, but God as home. The breadth and depth and very being of God are our true home as human beings.
- ✦ "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psalm 90:2). In other words, while your life and mine might be played out upon a temporal stage, the backdrop of that stage is not time, but eternity itself. There are two true things I can say to you this morning: human life is inherently good, and human life is inherently finite.
- ✦ In the ninth verse of the 90th Psalm, a confusion in the original Hebrew is cleared up like this. The King James Version reads, "We spend our lives as a tale that is told." The New Revised Standard Version reads, "Our lives come to an end like a sigh," says one writer, but "I am drawn to the idea of spending our lives as a tale that is told. Not the tale of which Shakespeare's Macbeth spoke with such despondency, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but a story with a purpose and plot and an inherent meaning that not even the most daunting circumstances can ever finally diminish or erase.

- ✦ Our years do not proceed in mechanical succession with days and months and years stacked upon one another like saucers on a shelf. Each chapter of our lives is a part of a larger and more expansive story.” So says the wonderful Presbyterian preacher Joanna Adams, and we gather here today because it is true.
- ✦ The 90th Psalm, which we read responsively this morning, is attributed to Moses, the great but flawed patriarch of the Hebrew Bible. Moses and God’s people Israel have arrived at Mount Nebo, at the edge of the wilderness, where they can now look down on the Promised Land toward which they have journeyed for forty years.
- ✦ Moses has come to the end of his life and will never enter the land he longed to reach—he can see it, though, now. His eyes drink in the beauty of the horizon that lies before him, realizing that his life’s dream and mission will be fulfilled by others but not by himself.
- ✦ Yet he expresses this profound faith: “Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another...from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” This is Moses’ benediction, a summing up of everything that ultimately matters. In these words he integrates the temporary and the eternal, the limited and the unlimited, giving his life (and our lives) ultimate joy and meaning.
- ✦ We don’t think much about these things until something brings us up short—until the stock market plunges, until a precious dream is shattered, until we stand in the face of illness in ourselves or those we love. Our ordinary lives are filled with grocery lists, lists of things to do, projects seemingly so endless they can never be filled.
- ✦ So how, with all the technological expertise in the world, all the advice of Dr. Phil, Oprah, Deepak Chopra, and the other self-help gurus, is it possible

that we still struggle to find the wisdom to live each day as a precious gift from God. "Teach us that our days are numbered that we might gain a heart of wisdom," says the psalm.

- ✦ A couple of years ago, the Whitefish Theater Company presented a wonderful production of Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town." Its central character is Emily, a young woman who dies tragically and unexpectedly in childbirth. She goes to the cemetery on the outside of town, and she asks the stage manager, who in the play is the figure for God, if he would grant her one wish, that she could return to life and relive her twelfth birthday.
- ✦ In the play, we see her coming down the stairs on the morning of her birthday. Her mother is waiting for her. "Well, good morning and a happy birthday to you. There are surprises waiting for you on the kitchen table, Emily. But birthday or no birthday, I want you to eat your breakfast good and slow. I want you to grow up and be a good strong girl." Emily eats her breakfast and then opens her presents, while her mother comments, "The one in the blue paper is from your Aunt Carrie. . . . In the yellow paper is something I found in the attic among your grandmother's things. You are old enough to wear it now, and I thought you'd like it."
- ✦ Then you hear the disembodied voice offstage of Emily's father, "Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?" Then Emily turns to the stage manager and says, "Please, take me back. I can't go on. Oh! It goes so fast. I didn't realize. Good-bye to clocks ticking . . . Mama's sunflowers . . . new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful."
- ✦ And then she asks the stage manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they are living it?" The stage manager answers, "No. Well sometimes, perhaps, the poets and some of the saints do."

- ✦ And we do, too, especially when the suffering of those we love intervenes. But how do we pray when suffering brings us up short of breath and full of grief? The Apostle Paul wrote, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” Perhaps being inadequate in praying comes from rightly recognizing who we are and who God is.
- ✦ “There are other reasons we may find ourselves unable to pray. We may be suffering from some physical or mental illness that saps our vitality and consumes our attention. We may be so overwhelmed with grief at the death of a loved one or a major loss in our life that we can only silently stare off into space. It is not uncommon that the times when we need prayer the most are when we find ourselves tongue-tied. It is precisely in such times that hearing that others are praying for us can be so consoling.” A young pastor writes:
- ✦ “While I was being treated for breast cancer recently, a close friend said, “I am praying for you. I thought that was the least I can do.” And I said, “And I think it is also the most you can do.” Intercessory prayer is a great gift we give one another.
- ✦ When I am in difficult times, I find that I may be able to talk about what’s going on fairly straightforwardly. But when another prays aloud for me, that is when my tears may come. To be in a position of being prayed for is to be in a position of dependency, to recognize that we are completely reliant upon God and others. Our spirits are deeply stirred when others pray on our behalf, calling upon God when our own need or despair renders us speechless.
- ✦ Sometimes—such as while watching the news on television, hearing about 76 people killed by a gunman in Norway, or seeing the emaciated bodies of

children in Somalia, dying from starvation in a famine that has killed thousands—I am numbed by the tragedy. I find no words to pray.” (Curtiss)

- ✦ It is difficult to endure suffering, even if we truly believe it is only a passing phase prior to the coming of better times. Knowing this, the Apostle Paul, writing in today’s powerful and beautiful passage, assures us that God is also aware of how difficult earthly suffering is. God is not distant from us. God is not separated from us. Even if we do not know how to pray, if we are unable to express our needs to God, the Spirit “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” Even if we have become completely inarticulate, God is immediately aware of our needs through that spiritual connection with us.
- ✦ Even though this is a very hopeful passage, ironically Romans 8:28-30 is often interpreted in a way that crushes the hope of those who are suffering. Many people read the passage “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” to mean that nothing bad ever happens to those who love God—as if the universe rearranges itself so that those who love God only experience good things. Thus, if someone is suffering, that person must not be one of those called or loved by God.
- ✦ This, however, is exactly the opposite of what Paul means to say. As Martin Luther pointed out, Paul “means to show that to those who are loved of God and who love God, the Holy Spirit makes all things work for good even though they are evil” (things such as debilitating illness, violence, tragic accidents). In other words, no matter what evil thing happens to the believer, God will salvage it and turn it toward the good for the believer’s sake.

- ✦ Yet it often remains hard for us to see God in the realities, in the sufferings, of our lives. In fact, sometimes it seems as if God has gone into hiding, that God is deliberately avoiding us.
- ✦ Even the Psalmist pondered the problem of feeling God’s absence: “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?” (Ps. 42:3)
- ✦ Today, in the face of so much horror, so much suffering, many people no longer wonder “Where is thy God?” Instead, they give up, thinking God is either long gone, or that indeed, there is no God at all.
- ✦ Those who argue that there is no God may simply be saying that in their experience they have yet to run across anything that even remotely resembles the activity of God. Certainly they did not see God in the Holocaust, or in the famines in Somalia, or in the suffering of children, or of the murder of children in Norway, for example.
- ✦ But this begs the question of what sort of thing would we recognize as the presence, the will, of God?
- ✦ The Apostle Paul affirms that God is present, not hidden, not absent, and that nothing will separate us from God’s love. And this is where we come in. We need to be open to the possibility that God is among us even in the darkest of times, the deepest sufferings, the longest silences. Then we will see God in even the smallest of wonders amidst the toughest times.
- ✦ The church’s business is to be the sign of God amidst suffering and pain and death—at all times. And sometimes that task seems overwhelming, I know. Right now an awfully high number of those we love, those who are part of our congregation, are in the midst of deep grief and illness and suffering. And yet the Spirit that leads us to offer hope and compassion is the very Spirit that intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

- ✦ And yet we know about deep sighs. I find myself sighing deeply a lot these days, and I know that is true for some of you as well.
- ✦ What if, as you catch yourself in one of those deep sighs, you were to welcome the Spirit of God into yourself?
- ✦ For the good news is that God, in Jesus Christ, has entered our suffering, the whole of our lives, sharing it and redeeming it.
- ✦ But how we will know that God is present, that Jesus will never leave us?
- ✦ The meaning of the word compassion is “to suffer with.” In this simple definition, we find direction.
- ✦ Some of you already know that a young man, Luke Benton, just finished with an exhilarating experience at senior high camp at our camp near Livingston, Luccock Park, died while climbing Pine Creek Falls barefoot. This happened just as camp ended last Friday, and he and a boy Tom and I knew as a five-year-old headed up the trail one last time. A skilled gymnast, Luke decided to climb down the falls, but he slipped, and in front of his friend Cole, he hit his head and died in a deep pool of water.
- ✦ Where was our compassionate God when this happened? God was with Luke and Cole. Suffering along with them, grieving the loss of this precious life. And God is with us. Suffering with the frightened, the sick, the dying, the lost, the hungry, the abused, the homeless. And calling us to be God’s love and compassion for them.
- ✦ You know this. When you pray for each other and for peace. When you offer laughter, hope, and food. When you show up, even if you don’t know what to say. When you work for justice, when you refuse to gossip, when you forgive, when you overlook annoying behaviors and accept each other, flawed as you are.

- ✦ Suffering can be a great killer of faith. It can compress the human soul into a cramped knot of pain and explode with bitterness all around. Or it can be the means by which we discover the shape of our humanity, including our kinship with God and one another. For the difference between the two, look to the cross.
- ✦ That is where we learn the truth that saves our lives: suffering does not have to destroy us. It is our fear and evasion that do that. Suffering can make us indestructible, by putting us in the same boat as the crucified one, whose own hurt battered the heart of God and yet broke through to abundant life. That is the promise. And the cross points the way.
- ✦ And so, when suffering comes and God seems absent, when the long and sorrowful sighs come often, remember that the Spirit of the living God fills you, with deep and holy breath, helping you to pray.
- ✦ The great writer and theologian Henri Nouwen knew this, and offers this prayer when prayer seems futile.
- ✦ Breathe out the sighs that you need to express. Breathe in the sighs of the Spirit, reminding you of how precious your life is, and how good God's presence in it is.
- ✦ Remember, nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.
NOTHING!
- ✦ And remember the voice of the Psalmist, "Lord you have been our refuge from one generation to another....hear these words of reality and of assurance from the Iona Community....Amen."

Sources:

Joanna Adams, "Matter of Time," <http://www.fourthchurch.org>

Victoria G. Curtiss, “With Sighs Too Deep for Words,”

<http://www.fourthchurch.org>

John Bell, “Lord, You Have Been our Refuge,” from *God Never Sleeps*.