

“How Do We Approach God?”
Genesis 17:15-22; Romans 9:30-33;
Matthew 14:13-21; Psalm 73

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If we think about it, the psalms that we've done so far have been a little bit like a person's life. We start out as a young person and perhaps learn the way of things. Psalm 1 begins with that kind of introduction to the way of faith. Happy are those who dwell on the word of God, who learn, who plant themselves along the river of God.

But then as we grow we begin to experience life and it doesn't look quite so simple. We get to Psalm 13 and in that psalm we looked at how the individual says, “God my life doesn't seem to be working out so well, and I think it's your fault. Those people who are making my life hard—you should make *their* lives hard and fix mine.” It's not an uncommon complaint as we go through life.

Then we looked at Psalm 79, and there we join as a group and not only find fault with God, but there's almost a sense of, “God, because we're not doing so well, it shines a bad light on you and you should really make it better.” It's almost a taunting of God, telling God that God is being shamed because I feel ashamed. There's a bit of this that feels a little like I'm not quite coming clean with God. I want to present myself as perhaps better than I am, or at least different.

Of course, then we get to Psalm 50, and God says, “Well, who does have the right to contend?” God makes the point; God has that right. There is, perhaps, an invitation to let go of my pretenses, to recognize that I'm not quite the person that I wanted to present myself as and to begin to try to be honest about who I am.

Today, we take a look at Psalm 73. Notice that the psalm recognizes that
Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

But then the psalmist immediately begins to talk about himself. “Well, God, I'm not so pure in heart.” This is what he says:

*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

He recognizes in himself that he has been full of desire for what the other has, wanting to be someone else, something else, and just wanting God to make him that, at best. It's pretty easy to have this kind of envy.

As he goes on, he has this litany of what he sees the successful looking like. They must have it all together. They must have shalom. They must be the ones who have found salvation. And so he's talking about that temptation to want to try to be them. A temptation to maybe want to be him. He recognizes that he has gone a long way down that path and that he's almost said, “Yes. I'm going to go after that success. That's what's going to be my salvation.” But then he realizes:

*If I had said, “I will talk on in this way,”
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.*

What saves him from going down that path at that moment is that he knows who he belongs to, the community he shares his life with, and he knows it's the community of faith. At that moment, all it does, really, is save him from going down that path, or slipping down the slope.

He goes on to say:

*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.*

So he begins to realize that because of the faith of the circle of people of the covenant, people of faith, that he was making a mistake. Still, he says,

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task...

Being part of the community was enough to help him know that going the other direction wasn't right, but he couldn't quite figure out what to do. It seemed like a wearisome task. I know that I have sat there a number of times wondering how to figure this all out. It seems a wearisome task.

What was it for the psalmist that led him beyond that moment—beyond a moment that wasn't quite despair? He knew kind of where he belonged, yet he still was struggling. He says:

I went into the sanctuary of God; and then I perceived their end.

He went to worship. He went to be with others, and in that moment he somehow encountered God and allowed God to change his perspective. It is as we come near to God, God changes how we see the world. At least that seems to be the psalmist's perspective. It was then, when he encountered God, that he recognized God's presence. He recognized that however embittered and stupid and ignorant he had been, what a brute beast he had been toward God, that God had continually been there holding his hand. It was then that he could say:

*You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honor.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

He changed what he desired. In encountering God, in recognizing God's goodness, he recognized that God hadn't abandoned him, he had abandoned God. He came to know that being near God was the thing to truly be desired. It was a change of his desire from wanting what everyone else had and thinking that nothing that he had was good or good enough, to desiring to simply be near God, coming to God.

It feels like this dovetails with what Jesus did with the disciples in today's Gospel. The disciples said, "We don't have enough here to do anything. Send the people away." Jesus, at that point, didn't say, "Yes, you do." He didn't tell them what was

going to happen. He said simply, “Bring what you have, and let’s bless it and use it.” And when the gifts they brought were used, incredible things happened. They didn’t stop and say, “I don’t have enough.” Bring your gift to God. You are enough.

The difference is a position of humility, of recognizing I’m not going to become him, I’m not going to become the savior of the world. I simply have some gifts to bring. If I bring them to God and allow God to bless them, who knows what’s going to happen? It takes a little trust. I think that’s one of the hard things about this—letting go of the messages around us and trusting that coming near to God, bringing our gifts to God, and sharing them is enough. The thing is, if we don’t do that, we sometimes get stuck doing nothing.

The psalmist says:

*My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell all God’s works.*

I think this is the central message of the psalm. We don’t have to put something on and pretend to be somebody we’re not. We can come and notice our own struggles. We can come and join the family of faith and not even always understand exactly how it all works and sometimes feel like the world is wearisome. We can come with open hearts to find out that God is near and when our desire is simply to come to God, God blesses the gifts we bring, and who knows what’s going to happen? But we do know this: our hearts are strengthened. Our refuge is God and we can tell of God’s works.

Let’s pray:

Gracious God, we are thankful for the psalmist and how amazing it is that something written so many years ago can yet speak into our lives. He invites us to recognize our own desires and how easily they become just envy. How easy it is to become stupid and ignorant by simply wanting what others have. Lord, help us turn to you and to desire you, to be with you, to be near you, to allow you to enter our lives and change our perspective and strengthen our hearts. Help us accept our portion, the life you give us, that we might come in wonder to share life in the family of faith and to be near to you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.