

Psalm 62:5-12

For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from God.

God alone is my rock  
and my salvation, my fortress;  
I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in God at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before God;  
who is a refuge for us.

Those of low estate are but a breath,  
those of high estate are a delusion;  
in the balances they go up;  
they are together lighter than a breath.

Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery;  
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,  
and steadfast love belongs to you, O God.

For you repay to all  
according to their work.

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sermon: Onward Christian Soldiers

During Christmas we spend most of our time with the Gospel of Luke – that is where we find the Hail Mary prayer of Elizabeth, the Magnificat of Mary, the story of a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no room in the inn, birth in a manger, angel choirs in heaven, and shepherds abiding in the fields watching their flocks by night. If it wasn't for Luke we'd only have five children in our Christmas pageant.

Luke is very concerned to show that Mary and Joseph are no rebels. They obey the orders of the Roman government to register in the census for the sake of taxes, they obey the law of Moses when they bring Jesus to the temple when the time comes for the rite of purification. Throughout his Gospel Luke is concerned to steer clear of rebellion and proclaim reconciliation. Jesus is the peacemaker.

In Matthew we hear about the Magi traveling from the East, and Matthew embraces Jesus as the light to the Gentiles. John does not tell a birth story, but he declares that Jesus from the beginning is the word, now the wisdom of God made flesh; in John Jesus is primarily proclaimed as heavenly sovereign, one with the Father.

We did not read much in the Gospel of Mark in December. The mood of Mark is quite different. If Luke is the peace love and understanding Gospel, then Mark is the Rocky Graziano of Gospels - or maybe even the Jake LaMotta, the Raging Bull. The bell sounds and the Gospel of Mark comes into the ring swinging.

Our Lesson this morning began at verse 14 in the first chapter of Mark - the story of the beginning of the Galilean ministry and the call of the first disciples. Just in terms of pace, Mark is in a hurry; Matthew and Luke take four chapters to get to this point, Mark takes 14 verses.

One Commentator wrote: Mark begins like an alarm clock, persistently declaring that time is up and demanding some response. Time and urgency are at the heart of this Gospel. In that first chapter, Jesus sweeps through Galilee and takes it by storm...the underlying sense is that God is on the march in the ministry of Jesus. The time is now, Jesus announces: his very first words of proclamation are "The time is fulfilled"

Then Jesus sees Simon and Andrew casting a net into the Sea of Galilee and he says simply "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" And immediately, immediately, Mark says, they left their nets and followed him.

The modern reader might wonder what was going on in the minds of these fishermen - were they conflicted, did they hesitate? How did they weigh their decision to leave their trade and follow this man? What happened in their lives to prepare them for this moment?

But Mark is unconcerned with such psychological probing - the point is not the disciples or their process of conversion, the point is the power of God on the move.

Barbara Brown Taylor says you have to understand this as a miracle story- Jesus walks right up to a quartet of fishermen and works a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before.

She says: This way of approaching the story may make us uncomfortable because we live in a culture that emphasizes our choices and independence, our ability to shape our lives and determine our destinies.

We can do whatever needs to be done; it's within our power; we can fix and improve everything; we can take hold of the future and make it what we want it to be. In fact, we have to do it, in order to please God and get to heaven. The better we are, the more saintly and sacrificing we are, the more likely we are to earn our salvation.

What we may have lost along the way is a full sense of the power of God - to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory. Whether we're ready or not, God acts.

There is a tone in Mark that we have somewhat sanitized from our mainstream churches. Last Monday we had a funeral here for Phil Lovell. Phil was the tree warden in town for many years, but as a young 17 year old he was a Marine in the Pacific and part of the force that took the island of Tinian - which held the airstrip where eventually the planes carrying the nuclear bombs to Japan took off.

Phil had come into my office years ago to plan his funeral. He had certain hymns he wanted sung, among them "Onward Christian Soldiers." A generation ago that would have been in every mainstream Protestant hymnal and familiar to even the most casual church-goer. Not today - we have Sweet Sweet Spirit and ...Let there be Peace on Earth - good hymns to express the tone of Luke's Gospel - but no Onward Christian Soldiers - which I think would be more expressive of the Gospel of Mark.

I asked Linda if she'd just play a verse for us this morning.

There is another old favorite I noticed is missing from the Chalice Hymnal and I think it's more than just happenstance - it's just not in step with our times - let me have Linda play the tune and see if we know the words:

Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that light.

By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,  
Toiling up new Calv'ries ever with the cross that turns not back;  
New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth,  
They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong;  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

James Russell Lowell 1819 - 1891

in the Boston Courier, December 11, 1845. as a poem protesting America's war with Mexico.

A prominent poet and author, Lowell became Professor of Modern Languages and Literature at Harvard in 1855, succeeding Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Lowell captures the spirit of Mark, and the spirit of Mark stands as an important corrective to the tendency to turn religion into a personal accessory where my needs are at the center, and God serves my process, my concerns, my well being, my emotional universe. Mark's religion does not tell us how God can be useful to us - Mark tells us to either be useful to God or get step aside.

God is on the march in the Gospel of Mark, and our task is well summed up in the famous words of Fr. Mycal Judge

Lord, take me where You want me to go;  
Let me meet who You want me to meet;  
Tell me what You want me to say; and  
Keep me out of your way

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