

Third Easter, 2009
St. Paul's, Grinnell
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer.

When I am preparing a sermon, it is my habit to print out the texts from the lectionary web site and carry them around with me for several days. Pulling them out from time to time helps me to absorb them over a period of time. This is the format (show a page). For some reason, I had not noticed that the heading for the Psalm is called the Response to the reading. Since it is customary for the congregation to participate in reading the day's psalm, it means that it is our response to the reading, much the way we respond to the sermon with the Nicene Creed.

When we are called upon to respond, we are called upon to put ourselves into the words, to be active and not passive in our participation. So rather than just saying the words of the psalm, we are invited to live them. And we may be changed, even transformed sometimes because we can receive the breath of God from the psalms. And thus we can receive the Holy Spirit just as the disciples did in the upper room. And we know that they were transformed.

For example, in today's reading from Acts, we see a very different Peter than we saw earlier. This is not the Peter who was trying to pretend that he was not one of Jesus' followers, who denied him three times. This is not even the same Peter who could not understand what he saw at the Transfiguration. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, this Peter is a leader. He has received the Holy Spirit and he now stands before the people as one with authority. This gift is echoed in the Psalm.

The Psalmist first asks "Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause", he asks for God's ear to hear his prayer. In God's answer, he sounds exasperated, just as Jesus often did. He says "You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory, how long will you worship dumb idols and run after false gods?"

The next verse is the answer of the faithful "Know then that the Lord does wonders for the faithful; when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me." The Peter we know in Acts is one of the faithful and the Lord has not only heard him, but answered him.

The next verses are for us, to help us in our search for God in our lives. "Tremble then, and do not sin, speak to your heart in silence upon your bed." It is in that silence upon our beds that we try to hear, to discern what God is asking us to do and be. Rather than grumbling and moaning and wishing for better times, it is in the quiet searching that we can put gladness in our hearts. Then we can fulfill God's hope for us and we can lie down in

peace, fall asleep at once, because we know that “only you Lord can make me dwell in safety.”

Most of you are aware that for the past year and a half I have been struggling with major depression. I bring this up because I want to witness to the tremendous help that the psalms have been for me. Indeed, sometimes I feel that they have been nothing short of a life raft to which I can cling. But the important thing is that the psalms are there for all of us all of the time. Jesus prayed the psalms and knowing that brings him even closer. The disciples prayed the psalms. It is thrilling to think of how many years they have been prayed. And the ways they have been used are as many as the people who have prayed them! Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister has this to say about the psalms in her book *In the Heart of the Temple*: Sung for centuries, the psalms have captured the spiritual wisdom and insight of the centuries. They sing of praise and fear and faith and final victory. They sing all the human emotions to God. They talk to God. They sing of the whole human race united in God who is life. They sing of a people who sin as a people and are saved as a people and sigh for God as a people see God every where. The psalms called Jesus beyond Judaism and stretch us still beyond ourselves.

Much of the liturgy in monastic orders consists of praying the psalms. If we pray the daily offices in the Book of Common Prayer we will find ourselves praying four to six psalms daily,

depending on their length. I have heard it said that there is no human emotion that is not covered in the psalms—emotions ranging from great anger to quiet consolation to loud rejoicing. But they always return to God as the center. The phrase “but you, O Lord Your mercy will endure for ever or a variation of that is often found at the end of the psalms. Several examples: For the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his faithfulness endures from age to age (Ps. 100) Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name. (Ps. 99). Ps. 102 is a litany of every kind of pain and sorrow, but yet the psalmist cries “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days; your years endure through the generations.” So during all this miserable period of depression, staying with the discipline of praying the daily office and reading psalms has, just as it for generations before me, kept me aware of God in my life, aware of God’s goodness and faithfulness. If we let the psalms be part of our lives every day, we are keeping God closer to us and that is the way our lives are meant to be lived. We will be strengthened as Peter was strengthened by letting the Holy Spirit act in our lives in ways that we could never have imagined on our own. We will truly be the children of God that John refers to in his epistle.

God will put gladness in our hearts, and we will remember in our hearts that our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth whose mercy endures forever.