

Psalm 90:1-12 Pastor Bill Uetracht 11/15/20 24 Pentecost

Our own Martin Luther, whose birthday we celebrated this past week, coined the phrase “living word” in relationship to our experience of the Bible. The phrase has always meant so much to me, because often my encounter with the Bible, particularly as I or we study it, is a meeting with something that seems very much alive. And this week that was very true. The word, although it was particularly gruesome and deeply troubling, spoke, nonetheless, volumes to me.

The first reading from Zephaniah is clearly one of the most challenging texts that we ever receive. I am glad that it only comes around every three years. If I had my way, we would probably just cut Zephaniah out of the Bible. We might all be better off. But the message from Zephaniah is clear and spoke to me in a gut-wrenching way this week. And that message is that indifference is not okay. We cannot treat God as if God doesn't matter (some would call this “practical atheism”), assuming that there won't be consequences.

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’” God is inconsequential, in other words. And what we do then is a matter of indifference. No way, Zephaniah says! God is real, and as Walter Brueggemann says, “God will have a day. Our shenanigans have impact. They don't go unnoticed. We cannot not tell the truth about pandemics, climate change, or even elections, and think that everything will be okay. It won't be. We can't be indifferent to that lack of truth telling. We need to respond.

That was living word for me this week. As a people pleaser, I find it hard to be so forthright. I live a lot in the land of “on the one hand, this and the other hand, that.” Truthfully, I don't apologize for that, for it helps me to be about the business of reconciliation, something I think

is at the center of what the Christian calling is. But sometimes we need to speak up. We need to tell the truth. God is not indifferent. Nor can we be.

But you know, this calling from Zephaniah was not the only or the big “aha!” moment for me this past week in my dealing with the scriptures. The Psalm for the week stopped me in my tracks. It was “living word” big time for me. Psalm 90 is said to be a “Prayer of Moses, the man of God.” Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says we through this song are to imagine Moses standing on the edge of the Promise Land, realizing that he cannot go in. The man who has led a whining, bellyaching group of stubborn Israelites during 40 years of wilderness journeying has just been told that he himself can’t go into the Promised Land with the group he led.

This story has always bothered me, unsettles me deep within my soul, for life too often for me seems that way. We travel a long distance, and yet we aren’t able to enter where we want to enter. Life stops us short. Death stops us short. I have been traveling with many of you for quite a long time, and lately it seems that life and death are stopping us short. Covid, more than anything else in all my long career as a pastor is forcing me and all of us to face what the Psalmist proclaims:

You turn us back to dust, and say ‘turn back, you mortals.’ You [i.e., God] sweep [mortals] away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Wow! That is depressing, or more accurately, unsettlingly true. Life far too often is like standing on the edge of the Promised Land, not being allowed to go in, confronting life’s fragility and its brevity. We

are all Adam; that is, we all are from the dust. We want to grab hold of life and control it. But it slips through our fingers.

I am now 62, old enough, as my Dad used to say, “to collect social security.” How in the heck did that happen? “The days of our lives are seventy years, eighty, if we are strong.” That’s staring me in the face. Oh, but I ride a bike for a hundred miles. Oh, but I wear a mask and a seat belt! Oh, but I avoid bacon and eat lots of Brussel sprouts! Yet even I, the pious and healthy one, am swept away like a dream.

Now, I get the Psalmist’s vision—unfortunately. You can’t be a pastor, and not be forced to deal with your own mortality. This is not a job for people who like to run from death, although I am sure many of us still are busy doing so. Yet what is particularly intriguing and somewhat of a conundrum to me is the way the Psalmist connects our mortality and fragility to our guilt. “For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.”

Admittedly, I find the Psalmist’s understanding of reality to be a bit concerning. Our mortality, our fragileness comes because of God’s anger? Really? That’s not helpful. People struggle enough with their sense of inadequacy. Why put another layer of burden on them?

Truthfully, I don’t find it helpful to see our struggles, our burdens, our suffering and our mortality as consequences of God’s displeasure with us. But I think the Psalmist, nonetheless, may be on to something. And this may not be something you easily grasp. If not, hang on to the rest of the sermon and throw this part out.

Maybe to be human is to be fragile, to be a bunch of dust, and maybe this truth gives us a sense of inadequacy that we will never overcome. I used to think—and this guided my parenting—that if you just give people affirmation and a strong sense of who they are, they will deal with life as strong, capable people, without a sense of

inadequacy. But what if being human makes you feel inadequate. What if your not measuring up comes with the human predicament? In other words, you won't ever completely get around guilt and shame. And perhaps, the truly sad people are those who can't face that, those who can't embrace their humanness, confront their shame and their guilt. Perhaps that is why the big sin of the first man and woman is that they didn't want to be human; they wanted to be like God. The people to be most pitied these days are those who can't face the inadequacy of their being human, those who can't grasp that before God and death we all don't measure up.

So where is the good news in all of this? Life is fragile. I am going to die, and I feel all kinds of inadequacy because of that. My sin is ever before me. We all know that. Seems like nothing but bad news. But there is good news. And it's to be found in the Psalmist's first words: "Lord, Sovereign, you have been our dwelling place in all generation. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

In the midst of the brittleness, in the midst of the fragility, in the midst of the brokenness, in the midst of the brevity, there is a center, a home. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place . . . in all generations." This isn't something new. This is a part of a tradition. God is *my* home, our home, and has been our home *forever*, among all generations.

Our little fragile, mortal lives, like the fragile, mortal lives of those who have gone before us, matter. They are connected to something larger than us. They rest in the eternal. Our lives are brief, but they rest in the one who is "from everlasting to everlasting." We who are but dust dwell in the one for whom a thousand years are like yesterday when it is past. We who are inadequate and who too often are haunted by our guilt and shame find a home in the truly adequate one. There is a center for us who are fragmented. And that center doesn't come

from our achievement, our accomplishment. It comes as gift. A real home is always gift. In God, we have that gift.

I needed to hear that this week. I needed that *living word*. Life seems so fragmented these days. I need a center—a center that is not mine to create, but rather mine to receive. And to be discovered by that center is a matter of being taught to count my days, gaining a wise heart. Life's brittleness could lead us to throw in the towel, but no! We receive the gift that life is, knowing that it is not ours forever, and, as our gospel reading suggests, still investing into the things of God like love and mercy that connect us to that which is eternal, that which lasts forever.

Sometimes it all seems a bit much. Sometimes I am tempted to withdraw, to give up. But the living word shows up again, calling me out of my indifference, and propelling me forward to get back at it.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years
to come. Still be our guard while troubles last and
our eternal home.