

“REMEMBERING OUR NEIGHBORS IN NEED”

Psalms 30 and 65

November 19, 2017

Rev. Jerry Duggins

The room is square, about 25 feet across, with a pit in the center. When he first awakes, the room is dark. Because he is slow and cautious, he manages to determine the size of the room while narrowly avoiding the pit. At one point he collapses into unconsciousness and when he wakes again, he finds himself bound to a table and a razor sharp pendulum swinging and slowly descending. When it descends far enough, its path will cut across his heart. His escape from this death is both narrow and gruesome. I'll spare you the details. If you are familiar with Poe's story *The Pit and the Pendulum*, you will know that his relief is brief. Soon the walls begin to close around him, forcing him toward the pit where apparently a horrifying death awaits him. We don't get to hear about it though because just as he is about to fall into the pit, the walls spring back and his rescuer appears and saves him from the judgment of the inquisition.

As with Poe's story, so also in Psalm 30, we have no idea what may be in the "Pit," but we know it isn't good. It's unimaginable perhaps. According to the psalmist, the pit is the sort of place that would bring shame on God, should one of God's people fall into it. The psalmist challenges God in his prayer, essentially saying, "What will people say about you, should one of your loved ones be found in the pit?" The logic is the same as Moses used when he suggested that the other nations would accuse God of rescuing the people of Israel from Egypt only to destroy them in the wilderness.

Maybe you've been at the edge of the pit, looked in and seen disaster waiting for you. Maybe, like the prisoner and the psalmist, you've uttered this desperate prayer. And maybe, you too, have experienced the saving grace of God. And maybe you understand the depth of the psalmist's feeling as he says, "O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever."

This is the sort of experience that changes you, that shapes you for the long future. You don't forget the narrow escapes. And when you remember those who have pulled you from the pit, you also remember the deep gratitude you felt. You might allow the experience to foster fear, but if you allow the thankfulness to have its full impact, then you can count on renewal. Walter Brueggemann, commenting on this psalm, wrote:

"The mark of the new life, inexplicable and unexpected, is confession expressed as thanks. Such thanks, which articulates a new life commitment, is possible only among those who vividly remember their prerescue situation. The purpose of the psalm appears to be to keep that memory alive, so that the occasion of transformation is kept alive" (pp.127-128).

One of the things that holding that difficult experience in memory with a spirit of thankfulness allows us to do is to identify with our neighbors in need. Some of you have

served in the military and found yourselves in dangerous settings. Some of you have had narrow escapes from serious illness. Maybe you've been through a painful divorce or had to care for an alcoholic brother. Maybe you lost a job or faced some insurmountable debt. The thing that happens when you come through it is at first just a sense of relief. But it soon becomes gratitude. And gratitude makes you attentive to the cries of others who are still in the turmoil you just left.

You may remember Larry Harris who survived a difficult struggle with throat cancer. He was extremely thankful to those who had helped him through treatment and most thankful to God. But what you noticed most was his desire to help anyone who had cancer. Those who have been through it have the strongest desire to help those who are going through it. My brother has a passionate commitment to NA largely born out of his gratitude for those who have helped him "stay clean."

It all comes back to gratitude. James Mays says of the psalmist: "Now he sees his life as a vocation of thanksgiving to the LORD" (p.142). I love this image. Someone asks, "What do you do for a living?" You answer, "I give thanks."

Imagine every day being Thanksgiving. I'm not talking about the football or the turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie. I'm not talking about the afternoon nap. I'm talking about that moment around the table when you look across at your sister with whom you had a terrible spat yesterday, but today you're glad to be in the same room and thankful that your anger didn't destroy your relationship. I'm not talking about gluttony, but about the gratitude over the abundance of food and for those who were a part of bringing it to the table; a gratitude that pauses to give thanks to God and remembers those who hunger and want for a roof over their heads. I'm talking about the thankfulness that is determined to be better and more responsive the next day.

Walter Brueggemann wrote: "Thanks is more than just being grateful. It is a confessional statement, in some sense relying upon and committing one's self to the other. To thank is to make commitment" (p.126). Thanksgiving is not just the celebration of a year filled with blessings. We also remember the challenges. We remember that not every day was filled with such abundance, and not everyone experiences this abundance today. Thanksgiving moves from celebration to service. Thanksgiving longs for that day when all gather round the table and satisfy their longings.

Remembering our neighbors in need: this is as important to the conversation around the table as the counting of our blessings. It is the inevitable consequence of giving thanks. There's always something incomplete about the joy when some members are absent, when the blessing comes to some but not others. And so we also remember.

We give thanks. We remember. We give thanks. We remember.... These two movements need each other. Giving thanks without remembrance is just self-absorption. Remembrance without the giving of thanks is despair. But together they propel us forward into that world where all mourning is turned to dancing and sorrow is

transformed into joy. Brueggemann says, “The move from weeping to joy is as reliable as the move from night to daybreak” (p.127).

We are not intended for the pit. God means to bless us, all of us. The psalmist shows us the way. Remember... Give thanks... Remember... Give thanks.... Amen.

Resources:

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms*.

Mays, James L. *Interpretation: Psalms*.