

Arvada
United Methodist Church

November 26, 2009

“A Great and Godly Adventure”
Psalm 30, Isaiah 43

Rev. Rusty Butler

Some of you have told me that today is your favorite worship service of the year. Through the years we have had great music (many times provided by the Jeffco Brass), we have sung songs that remind us how fortunate we are to live here in America (later in the service we'll be singing America the Beautiful), and we have turned our thoughts to God to give thanks on this day perhaps more than any other day in the year. There is something good and decent and right about it all. A preacher doesn't have to go on a long search to find something for which to be thankful for on a day like today.

There are so many things to be thankful for...

This week, my oldest son, David, wanted to go play racquetball early in the morning. I agreed but when I got up Monday morning, I noticed that he was already dressed in his gear and ready to go. I thought I'd better get on the ball and get with it.

So I hurried to get ready and got my stuff together and drove over to the courts. He went inside the racquetball court and I sat down on a chair to take my sweatshirt and sweatpants off and put my glasses on, get my racquet ready and so forth. I bent over and walked through the little door into the court and he looked at me with a kind of shocked look on his face. I looked down...I had forgotten to put any shorts on. Just wearing my underwear and a t-shirt. Now what I'm thankful for is that no one was in the balcony watching!

There's always something to be thankful for!

Would you pray with me?

O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts free us up to be thankful today. Amen.

In Gregory Hodgson's book, “A Great and Godly Adventure – The Pilgrims and the Myth of the First Thanksgiving”, he shares the account of the first Thanksgiving written by one of the Pilgrim's named Edward Winslow:

“Our corn (meaning wheat) did prove well and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good, but our peas not worth the gathering. Our harvest being got in, our governor sent four men on fowling. They four in one day killed as much fowl as with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, among other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on the governor and upon the captain and others.”

That was the extent of the description of the first thanksgiving.

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Later, he says, the traditional menu was formed and was meant to suggest the food the Pilgrims ate at the first Thanksgiving, turkey and cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie and candied sweet potatoes. Historically, he says this is plain wrong.

The muskets they used to shoot would not have been practical for the wild turkeys, there was no sugar for the cranberries, no crust for a pumpkin pie and sweet potatoes were from the south which didn't come along until a good century later.

I suppose there were no green bean casseroles and marshmallows on the sweet potatoes either! Oh well!

The myths and traditions that grew around the holiday through the years are simply meant to bring home the idea that a tiny band of men and women determined to follow what they believed to be the ordinances of their God, entrusted themselves to the trip across the ocean, confronted disease and starvation, enemies and fear and succeeded in building their church and their settlement. We commemorate the mysterious cycle of life, the parade of generations and the miracle of enough to eat as we go through the rituals of the day.

The Pilgrim's story is a story of alternation, that theory from William Hocking about the alternating patterns of existence and experience...those contrasts that make up a life, good and bad, sorrow matched against the joys, the day versus the night.

In one phase or segment of life, things are going well, you are doing great. Things are bubbling along quite nicely. Then before you know it, things are not. That is the crux of it, right there. Things are not well.

You can hear it in the words of Psalm 30. It is an example of this idea of alternation. It is a story that covers the span of two days and a night. It is a resource for those of us who go through these phases of alternation. It is a story for all of us.

In the introduction to the journey, the author invites the hearer to join in the songs of faith.

“Sing Praises to the Lord, O you, his faithful ones, and give thanks to God's holy name.”

And here is the reason why you should join in.

“For God's anger is but for a moment; God's favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.”

God's anger is brief and according to one scholar, in the Hebrew, the word is “like a beat”! (Breuggeman p.181)

So there is anger contrasted with favor

A beat versus a lifetime

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Sorrow versus joy

Night versus morning

Hocking's theory of Alternation...

Then the Psalmist gets down to business by explaining what happened.

It was a terrific day...everything was going good.

For the Psalmist, it sounds like this:

"As for me, I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved."

By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain."

For us, it is a good family, good job, good house, good education, good health, everything was good. I was a strong mountain!

I went to bed and everything was hunky-dory. (hunky-dory is a technical term)

But then let me tell you about the night...says the Psalmist:

"You hid your face; I was dismayed,"

You and I have been there:

The world came tumbling down,

There was a pink slip on the desk

A pregnant teenager

Papers for divorce

A cancer diagnosis

An old secret exposed to shameful light

There is a terrible alternation...and the Psalmist says,

"You hid your face, I was dismayed."

The biblical way of talking is that we live because God's face shines upon us. Have you ever heard these words for a benediction? The Lord bless and keep you and make his face to shine upon you?

It is the way of a child who has lost his mother but is suddenly okay when he sees her face. When God's face was hidden, the psalmist says, I was in dismay.

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So what do you do when this kind of thing happens, when you are in dismay?

You can do what the Psalmist did...

The Psalmist said it this way:

“To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication.”

I began to argue with God about what had happened...

“What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?”

Now sometimes these rhetorical questions need to be answered...

“What profit is there in my death God if I go down to the Pit?” The answer: none.

“Will the dust praise you God?” The answer: no!

“Will the dust tell of your faithfulness?” The answer: No!

So here is what the Psalmist says...

“Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me, O Lord, be my helper!”

The Psalmist implores God.

Maybe you don't talk to God like that in the daytime, but at night, when you are feeling vulnerable and alone and beset by the vagaries of the day, maybe then you'll talk to God like that...

Hear me, be gracious to me, be my helper Lord! That's how the Psalmist puts it.

That's what happened at night and then...and then!

And then the Psalmist says,

I woke up at daybreak.

It had been a terrible night...the long night of the soul in distress. I didn't know where else to turn. I implored and pleaded with God.

And then the next day came...and life had turned

This is the way the Psalmist says it,

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”

Mourning to dancing. Funeral clothes to clothes of joy. A new life-a new day- a new chance.

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I walked up to church from the parking lot one time last week, I looked up and saw the front door close and a woman going in with a little girl in hand. She was taking her kids to KDD. Not so unusual. I barely noticed, but then as I got closer I heard the sound of what I thought was an animal, but then I could see it was this little boy, he was maybe four, the older brother. He was kneeling down like a catcher, and I couldn't see his face just heard the whimpering...he sounded like a wounded pup. I don't know what had started him on this. He wasn't happy.

Little man. Just squatting there like a baseball catcher crying. You should try that sometime. I bet you start to hurt so much you'll start crying too!

Anyway, he was just sitting there, and I walked by him and looked at his face. I thought to myself maybe I should ask if he wants to go inside, but you know, sometimes a fellow doesn't want anyone asking him what is wrong, he just wants to squat and have a good cry and that's the way it was I thought with this little guy.

And so I opened the door to go inside and at the same time his mother was coming out, she had deposited her smallest one inside and now she was going to go out and get the crier.

So I opened the door and we met at the doorway and she looked at me, I didn't say anything but she read my face and answered my unasked question and said with a wry smile on her face, "he's mine". And then she went out and gathered him up and brought him inside.

"He's mine." Sometimes those are good words to say. She's mine. He's mine. They're mine. When we get to say something like that, it can be a very good day.

If you thought of God as a person, you might think of God looking around at all us people and saying, oh that one over there crying is mine, and that one over there getting help, "mine", and that one doing the helping? "Mine too." Oh you don't even have to ask about that one over there, had a bad time of it recently but, yep, "mine".

I never understood a theology that said God would disown us for one thing or another, for sitting down and crying in the middle of the sidewalk, for thinking terrible things, or even doing something terrible, instead I always thought of a God who said, regardless of what happens with people, "mine".

In the book of Isaiah, there are these words,

"But now, thus says the Lord, the one who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

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You are mine.

Now, you may be like me and not have an anthropomorphic God, your God may not have hands and feet and eyes and so forth, maybe your God is more like energy, or more like consciousness, or more like an abstract idea like goodness, or compassion, or love. Maybe your God is more like the universe itself, or the cosmos, something wide and expansive and that we are simply a part of.

However you might think of your God, I'd ask you to consider that the prophet was onto something...

The one that created you and formed you, that called you out of nothingness into somethingness, and that one which is with you through the floods and through the fire...and that says, "You are mine." The prophet who said that might just be onto something. And for that on this Thanksgiving Day, we pause and ponder and offer our Thanks.

Amen.