SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Love’s Mission, and Ours* Psalm 22:23-31

 Mark 8:31-38

One of the things we did in Bible Study this past week was to read all of Psalm 22 before we went on to discuss the last eight verses that we sang just now. We read the whole thing because of the words and images that are a part of the beginning. We hear and see them again when Jesus comes to the end of his life.

To read the whole of the psalm, I felt, helped us understand how Jesus could reveal himself to his disciples as the Messiah, and also refer to himself as the Son of Man. As Messiah, he is on a mission to show us what it means to love—to love others, but also to love our own life—and, as Son of Man, how we are also able to do this as human people.

Jesus’ mission was to show us God’s glory by showing us our own capacity for love, and loving service toward others, and one of the starting points for learning this is in Psalm 22.

Throughout the psalm, we hear the voice of a single person, one who is suffering and in pain. We do not know what his specific pain is, even though there is a pretty graphic description of a body that is “shriveled,” bones that are “out of joint” and a heart that is like wax that has melted within the psalmist’s chest.

In addition to the physical distress, the psalmist is also surrounded by threats, dangers, and hostility on every side. Yet, when we reach the last eight verses, the ones we sang, what we hear and sing is a song of connection, a song of relationship with God. What the psalmist sings about is his/her connection to God:

*23God did not despise or abhor
   the affliction of the afflicted;
God did not hide God’s face from me,
   but heard when I cried to God.*

Despite the extreme distress and the fearsome people, animals, and circumstances surrounding the psalmist, this is still a song of praise. It is still a song that portrays a human being’s absolute confidence in God’s concern and caring. Also, in the face of so much heart break, the psalmist still does not give in to thoughts of abandonment or rejection. Everyone and everything else seem to have deserted and rejected the psalmist, but *not* God.

What is portrayed here for us is a relationship with God that cannot be broken, despite what is happening to the psalmist. Life is hard, scary, and sad and in the very beginning of the psalm—the very first verse and many that come after—we hear expressions of deep grief, we hear crying, and lamentation. The psalmist is crying out and asking, “why”?

But what is amazing is that the writer—whom we may assume has had a relationship with God *before* the hardship came—has not lost his/her desire nor their ability to praise God.

Somehow, the relationship between God and the human creature has been so close and so filled with trust that even now, sorrow and fear cannot destroy the connection between the two. Indeed, it is this unbreakable bond that allows the human expressions of sorrow and anger and reproach to be given full voice—you can risk alienation with someone, even God, when the relationship is a strong and trustworthy, you can ask the hard questions, you can remain confident of the love you have known.

What this also allows for is that the palmist is able to find his/her way back to confidence and connection. In fact, the psalmist’s return to faith is so strong and secure, that s/he constantly also promises to praise and bear witness before others of God’s loving care for all people. S/he is aware and open to others and promises to include them in this song of confidence. All through the psalmist’s ordeal, s/he remains open to God and to others. Never once is the psalmist in danger of turning away from the source of healing, safety, and life.

What I would like to point out is that such faith does not just happen. It takes time and effort to nurture a faith as strong as this. Whether it is with God, or with another person, it takes cultivation of one’s knowledge and understanding of the other to form such a faith. What the psalmist shows us, then, is an experienced faith; a faith that can be cultivated and made strong.

Such is the faith that Jesus has in the passage we heard from the gospel of Mark. Jesus, who is always taking time away from the disciples to be alone with God to pray, has just had a conversation with the disciples about his identity.

Peter, when asked about his personal belief about Jesus, has been especially on top of things by declaring, *‘You are the Messiah.’* [8:29b] Yet, it is in the very next breath, after Jesus has apprised the disciples of the kind of Messiah he is going to be that Peter loses his composure and begins to rebuke Jesus.

Peter’s mistake is one that we all make and continue to make. We hear words like “messiah,” or “leader,” or words like “king,” or “chief,” or “president” or even “manager,” or “boss,” or any other word or words describing what sounds like “the person in charge,” and we immediately think of how much power over others this person will have.

Many also are immediately impressed by the way such power will allow them to enrich themselves—usually at the expense of the least vulnerable in the community. Many will immediately think of how they will now have the power to dictate who is in and who is out—out of favor, out of civil and equal rights, denied recognition, self-determination, even due process.

Jesus will have none of that. He is swift to scold Peter, even calling him “Satan!” He will not allow Peter to tempt him into accepting the kind of power that is selfish and self-centered.

It is also telling that at this point Jesus refers to himself as Son of *Man*. As such, rather than above all other humans, Jesus’ effort will be to show what human beings are capable. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. However, he is also the Son of Man. And so, Jesus tells us how we, too, may be connected to God in such a way that remains strong and real despite anything else that is going on in our lives or in the world around us. He describes it as *“taking up your cross”* [v. 34b] and following him. He also warns that *“those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”* [v. 35]

This week, religion historian, Diana Butler Bass, found it interesting but sad that when news broke of Alexi Navalny’s death in a Russian prison camp, one politician compared it to his own troubles with the law in this country. Former president, Donald Trump, complained that he was being just as unfairly treated, just like Navalny.

Well, first of all, the man is still free and campaigning. Second, I think he missed the part of Navalny’s story where he refused to flee and live outside of Russia even though he had already been poisoned once by Russian agents.

Despite the threat to his freedom and his safety, Navalny insisted on living *in* his country among his fellow Russians. He insisted on sharing their plight in person.

Butler Bass remembered that Navalny had converted to Christianity a few years before his incarceration and death. She quoted some of his last words to the court before he was imprisoned; words that show he clearly understood Jesus’ words about “taking up” the cross, and so she observed that:

*When you take up Jesus’ cross, you* choose *to surrender the burdens of self-pretension in favor of cumbering yourself with compassion and love of neighbor. This cross puts one in tension with injustice, the powerful, violence, bigotry, and delusions of grandeur. That’s the cross Jesus instructs his followers to pick up… Navalny wanted all of Russia to be free;* [Donald] *Trump only wants to free himself. If Navalny had survived the risk, there is every indication he wouldn’t treat his enemies with revenge. In his final speech, he actually invited his enemies in… Navalny faced his tormentors and acted courageously on behalf of a wider moral vision;* [he] *accepted affliction* [and] *embodied heroism;* [while the other man embodies] *narcissism. Heroism might wind up in genuine martyrdom (it sometimes does… )*

Jesus Christ calls us to deny ourselves, and we can do this by removing ourselves from the privileged position we often make for ourselves. We accomplish this not by diminishing or destroying ourselves, but by seeing ourselves as Jesus saw himself—as part of our life, as one of us, as part of the vast and varied human community who needs God’s love and service which can only be conveyed through our life and our commitment. Without this mandate, we will be in danger of becoming a cross-free community without moral bearings.

Friends, followers of Christ are asked to take up a cross and follow. This means that our life will involve both love and suffering, and it will certainly include self-sacrifice. But if we set our minds on the things of God, we will receive the riches of everlasting life, and we will know how to answer the question of Jesus, “What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?” [v. 36, CEV].

During the Lenten season, let us remember that our deepest convictions come out of an experience of spiritual conflict and struggle, one that includes suffering and death … but also everlasting life. So, let us give thanks that Jesus is the Son of Man every bit as much as he is the Son of God. For therein lies our hope and God’s promise: that Jesus’ mission of love among us has endowed us with the gift of love, and the strength to offer love to others. May we receive this knowledge as a treasured blessing and give thanks to God.

Amen.