

Surprised by Peace

Psalm 85

12.04.11

Dean Feldmeyer

You restored us once, God. But things didn't work out like we hoped and thought that they would. So we really need for you to restore us again. We need for you to re-restore us. And God will restore us but the restoration won't be the one we expect or want. It will be even better.

That, in essence, is the message of the 85th Psalm.

Those in charge of the lectionary, however, chose to leave out that middle part, so the way we have read it, today, the message is truncated. By leaving out verses 3-7 the message becomes: "God restored us in the past and God will restore us again."

W. Dennis Tucker of Tuett Theological Seminary says that is unfortunate because the left out verses, 3-7 are where most of us actually live.¹ We reside between the first restoration and the next restoration, the first salvation and the next salvation, the first coming of Christ and the next coming of Christ.

And Advent is the season when we acknowledge this reality of our lives, the way we live between the restorations, and the promise that makes it tolerable.

PSALM 85: 1-3 – You Restored Us In the Past

¹ LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.

³ You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

Most scholars date this psalm about 520 BCE, shortly after the return of the exiles from Babylon. For seventy years they had prayed for release and restoration and now their prayers had been answered. Cyrus of Persia had defeated the Babylonian Empire without an arrow being loosed and, within a year, had allowed the exiles to return to their homelands.

About a third of the exiles chose to return to Judah, but what they found upon their return there was devastation and ruin. The capitol city, their beloved Jerusalem, had been razed to the ground, the temple dismantled stone by stone, the city gates burned, the homes and businesses crushed and destroyed. There was not a structure left standing.

And in the intervening 70 or so years those who had been left behind in Canaan had concentrated on their own survival, dispersed into the countryside or fled to Egypt, and made no attempt to repair any of the damage.

What heartbreak must have been theirs as they looked upon their beloved city, the city their parents and grandparents had told them so much about, the city on the hill, overlooking the beautiful river, now lying in ruins.

Confronted with this bitter disappointment, the poet (psalmist) does what he does best. He composes a poem. And in the first three verses, before looking at what is or what needs to be, what he hopes for and dreams of for his people, he looks at what was. He makes a brief, three verse, trip into the past.

When he says that God restored the fortunes of Jacob, he is talking about God restoring the Hebrew people to the Promised Land. He could be referencing the Exodus or their recent return from Babylon or both. Whichever it is, he also allows that it was an act of pure grace on God's part.

The people certainly didn't deserve it, he says. But God forgave and pardoned all their sins and withdrew his righteous anger and dealt gently and lovingly with them.

My goodness, this poem could be written today, couldn't it? Right here in America. Why, even in Wilmington. We are undergoing the greatest economic downturn, the greatest financial challenge since the great depression. Like Jerusalem, our 401(k)'s are in ruins, our pensions are heavily damaged, if not destroyed. Our financial security has evaporated like a morning fog. Our jobs have disappeared. Our businesses have left and "For Rent" signs have appeared in windows all over town.

Spend a few minutes at the barbershop, the hairdresser, the diner and you'll hear the people doing as the psalmist did, remembering a former time, a better time, another time when we were restored. In fact, some would say that, in Wilmington, looking back has been raised to the level of high art.

We look back to 1947 when our church was featured in a Life Magazine spread about Methodism and America. We were, the article said, a bright and shining example, typical of American Methodism. Of the 7500 residents of Wilmington, one in ten was a member of the Methodist Church, making it bigger than most Methodist churches in America. A generous congregation they gave a total of \$10,000 a year to their church, half of which went out of Wilmington to missions in Europe and the development of African American churches in the south.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=12/4/2011&tab=5

A few years later our city became home to the Clinton County Air Force Base and we saw our little community grow. In 1971 the air base closed and the economy of the city hovered in recession for nearly a decade. Then we were restored once again when Airborne Express purchased the facility in 1979 and, during the next 24 years, invested more than \$250 million to build a hub for its national delivery network, employing more than 6,000 persons. Then came the contract with DHL and more jobs and more prosperity.

Our primary worries became those of finding and welcoming new workers, weeding out the illegal immigrants, and dealing with the truck traffic through town. We had fallen and been picked up; we had collapsed and been restored.

Then, in 2008, we returned to Jerusalem and found it in ruins.

In 1995 we had been named one of *The 100 Best Small Towns in America*. In 1997 we had been featured in *Time* magazine as a magnet for businesses and families. Eleven years later we were featured on *60 Minutes* as the very image of desperation and depression.

PSALM 85: 4-7 – Restore Us Again, O God

⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation towards us.

⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

⁶ Will you not revive us again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

The city of our dreams and hopes lay before us in near ruin. Over 6,000 jobs lost with the stroke of a pen. The layoff's. The unemployment. The desperation. The crowds at the Free Clinic, the Benefit Bank, Your Father's Kitchen. Pensions lost and retirement delayed. Careers destroyed. College educations surrendered. Hopes and dreams abandoned.

Despair was like a hungry wolf at the door, trying to claw its way into our lives and only our most strident efforts kept it at bay. Tears were common, curses more so. Disbelief mingled with anger. *"Not again. Not again."*

Our theology is a little more sophisticated than that of the Psalmist but we understood the feeling expressed when he cried out to God, "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again?"

We learned, the hard way, that our salvation was not to be found in the promises and plans of big business nor in the moil and machination of big government. We turned, instead, to God and each other.

We expanded our ministries and extended helping hands. We created "Energize Clinton County" and "Grow Food, Grow Hope." We sang with "Heart, Music, Change" and we danced at the Hospital Ball.

We reminded ourselves that we had been abandoned in the past and made our way back and we would do it again. And we turned to our God and said that prayer which we dared only whisper into our pillows, "Please, God, make it so."

When Dennis Tucker says that verses 4-7 are where we live, he isn't just kidding. America is living there, now. And sometimes it feels like Wilmington has put down roots in those verses.

But the psalm doesn't end there.

This is the place where the psalmist stops talking and starts listening.

PSALM 85: 8-13 – Surely His Salvation is at Hand

⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Let me hear what God, the Lord, will speak...

And then the psalmist speaks to us as a translator might speak, relating to us what God has told him.

If we turn to God and respect (fear) God, God will speak peace to us. Our salvation will be at hand. And what does that salvation look like?

Well, if we're looking for God to find us a high paying, prestigious job we may be outa luck. If we want God to put a Lexus in our driveway and a Caribbean Cruise on our calendar we may be barking up the wrong tree. If we want God to pay off our credit card bills or refill our 401 (k) we may need to find a different psalmist.

Because those things, says our poet, are not what God promises. God promises three things:

1. His steadfast love.
2. His faithfulness, and
3. His righteousness.

Steadfast Love

Steadfast love is just another synonym for "grace."

Steadfast means unwavering, unchanging, unstopping, unbending. God's love for us is steadfast. It doesn't stop. It doesn't end. It is the unstoppable force AND the immovable object.

We are accepted, brothers and sisters. Nothing changes that. Rich or poor. Employed or unemployed. Mansion or mobile home. Calvin Kline or Levis. Rock, pop or country. None of it matters to God. God loves us.

Faithfulness

God keeps his promises. If he says he will love and accept us, he does.

If he says he will watch over us, he will. Listen to how a contemporary psalmist, Thomas O. Chisholm put it in 1923:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassion they fail not.
As thou has been, thou forever wilt be.

Summer and winter and spring-time and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided,
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Righteousness

We often tend to think of righteousness as a legal term. We think of it in terms of being right or good or obedient. But, in fact, the Hebrew understanding of righteousness means being in an appropriate relationship with those around you, including God. A righteous person was one who treated other people with compassion and mercy and related to God with humility and respect.

When we say that God is righteous we mean that God has repaired the broken relationship that exists between us and him. God has picked us up from our failures, dusted us off, and set us back on our moral, spiritual feet, perfectly aligned with him as we are supposed to be.

PEACE

None of these are for their own sakes, however. God does not bring us steadfast love, or faithfulness, or righteousness just because they are good ideas. God brings them to us because of what they yield when they are mixed together in his people and that yield is **PEACE**.

Twice he says it.

When we respect God and turn to God in humility and trust, the outcome is peace – inner peace and outer peace as well.

When we abide inside God's steadfast love and faithfulness and righteousness, we find peace within ourselves. We no longer are we driven to achieve and acquire in order to show that we are acceptable. We are no longer driven to look and act the way our peers tell us to just so we can be part of their group. We are part of a greater group called The People of God.

We can rest and breathe a little easier because we know that we are not defined by our pay check, our political affiliations, our successes or our failures. We understand the meaning of freedom because we know that our past has been stamped approved by God. We can dare to dream because we understand that our future is utterly open.

When we abide inside God's love and faithfulness and righteousness, we can accept others because we have, ourselves, been accepted. We can forgive others because we have, ourselves, been forgiven. We can help others because we have, ourselves, been helped.

We can be patient and understanding, helpful and hopeful, compassionate and caring because we know that these are gifts of God, the fruit of God's spirit in each of us.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (5: 22-23) And these, he says, are gifts. They are signs that God's Holy Spirit are at work in us. They are not things we do to earn God's love. They are not prices we pay so that God will love us. Neither are they fines we pay for the sins we have committed.

All that has already been taken care of.

Our slate has been wiped clean. All that's required of us is to accept the fact that we are accepted by a loving, faithful, righteous God. When we can do that, we will know peace.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 85 is often referred to as the Advent Psalm.

It begins by remembering a time when God came and saved and restored us. It's middle examines the fact that we need to be saved and restored again. It ends with the promise that salvation and restoration is coming, indeed, is at hand.

That, brothers and sisters, is the experience and the celebration that is Advent.

We celebrate the fact of our restoration even while we pray to be re-restored.

And when we are re-restored, as the psalmist promises we will be, the surprise hidden deep inside the package is PEACE.

AMEN