

THE SECURITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Pentecost 15 Year B

Prov. 22:1-2,8-9,22-23; Ps. 125; Jas. 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17; Mk. 7:24-37 Glad 05/09/2021

We live in uncertain times. Even before the onset of COVID-19, life was tenuous. Now, it is much more so. Forget travel overseas, we're not even sure when we will be able to travel interstate with any degree of certainty that we could get back when we want. While here in QLD, the virus is pretty much in check, elsewhere around the world, it's running rampant. You're all familiar with the situation in Kenya with regular updates from Pastor Chris. There are many other places, however, where it is just as bad, if not worse—India, for example—although it's probably not fair to compare the two, or Japan with 10,000 new cases a day.

But not only are the times uncertain with regard to COVID-19, evil also seems to be increasing around the world. Lately I've been watching a number of YouTube videos from people who have escaped from North Korea, speaking about what life is like there. Now, you all know it's bad, but let me tell you, you have no idea just how bad it is. If you want to see evil personified, you need look no further than North Korea. But, of course, evil is rampant everywhere. We are even subject to it here in our own safe little communities.

For others, it might be health issues, or relationship issues, or mental health issues. The list goes on. So, I guess everyone is living in uncertain times in some ways. Do you ever worry about the future? A lot of people do. They're afraid of what might happen to them or to their savings or to their families. They're afraid of what might happen in the world, in their country or in their community. Whenever you feel unsettled or insecure, Psalm 125 is a great place to go.

Psalm 125 is grouped with the songs of ascent—songs that were intended to be sung as the people came to worship—sung as the people went up towards their land, their city, and the sanctuary of the Lord. We might expect these songs, then, to be overflowing with thanksgiving and praise, and to a certain extent, we do find this to be true. But these are also the songs of realists. The people of God have not forgotten their history, which contributes greatly to who they are. It was bad. Maybe it's still bad. But faith requires them to believe it won't last forever.

Like Psalm 123, Psalm 125 is usually classified as a communal lament or complaint or prayer for help. There is an ebb and flow here between covenant and trust. It begins in verses 1 and 2 with an expression of trust. Then moves on in verse 3 with a clause that implies complaint and petition. The petition becomes explicit in verse 4 and then in verse 5 returns to trust in the form of a warning. The psalm then concludes with a declaration of peace.

Scholars frequently suggest, especially on the basis of verse 3, that Psalm 125 reflects the people's domination by the nations in the era following the exile. It reflects both the faith and the struggle of the people of God in every generation.

Psalm 125, a psalm of trust, compares the Lord's care for his people to the hills that surround Mt. Zion or Jerusalem (v. 2) or even to Zion itself (v. 1). Like the encircling mountains, God is unshakeable, God's promises unchangeable, but there is a certain amount of trust that is necessary on the part of God's people, because if these songs of ascent are anything, they are the words of a people who has experienced what it is to be oppressed, what it is to feel pain.

In the days of David, Jerusalem was looked upon as an impregnable fortress. It's surrounded by a natural rampart of hills; and appears to lie in the centre of an amphitheatre raised purposely for its defence. By the ancient Jew it was considered to be an impregnable citadel. David looked upon the city of Jerusalem, and he thought within himself, "No army can ever be able to surprise this city, and however numerous may be the invading hosts, my people will always be able to hold their own in the midst of a city so firmly fortified both by nature and by art."

As I mentioned, however, in my sermon on Psalm 130, a few weeks ago, the hill upon which Jerusalem is built, could hardly be called a mountain. It is not physically a significant hill by any means. Even the hills that surround it, including the Mount of Olives, while a bit higher than Jerusalem itself, are likewise not of great height. The language here depends not so much on geographical realities as on mythic perceptions. These hills which constitute and surround the place where God dwells amongst his people are symbols of the embracing protection of the Lord or of the trust of one who is faithful.

In his day, David said, "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people." What he meant is this, "As Jerusalem is fortified by the mountains, so are God's people castled in the covenant, fortified in the Omnipotence of God, and therefore they are impregnable secure."

Of great interest, also, is the comparison made between the people and the Lord. Those who trust are like a mountain. The Lord is like the mountains. To an Israelite, mountains were the symbol of all that was immovable and unchangeable. Created in the image of God, the people of God mirror who God is—unshakeable and present. Yet, there is a mild yet detectable underlying aura of warning. Could even the righteous be moved to evil acts in the face of injustice? The Psalmist indicates that this is a possibility, and God is called upon to provide what might be later translated in the New Testament Scriptures as, "the way out," so the righteous might endure.

Psalm 125 recounts the blessings of belief, bringing as it does assurance that God will do good to those who are good, and as it winds down, the final request is that of peace. It's notable that this peace does not require the Israelites to succumb to the injustice and oppression that is so prevalent in their history. The righteous may certainly act, but they call on the God to help them join in the work of doing good—of being those good people.

The peace that comes from submitting to God's rule, is no ordinary peace. In Philippians chapter 4, we are told that the peace of God "surpasses all understanding" (7), and in John chapter 14, we are told that "it is greater than the world can ever give." (27) Like the peace Jesus left with his disciples, so the peace the psalmist declares is experienced in the midst of opposition from the world, where wickedness rules. Therefore, as the NT also makes clear, the faith of the people of God is inseparable from hope (Rom 8:24-25, Heb. 11:1). In short, the people of God always live with the end in sight, proclaiming God's rule in the face of wickedness, attempting to embody the peace that God offers in the midst of a hostile world.

The opposition to God's rule, however, is as evident now, just as it was in the time following the exile. Therefore, this psalm continues to speak to and for the people of God. In his essay "are we afraid of peace?" Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, addresses the ongoing opposition to the peace that God wills for the world. He writes:

Though temporary in nature, war seems to last forever. In the service of death, it mocks the living. It allows men to do things that in normal times they have no right to do: to indulge in cruelty. A collective as well as individual gratification of unconscious impulses, may be too much a part of human behaviour to be eliminated—ever.

In a similar direction, the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, reminds us that moral people are far more inclined to do immoral things—like indulging in cruelty—in the name of their society or nation.

Given these severe and realistic assessments of human nature, we can begin to appreciate the profound importance of Psalm 125. Because the dynamic of evil seems to have a subtle way of luring the righteous, it's more important that human hostility and cruelty be identified, named for what they are, and opposed. It's crucial that the people of God, who know a more excellent way, be as faithfully determined as the psalmist that evil not prevail, that they pray for God's goodness, and that they display the psalmist's confident courage in declaring a peace that opposes the declaration of war and every other impulse toward cruelty.

The collective heart cry of this Psalmist and of the ancient people of God is not all that different than our own. We ask God to direct us in the paths that lead to redemption, in order to frustrate the wicked and put an end to their destructive influence. The Psalms can be difficult to navigate, because a fine line sometimes exists between wishing destruction upon enemies and simply acting to bring about liberation, but there is, indeed, a line. God is faithful to work with us, standing firm, as we seek the way that leads to salvation, always beginning with Jesus and our responsibility to be like him.

The Orthodox theologian, Patrick Henry Reardon, writes:

To abide in Zion, therefore, to confide in those blessed mountains round about her, is a task as well as a grace. And how does the Lord Himself describe this task? “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (Jn. 15:9,10)...To abide in the love of God, manifested in the observance of His commandments, is to dwell in Jerusalem. Such a dweller will never be shaken...

If your faith is in Christ, then you are safe and secure. You are like Mount Zion which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds you on every side.

If your faith is in Christ, then your inheritance is also secure. The power of the wicked will be broken on the outside, and the power of sin will be broken on the inside. Your inheritance is kept safe from the wicked, and you are kept safe to receive it.

And if your faith is in Christ, then your future is secure. You have been made good in Christ, and God will do good to those who are good.

So don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. If your faith is in Christ, then you are safe. You are secure.

Put your trust in Christ. When you put your faith in him—he who died on the cross to pay the full payment for your sins—he gives you a new heart so that you can follow him and obey his commands. He pledges his full protection for you. He promises you a secure inheritance and offers you a secure future of perfect peace in his presence.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.