

Let the Light of Your Face Shine Upon Us

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Psalm 4; Luke 24:36-48
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
April 18, 2021 – Easter III

Prayer

We come before you, O God, from the varied circumstances of our lives. Wherever we have come from, grant that we may come to know your presence in our lives, in our *daily* lives, in every moment, in everything around us, in every situation. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

“Answer me when I call, O God of my right!” That’s the way that Psalm 4 begins. It’s not exactly “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!”, is it? What an odd prayer for the 3rd week of the season of Easter! During the season of Easter, we might have expected the lectionary committee to choose a buoyant psalm that expresses the calm serenity of one who knows that all will be well. Instead, we are given a psalm of lamentation and complaint, in which the psalmist doesn’t waste *any* time being nice and polite with God, trying to cozy up to God, trying to get on God’s good side in order to build a positive vibe with the Divine.

You get the sense that the psalmist is just in too much trouble for that. Something is happening to the psalmist that is hard enough, stressful enough, humiliating enough, that the psalmist begins this prayer by launching a petition straight into the heart of God, insisting that God answer when called upon. “Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord!” the psalmist cries out in verse 6, joining in with others who may be suffering as well.

What Psalm 4 teaches us is that Easter faith of resurrection is not reserved for well-dressed people who appear to have their lives nicely stitched together. Easter faith, the faith of Jesus Christ, is a faith for times of trouble. It is a faith of people in trouble, for people in trouble, by people in trouble. Easter faith has experienced trouble from the inside and knows what trouble and alienation and suffering can do to you. Easter faith is very candid about the realities of trouble, and Easter faith stands and announces that God is present in every situation of difficulty, present to redeem and transform.

In recent decades, the Christian faith has been experiencing something of a crisis of credibility in our culture. This credibility crisis is leading, among other things, to declining numbers in churches, declining influence, and declining resources. Those diminishment are generating their own effects, of anxiety among church leaders, disillusionment among the young, cycles of blame and anger and grief. Some Christian voices are trying to reclaim our lost influence by shouting more loudly and insisting on the certitudes of our faith, as if making more noise will restore our credibility.

I want to suggest that one of the reasons for the credibility crisis of the church is that the church is too often seen as disconnected from the troubles of the world. The church can seem preoccupied with our own institutional survival, rather than with the real problems that people are facing in the world. We can seem more interested in judging other people for their shortcomings, rather than coming alongside them and walking with them towards the common good.

But our texts today, from Psalm 4 and Luke 24, show us that biblical faith is not reserved for people who have everything figured out; biblical faith is for people who are in trouble, for people who need help, which turns out to be all of us.

While Psalm 4 seems to come from a situation of public humiliation and shaming, Luke 24 is situated in a group of people who are confused and trying to figure out what in the world is going on. In verse 36, the disciples are discussing the report that a few of their number had just broken bread with the risen Jesus, the One whose crucifixion they had all just been grieving. Talk about a head-spinning, mind-blowing conversation.

Into that confusion comes Jesus himself. And as Pastor Jen showed us last week from John 20, Jesus does not come into their midst and ream them out saying, "What is wrong with you people? Why are you such morons? How many times do I have to tell you to trust me?" He comes to them, in the midst of their pain and confusion, and says, "Peace be with you." "Shalom," he says to them, offering them his holistic, full-bodied, reign of God rest and peace.

But because they (like us) can be a little slow on the uptake, they think they must be seeing a ghost. Because that's what you might think if your beloved friend, who was executed on Friday afternoon, walks into your living room on Sunday evening. Jesus shows them his hands and his feet, still bearing the wounds of Friday, and then to seal the deal, he asks them if they've got anything to eat around here. In Bible study this past week, we argued a bit about whether Jesus said this because he was actually hungry after his three-day mission in the realm of the dead, or if he was doing this as a teachable moment, in order to show them that the resurrection body is still a *body* of some kind. In any case, Jesus forms his disciples the way good teachers do – he begins with personal relationship. He does not immediately launch into a 12-point lecture about God's sovereignty or lead them in a 20-minute period of contemplative meditation. They weren't ready for that. He has a meal with them.

Having begun to open their hearts, he then sets about opening their minds to understand that the faith they had been practicing – the faith of the law and the prophets and the psalms, the faith that brought them to worship each week, the faith that led them in their small group life, the faith that they lived out in acts of mercy and compassion – their faith was not a way to avoid trouble, their faith was *for* times of trouble, their faith included suffering, and it also included the new life of rising from the dead.

Having opened their hearts, and having opened their minds, Jesus then sends them out in mission, sending them forth to practice repentance and forgiveness, sending them to

teach repentance and forgiveness to all nations. Their faith, which was for times of trouble, was not to be kept to themselves. The entire world is weighed down with trouble, and so the entire world needs to be held with the heart of faith.

Friends, our world is heavy with trouble. We are swimming in a world of violence and tragedy and resentment and bitterness. The Minneapolis trial of the police officer in the killing of George Floyd is moving towards its close. Other shootings continue to unfold. In Indianapolis this past week, a gunman killed 8 people at a FedEx facility and then killed himself. The pain and mistrust and hostility that our society is experiencing is palpable right now. We know this, because we feel these things, too.

In the face of the world's great hurt, if the church's response is to worry exclusively about institutional survival, or to become judgmental and scornful towards people who don't do things the way we think they should, then the church probably deserves to lose credibility.

But if the church comes alongside the hurting people of the world, and cries out with them, cries out for them, "Answer us when we call, O God of our right!"; if the church comes alongside the hurting people of this neighborhood, the hurting people of Fairfax County, and listens to them, talks with them, eats with them, gets to know their wounded places and shares with them our wounded places, if we do these kinds of things, then the church may rediscover our credibility.

What aspect of the trouble of the world speaks to your heart? Part of the gift of being part of a connectional church, part of a presbytery, part of a global church, is that any single congregation does not need to do everything. Any single congregation, any single disciple, does not need to respond to every bit of pain and suffering that there is. God has the whole world in his hands, so we don't have to. But a key part of our vocation is to identify some small number of the troubles of the world, troubles that resonate with our own life experiences perhaps, troubles that move us in some deep and compelling way. And having identified them, we come alongside those who are suffering from them. Not to become their Savior, for they already have God as their Savior. But we come alongside them, to get to know them, to break bread with them, to get to know their stories, and to watch and wait with them for God's redeeming and transforming presence in their lives.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Amen.

Prayer

Lead your church, O Christ. Lead us out from our preoccupation with our own safety and security, out into the free zone of solidarity with your beloved and hurting people. Lead us into the courageous life of discipleship, lead us into your path, where we will find meaning, freedom, and abiding hope. In your name we pray, Amen.