

“Our Times are in His Hands”

August 8th, 2010

First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

Dr. Andy Dearman

Not only am I delighted to have an invitation to share with you on this day of worship, I am particularly delighted to know that this congregation has been using the Psalms for sermon texts in the last few weeks. As you know, the Psalms are hymns and prayers, and I have heard it said that one could learn a lot about a congregation or a group of people from the hymns that they sing and the way that they pray in various circumstances of life. One of the reasons that I love Psalm 31 is the way that it prays realistically about life in God's good, but fallen world. It gives voice to things that cause us worry and distress, the way real prayers do, just as it speaks of hard-headed hope for the long haul and the ways in which God grants us joy, the way real prayers should. Who does not resonate with a prayer like: "I have become like a broken vessel...I hear the whispering of many who say 'terror is all around'...There are schemes against me." These are from our Psalm this morning and they strike a resonant cord. The prophet Jeremiah would use the same language of broken vessel and "terror all around" to describe his own sad circumstances. The more he sought to convey the word the Lord had given him, the more he faced opposition. The opposition wouldn't crush him, but it would afflict him all of his adult life. And yet, thank God, like Jeremiah we would not be fair to our human experience if we left out our psalm's poignant expression of trust in the Lord and confession that we will not be put to shame. "I will rejoice in your steadfast love because you have seen my afflictions... and you have set my feet in a broad place."

We can pound away on doctrine or on intellectual reasons to believe in God, but I suggest great prayers like Psa 31 are where the rubber meets the road for most people. We don't believe finally in something, but in Someone. The rubber meets the road for most of us when we sense the Lord's presence in trying times, learning from those experiences, and growing in our ability to trust the Lord with all our circumstances. That is the wonderful realism of Psa 31.

One of the voices from the Psalm that I love comes in vs. 5: "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me." I hope it sounds familiar to you. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus' last words from the cross were taken from this part of Psa 31: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And then he took his last earthly breath. Of all the things one might say before death! As the afternoon sun was darkened and the veil in the temple was torn, Jesus cried out: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And then he died.

It is, of course, one thing to say in the abstract that our life is in God's hands. Psa 31 says just that: "Our times are in God's hands." It is quite another to make such a confession when threat or doubt is upon us and we must thereby make a statement with our life or even with our approach to death. Long before Jesus was born the saints of old faced this issue head on. Whether it was David, Jeremiah, Esther, or those now known only to God, the confession was there to make because God was there to sustain. Our psalmist was part of the league of believers who practiced hard-headed hope, who knew that their lives were precious in God's sight, and that even death could not thwart God's good intentions. This week I was much sombered by the report of the murder of 10 medical missionaries in Afghanistan. They were from different countries and their organization had been doing medical relief work in Afghanistan for over 30 years. They were taken from their vehicles, robbed and then shot. The

Taliban claimed responsibility, saying that they were spies and preaching Christianity. I hope that they were able to make the great confession as they faced their earthly death: “Into your hand I commit my Spirit.” Certainly we can give thanks for the witness of their life and rest assure that the Lord is stronger than death.

Friends, it is the foundation of the Church that Christ died for us...That in his death he bears the failures of the world. He is God’s offering to make things right. We call that the Gospel. Our lives are not an offering for sin as was his, but our lives are intended to be an expression of trust and devotion, as was his. So in his dying Jesus quotes this prayer from the Psa 31. He prays and dies the way persons of faith pray and die. In that sense he casts his life into God’s hand, as he had done all through his ministry, and shows to all what it is like to trust God with our death as well.

Another voice that I love comes in the first verse. “In you O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.” We can, I hope, feel the intensity of such a prayer. I, for one, have a sense of my own neediness and the mysterious ways in which the Lord provides both refuge and strength. We don’t have to be just like David to experience shame or failure, or the king of Israel to sense God’s claim upon our lives. It can be the prayer of anyone. Perhaps you will be surprised to know that this prayer was a very important text for Martin Luther. Here is why: As a college student Luther had gone against his father’s wishes and given up the study of law to enter an order of the Catholic Church and to serve the church as a priest. He had something of an emotional crisis as a teenager early on in his college experience. He had been traveling by horseback between terms and was caught in a violent storm, where the thunder shock the very ground and the lighting struck around him. Luther feared for his life. Was God trying to tell him

something? How many college students have asked that question? He took the experience as instructive, as if God had shown him the power of failure and the reality of judgment, and he sought in response to please God through his various commitments. Not only was his father unhappy that he gave up the study of law, but Luther himself was somber and anxious after his near-death experience. He had little of the fun-loving personality that his friends had come to know and a sense of dread about him in recognition that life was so fragile. Well, Luther took to his vows with utter seriousness, confessing his failures and engaging in good works, all the while going through the academic ranks. One degree led to another, finally achieving a doctorate in theology, yet Luther remained a troubled soul. In the religious community where he lived, he drove his superiors crazy, worrying about God's judgment and the influence of Satan, and his doubts about his acceptance with God.

His superior came to see him one day and said that Luther needed yet another assignment to take his mind of his worries. He appointed Luther as a teacher of the Old Testament in the university. So Luther dutifully took up this new task. He was preparing some lectures on the Psalms and he came to Psalm 31. He noticed, of course, that the psalm goes back and forth between descriptions of difficult circumstances and expressions of confidence in God. But he kept coming back to the first verse: "In you O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me." What in particular, you may ask, seized his attention? It was the last phrase: "in your righteousness, Lord, deliver me."

The force of the statement hit Luther like the earlier thunderclap had struck the German forest. The Psalmist prays that God would preserve him because of God's righteousness. Luther, you will remember, was always concerned that his own righteousness would not measure up and

that his own commitments would not suffice to secure God's love toward him. And Luther's mind and his heart began racing. God's righteousness? What does that mean for me? For others? For the world? And so, like a good professor he got out his concordance and study aids and began to look through the Scriptures. And as he did so he began to realize that the term "righteousness" when applied to God is a relational term and a dynamic term. To say that God is righteous is not to identify God with human norms, but to say God is rightly related and rightly committed to the world of his own making. In the Bible righteousness is often associated with what we call an act of vindication. One of my own teachers some years ago said think of God's righteousness as a way to affirm God's integrity in action. In modern terms, when we say that so and so is "self-righteous," that is typically a negative comment. After all, it is so easy to be disappointed by or suspicious of human claims. But as Luther discovered, that God is righteous and wills to set things right is the best possible news. And so the psalm begins with the plea that God would act according to his own rectitude, his integrity, and redeem someone overwhelmed by circumstances larger and more insidious than can be handled. Yes, good friends, the seeds of the reformation movement in Europe sprang, at least in part, from the power of Psa 31:1.

As Luther went through Scripture he came across the great affirmation of St. Paul. I hope that you recognize the connection. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," he wrote to the Romans, "for it is the power of God resulting in salvation...for in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." That was Luther's theological thunderclap: That God, to put it in human terms, is motivated by his integrity to reclaim and restore a good creation gone wrong; to redeem people who have gone astray and deserve judgment or been overwhelmed by the world's failures. That

word which became so important to Luther, grace, God's grace, is rooted in who God is. And yes, he became a human catalyst to change history.

Hear the prayer of the Psalmist: "In your righteousness, redeem me." There is confidence in such a statement; confidence in God. It is the same with the prayerful confession, "Into your hands I commit my Spirit." In living and in dying, we belong to the Lord.