

Trusting God In Spite Of... – Bob Munshaw

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

There is an old story of a father who took his young son out and stood him on the railing of the back porch. He then went down, stood on the lawn, and encouraged the little fellow to jump into his arms. "I'll catch you," the father said confidently. After a lot of coaxing, the little boy finally made the leap. When he did, the father stepped back and let the child fall to the ground. He then picked his son up, dusted him off, and dried his tears.

"Let that be a lesson," he said sternly. "Don't ever trust anyone."

This morning's lectionary readings invite us to think about questions of trust. In the 91st Psalm, we heard a beautiful song of trust with images of God as a refuge and a fortress. The Psalmist pictured angels guarding us in all our ways. His hope in God came through clearly as he describes God as protector and as our salvation. Now, I'm not certain who wrote this Psalm, but I'll be honest that more questions come to my mind than feelings of assurance. Don't get me wrong ... I want to trust God on all occasions, but I look at the world ... even more, I look at the lives of some of my Christian friends, people who have been pretty faithful in following God, and I can't help but think that maybe they feel like the little boy in the story. There have been some times when ... even many times when they have trusted God, and when the going has gotten tough, they feel like God has said "Trust Me", only to let them fall. In verse 10, the Psalmist wrote, "no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent."

When jobs suddenly disappear ... when loved ones suddenly are snatched away in a tragic accident, when marriages dissolve, then how do we hear these words ... how do we receive these words? Does our trust grow, or does it too, dissolve in the midst of our brokenness and pain? Now, we're obviously not going to stop here, but I think that for those of you who are a little younger, it is important to know that just because we grow up faithfully following God and living as Christians, doesn't mean that there won't be some real challenges in our lives. So what do we do with this extremely positive Psalm that seems to be saying that God will never let anything bad happen to us? It's nice to hear, but it doesn't seem to fit with real life.

I want to suggest to you that when we come across passages that raise more questions than they answer, one of the best things that we can do is to consider the greater context of our Scriptures. What else does the Bible say about both blessings and pain? Well, the letter of James says that we should consider it joy when we encounter trials of many kinds because the testing of our faith develops perseverance, and basically as we trust God through the difficult times in our lives, we grow up strengthened and rooted in our faith. Well, I believe that this is true, and that we should pack that into our heads somewhere, but when you or a friend are in the midst of real life misery, it might not be the best or first place to turn for comfort. Oh ... you

just lost your job – consider your lack of money, and consider the beating your pride is taking, and consider that you can't pay your bills joy. It will build character for you. So again, while I do believe that God does work in us during those times, perhaps we might want to hold off on using that text right off the bat.

Then there are the words of Jesus, which are varied. On the one hand, Jesus calls for trust. In the Sermon on the Mount, he points to the birds and to the flowers and tells us that if God cares for these of His creation, surely he cares for us. In Mt. 6:26-, he says, **26**Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

But Jesus also told those who wanted to follow Him that they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow Him. When another guy said that he wanted to be a follower of Jesus, Jesus told Him –“Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” The point that I'm making here has to do with the fact that in this physical life ... this life that we are living, God loves us intensely, but doesn't necessarily promise that He won't allow some tough things in our lives.

The other lectionary readings this morning also help to balance out our understanding of Ps.91. We find in them aspects of trusting God in the midst of bounty and also in the midst of pain. Paul, in Romans, sounds a little like the Psalmist as he writes to the church in Rome. He tells those Christians that the word is near you ... confess with your mouths and believe with your heart and be saved ... and then he says, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him.” This sounds like more of the same thing as we heard in Psalm 91. Just believe, and all will be well ... you will never have problems. But Paul we need to be careful that we don't take this lection out of the context of the whole of Paul's life and teaching, either. On several other occasions, Paul wrote about how difficult it has been for him as a follower of Jesus. We may have had it rough, but so has Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he writes

“ I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. **24**Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. **25**Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, **26**I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. **27**I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. **28**Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. **29**Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"

With this as his testimony, he was clearly not trying to tell the Christians at Rome that if they follow God, all things would be nicey-nice. ... But he was also able to tell the Christians at the church in Philippi –

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. **12**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **13**I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

And so, we have Paul who is able to speak from experience of his life as a Christian that there is reason for us to put our trust in God in spite of the fact that we may get beaten up and broken by life ... that it is not just the “right” thing to do, but that in spite of what God allows us to go through, there is still joy, peace ... perhaps a peace that is beyond both our own understanding and the understanding of the world, that comes through life in Christ.

I want to continue on in the lectionary readings this morning, because I think they are grouped together for a reason ... to get us to really consider where we are placing our trust in this life. The Gospel reading invites us to think about the experience of Jesus. Here is God Himself, the second person of the Trinity – Jesus as fully God and fully man –he is on the cusp of beginning his earthly ministry, and he is led by the Spirit into the desert where he fasted for 40 days, and was tempted. I find it very helpful to consider the way that the author of Hebrews talks about what Jesus experienced. About Jesus experience, he writes, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

The crux of the issue is not that everything gets perfect for us when we become Christians, but that not only are we forgiven, we also have God with us, and God working in us and walking with us through our darkest times.

And I want to be clear here that the Scriptures don’t present Jesus as powerless to work. In fact we see that Jesus does quite a few miracles that are recorded in the New Testament. I likewise believe that God does sometimes work in miraculous ways today. But, you also see that Jesus doesn’t make everyone’s problems go away. He doesn’t heal everyone. He doesn’t take care of everybody’s money concerns ... but he does heal some, and more importantly he makes the promise “I will be with you always.”

So, in closing, I want to take you to the final reading, which is Deut 26.

In Deuteronomy, we find the Israelite people. They are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land ... the land of milk and honey ... the land that God has promised. Unlike Jesus 40 days in the desert, the Israelites have been in the wilderness for 40 years. We read that because of their sin, a whole generation, the generation that left Egypt has been wiped out. I turned 40 last fall. The Israelites had spent the whole of my lifetime in the desert. It is all they have ever known. They have been manna’d up to here. The sand and grit of the desert must have felt like

it was permanently in every crevice of their bodies. But here they are ... finally about ready to make it.

And among the first instructions given by God through Moses was this instruction to bring the very first fruits of this new land to God – this is both a reminder, and a statement of faith and trust – did God have any real need for a bunch of baskets of fruit – of course not. This instruction, I believe was for the people. It was to regularly remind them that all of the gifts that they have ... all of the things that they would be enjoying were a gift from God.

God is the one who ultimately provides for all our needs, and God is also the one who walks with us, strengthens us, and continues to give peace, hope, and joy even in our worst times.

And so in a few minutes we will come to the time in our service where we celebrate the Lord's Supper. In many traditions, Communion is called the Eucharist, which is a Greek word that basically means to thank or give thanks. So, as you come to the table you are invited to come with a deepening faith in God, who loves, forgives, heals, and walks beside us and with a true thanksgiving for His love and grace.