

“Living in Light”

2 Wednesday in Advent

Psalm 126

December 7, 2011

Each morning I wake up before the sun comes up. It all began years ago when I had my first dog and had to get up to walk her before the routine of the day began. Due to the years of waking up early I now am unable to sleep in. It never ceases to amaze me that I hear the birds singing even when it is dark outside, before the sun has come up.

Perhaps they sing because they know the sun will rise? And how would they know that the sun would rise? Probably the same way we do, because it has risen everyday. I like thinking that maybe they sing out of anticipation of the sun rising. They sing because they have hope.

As the darkness is part of their lives, so too, it is part of our lives. And it's not just the physical darkness that we have to deal with. We also deal with the darkness of conflict, darkness of anxiety, and darkness of turmoil, chaos, and sorrow. It would be easy to sing in the darkness as an act of pity – to mourn for the pain it is causing us. But the birds aren't doing that, and neither should we. I think it is a good thing to sing to welcome the sun even if we can't quite see it yet. We sing because we know the sun is about to rise and the darkness has to give way to the light.

Have you ever noticed that for some, those who seem to have a deep, abiding faith also have gone through the deepest suffering? Those whom I have talked with, those whose faith is well founded, well developed, a sure foundation for their lives are also people who have gone through a great suffering or conflict. It seems that struggle and faith go hand in hand.

The psalm I have chosen for tonight speaks of suffering as an act of redemption. It sings of how through suffering people are saved. It is almost ironic. Could it be true that suffering is needful and that without it there would be no lasting joy, no expectant hope?

With all of Israel's stubbornness, with all of Israel's selfish ways, with all of Israel's sins, Israel showed times of deep faith and commitment to God. This happened especially in times of trouble, struggle, and despair. Israel in her darkest hour would expect salvation to come in Israel's life. Israel expected nothing less than a miracle. Not only did Israel expect it, Israel looked for it.

In this psalm we read of a river transforming the desert. As water turns a barren land into fertile ground so too does God's healing presence turn suffering into joy. The key to this understanding and hope lies in the phrase, “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

The language of imagery reflects customs of various nations. These nations considered the time of sowing seed as a time of mourning. At the root of this was the interpretation of the natural process as dying and rising again of living things (i.e. the grain must die in order to bear fruit). This historical context gives meaning to this phrase “Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.” The writer uses this understanding to point to a deeper truth, a truth that addresses the struggle of Israel amid

their calamities, suffering and loss. In the midst of death the writer sees and tells of God creating new life.

What is helpful to us is that faith is the key. Believing and trusting God becomes the stuff to lead them out of darkness into light. God alone turns weeping into laughter, sorrow into joy, and death into life. Suffering and death are redemptive. They are a necessary stage on the way to joy in God's glory. They are a divine seed that sprouts in secret and ripens for God's blessed harvest. Suffering is redemptive. Perhaps that is why those who deep faith are also those who have suffered?

Does all this mean that God brings suffering into our lives that we may find salvation? Of course not! What it does mean is that as suffering comes into our lives, instead of shattering us and destroying us God uses it to be a means of God's grace and love. Through suffering we receive mercy, strength, as well as forgiveness if/when necessary. God uses that which could destroy lives and turns them into tools that bring life. A good example of this is Joseph when he confronts his brothers who sold him into slavery. At the end of the story he says to them, "You meant it for evil. God meant it for good."

Suffering, struggle, and even death remind us of our humanity, of our limitations. When we feel helpless it can be quite a shock. After all, we live in society that prides itself on a "can do" attitude. So how can this kind of feeling, a feeling of helplessness, be helpful?

When we face the fact we cannot control life, that we cannot will our way out of a problem, or when we cannot fix the situation, we are confronted with our limitations. In that confrontation we are led back to God. It is precisely those kinds of moments that we are finally ready to let go of control begin to look to God for help. You might say that our suffering, our struggle brought us to that point. In so doing we open ourselves to God and in that moment God can revive us, make us strong, and lead us out of conflict. The suffering, the death became a means to be renewed.

We who are in darkness, who know first hand the sorrows of life, God uses the sorrows to bring us back to God. When we are led back God can work in us and we are now ready to accept God's lead, becoming the person and people we were meant to be. Or t say it another way, because of God's faithfulness in the past, because God never abandons not forgets us, even when in darkness we can sing. We sing because we know the sun will rise. The darkness will give way to light. We have hope!

AMEN