



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, Oct. 3, 2010

“I am the light where God shines through, for God and I are one, not two.” That was a phrase that our mom taught us when I was young. I like it – “I am the light where God shines through, for God and I are one, not two.”

Being raised with that image of myself and of God is one reason that for years I refused to say this phrase from Morning and Evening Prayer. It is a line from the General Thanksgiving prayer at the end of the service. It reads, “Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants.....” That was the phrase I left out – I refused to pray, we your unworthy servants for I figured being made in the image and likeness of God guaranteed that I was worthy. I just figured that some ecclesiastical authority hadn’t been raised by mom and had gotten their theology wrong. I was worthy --- I am worthy ---and that was that.

So, I don’t much like this gospel reading today –with the line, “We are worthless slaves, we have done only what we ought to have done.” I think Jesus is aiming that statement at you and me. Hmmm, I wonder why? And He asks, “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?” and I answer – yes you should say thank you and you should not think of them as slaves or unworthy. Why are you telling us this?

You see, I worked as a servant once. You might say slave, but that word is a tough one for me, so I describe what I did as being a servant. I was hired by a 97 year old woman to be her personal assistant. Mrs G. had been raised in the bourgeois class in Germany prior to WWII. Her family employed household servants. So did she, as a young wife and mother. She was used to paying people to do her bidding. Then Hitler began his rise to power and her influential heart surgeon husband found out that he had Jewish roots and he was required to register himself as a Jew. Soon, the persecution and eventual arrest came and they were able to flee to the United States with only their daughter. Now, at 97 she had hired me to care for her – 6 days of the week - coming in early in the morning and leaving mid-afternoon after preparing all of her meals. When I began the job I truly thought that my Christian love, self-discipline, and power of the Holy Spirit would bless the experience and Mrs. G. 2 ½ years later – I gave up. Like those bewailing in Babylon – I wept, I mourned, I began singing, “You don’t own me” and I quit. I had the luxury of quitting and I did.

So, I feel some of the pain of the persons writing in Lamentations and Psalm 137. To lose one’s freedom, to lose one’s identity, to be the captive of another human being is devastating. These people have been sent into exile – they live now away from their homeland, they serve as slaves, they moan, cry out, long for redemption. Their life is suffering, hard servitude, imprisonment. Where is God? They weep, the curse their captors and wish for violence and punishment for the children of their foes. Where, when will there be relief?

And then contrast that with Paul writing about his imprisonment. Our best scholarship is that Paul spent several years imprisoned in Rome. And from there he wrote letters – like this letter to Timothy. And he’s telling Timothy to never be ashamed of serving God and witnessing to the life and Lordship of Jesus Christ – no matter what. That in all suffering God is present, grace is present, trust can be present. And no matter what, we are to guard the good treasure of our faith and love that are in Jesus Christ and share it with others. Wonderful words

– wonderful advice, eh? And he’s writing while in prison – also away from his homeland – apart from loved ones – and here he is – filled with love and power and self-discipline.

But then what about those captives in Babylon and what about me? What about our suffering? Doesn’t our freedom matter? Shouldn’t we fight back against oppressors and try to obtain our release? Or is it all a matter of increasing our faith and forgiveness? The verses in Luke right prior to the start of our reading today are the lines about continuing to forgive, even unto forty times forty.

And here is Jesus saying to his apostles, and to you and I- if you even have faith in the very smallest amount – faith the size of a mustard seed – then possibilities will open up for you that could be described as impossible (a tree being uprooted) and absurd (planting a tree in the sea). The smallest amount of faith connects you with the power of a God where nothing is impossible and there is so much more to life than our present situations. So, if we accept and forgive, then what?

Do our wailing and whining cease? Do we look at the world with new eyes? Probably so. I know that despite reading through the Lamentations and other books of the prophets in the Old Testament that tell of the pains and horrors of their captivity by the Babylonians and other enemies, the prophet Jeremiah gives the exiles these words from God in Chapter 29, *“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord for its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

Wow, Live in the situation that you find yourself in. Be obedient to God, pray for others, including your captors, seek good for all. I think that might be tough advice for us to get our minds around. Just as the words in Luke are tough ones about serving without honor, thanks, or glory. We are rugged individualists in this country and we stand up for our rights, by God. We don’t need to bow down to anyone. Perhaps we are missing something with that attitude.

I think I will need to read the new book on the market by Jonathan Franzen called Freedom. From what I understand, Franzen proposes that our individualism and ideal of freedom have exiled us from being formed as spiritual beings obedient to God, of accepting of the work we have to do in community, and for that we are suffering. Our ideal of freedom - keeps us turning from so many ways of serving others.

So, perhaps I quit my job too soon. There may have been more for me to learn, serving and living with Mrs. G. And perhaps the writers of Psalm 137 and Lamentations were just getting their pain off their chests and were able to move on with life.

Because, I do know that I have learned that my laments, my complaints about others usually lead me to self-scrutiny. And as I pray and yell and cry out, my awareness increases that Yahweh, the God of all of us, is all I truly have. God is our best hope. It is God who will judge, God who will comfort. It is God who will have to deal with the wickedness both outside of ourselves (our perceived enemies) and within ourselves. It is God who will endure.

And yes, I know now that I am both worthy and unworthy. So, today I can fully pray,
Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessing of this life; but above all for our immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our

days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen