



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

March 26, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 27: 1-8; 14

Gospel Lesson

John 9: 1-7

Wesley's 21 Questions – Christian Character

The Pillsbury Dough Boy. Cute. Cuddly. And wanted for attempted murder. Well, not exactly ...

A woman in Kansas was sitting in her car on a very hot day when she heard a loud bang and then felt a sharp pain in the back of her head. She was holding her hands behind her head when someone walked by and asked, "Are you OK?" The woman stammered obviously in shock, "I've been shot in the head, and I'm holding my brains in."

Well, it wasn't her brains. It was dough. A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded in the back seat, apparently from the heat, making a loud explosion and shooting the dough into the back of the woman's head.

Sometimes our fears are like that lady. They are unfounded and irrational but there are other times when our fears are based on rational and well-founded reasons. Life can be risky and hard leaving us with reasons to be scared or have anxiety.

However, at the heart of any struggle we may go through is the question – whose strength are we relying on to see us through? In this season we have been looking at Wesley's 21 questions – last week – we looked at examining our spiritual life with the question: Is Jesus real to me? Is Jesus a vital living presence in our hearts and lives. Today we look at our Christian character – [Read questions – all deal with character in some way] – def – mental and moral qualities of a person – I read one quote that said character is who you are when no one is looking – it is the essence of who we are formed by our choices – our principles – our beliefs – our habits of how we act and think.

But for today, I invite us to consider one question that forms our character in how we choose to make it through life. And the question is - Am I defeated in any part of my life? Do I need God's help in my life? In other words when our backs

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are against the wall – when we don't seem to see a way forward – and our strength is failing – where do we turn? It takes moral and spiritual courage to admit when we are defeated – to admit we need God in our hearts and lives – to admit we need help. So, where do we look for help? Is it in the things and people of this world that are temporary or the things of heaven that last for eternity? Is it really our strength we need to rely on or do we need to rely on, trust in, and surrender to God's strength? Do we give into fear or turn to faith?

And there is no one who knew this better than David, the author that Psalm 27 is attributed to. David's life had not been an easy one. He was plucked out of obscurity as a young boy and anointed king. The only problem was there was already a king, Saul. And Saul was not very stable mentally. In fact, his sometimes violent behavior bordered on insanity. For a time, David worked for Saul keeping him calm through his music but eventually Saul's jealousies and paranoia got the better of him and he lashed out at David threatening and trying to kill him. So, Saul raised an army and David raised an army and he went on the run as Saul hunted him. David knew all about being defeated and afraid and weak. He knew what it was like to be stalked by anxiety and pursued by worry. But he also knew the path that leads out, the path that leads to a peace that passes all understanding. And this Psalm is all about that path we are called to follow.

For it is in those times that we have a choice to make - we can go it alone or go with God. And so, we hear David say to us in this Psalm, "the Lord is my light..." Very often troubling times are compared to darkness because we feel lost and in need of direction or light. If you've ever walked into a room in total darkness there will be hesitation, caution, and apprehension because you are fearful about making a wrong turn or walking into something. The same would not be true when the lights are on. It is the same way in life, there are troubling, dark times in which we feel so lost and alone not knowing which way to go or what to do, we are in the dark. But like David we have help – there is a greater light leading us.

Once there was a small boy riding in a car with his parents on their way to visit his grandparents who lived nine miles away. As they were driving a thick fog settled over the hilly countryside before we started home. The boy was terrified,

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and asked if they should be going even slower. His mother said to him gently, "Don't worry. Your father knows the way."

You see, his Father had walked that road when there was no gasoline during the war. He had ridden that blacktop thousand of times on his bicycle. And for years he had made those weekly trips back to visit his own parents. How often when we can't see the road of life, and have felt that familiar panic rising in our heart do we hear the echo of that Mother's voice?

And so, focus on God who knows the way – who is our light leading us onward.

David also notes that the Lord is his Salvation, which means that the Lord is his rescuer or deliverer. In other words David is not looking to other people or even to himself to fully rescue him or completely deliver him but rather he is looking at God.

In our Gospel lesson we meet a blind man. And this man was being used as an object lesson by the Pharisees to trip Jesus – so as he walks by one of them asks

"Rabbi, who sinned-this man or his parents-that he was born blind?" In other words - Who caused this to happen, this man or his parents? Who is to blame here? Why is there blindness in the world? Why is there poverty, illness? Who is to blame, nature or nurture-this man or his parents?"

And Jesus, as he so often does, answers with a third option, one that the questioners did not think of. Jesus said, "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents. This man is here, before us blind, so that the marvelous works of God can be shown."

For when Jesus sees someone in need, he does not use that person's plight to develop a political or moral agenda. Jesus sees opportunity, a chance to point out that there is power in weakness. There is power in focusing on God's strength that sustains- So that we know that while God is not the author of our pain, God can bend and use our hurts in a redemptive way – in a healing way. In a way where our hurts and pain, struggles and setbacks, difficulties and defeats become the building blocks of our service and ministry to the world. And so, this blind man was healed physically but also more importantly spiritually by Jesus – but sometimes this new life comes about not through a physical healing but a healing of our hearts, our

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souls and our minds. It is often a healed soul that allows us to have a healthy attitude, mindset, and perspective on life. A perspective that allows us to reach out in powerful ways to lift up others and point the way to hope to those who are struggling. For we realize that the strongest and most beautiful people around us are those who realize that in their weakness and vulnerability there is strength. The parents of an autistic child who give valuable guidance to others in the same situation. The AA sponsor who patiently helps a fellow alcoholic to remain sober. The survivor of abuse who provides a lifeline to those who are being abused. The wife of an Alzheimer's patient who offers support to families dealing with various types of dementia.

And so, focus on God, our deliverer, who gives us strength and healing and power even in our weakness.

The Lord is also the "stronghold of our life..." A stronghold is a refuge, a place of safety from danger. David is saying that we should have confidence and peace not because there are no serious storms in our life but because we have a secure place, a sure stronghold, for the Lord is our refuge. The refuge he talks about is not a place or any location, but is found in the fortress of a relationship with God, a relationship of hope and grace that holds us up. Because when we look to the greatness of our God instead of looking at the greatness of our problems anxiety will fade. And so we need to focus on and hear the voice of Jesus this day as he says to us, "I am with you. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid"

For Jesus didn't come to bring us half a life. He came to bring us salvation, wholeness, abundant life. But not for us to hoard, but share. Not for us to keep quiet, but proclaim lives. Not for us to ignore, but live out.

Writer Niel Lorenz tells how her friend, a young wife and mother of three, chose to spend the last year of her life while afflicted with a terminal illness. Linda made it clear from the beginning that her illness was inconvenient, annoying and unwelcome, but that it would not rule her life. She would not be defeated. She decided she would be thankful and live faithfully depending on God who had never let her down yet, no matter what was going on. Every morning her family began with a short worship that included naming and thanking God for their blessings.

And so, she and her whole family continued to take scuba lessons at a local pool to prepare for a big family vacation in the Cayman Islands. Once in the

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islands, she rested and watched her family go out for their daily excursions to the reef. But she wanted to go diving with them, be a participant, not just an observer. In response to her incredible determination and positive and hopeful spirit, a group of local diving instructors devised a way that she could join her family. Because her spine was too brittle and ulcerated to bear the weight of the tank, they fitted her with a mask and mouthpiece and, as she breathed in it, they weighted her just enough to put her under the water. Then they floated an oxygen tank on a piece of foam above her and carefully added weights until Linda, the divers, and the tank slipped slowly beneath the surface. For nearly an hour the entire family was able to explore the wonders of the island reefs.

Later, when Linda's husband Steve tried to pay for all the extra time and effort as a way to thank them, he was turned down with these words: "We dive here everyday. We have seen that reef literally hundreds of times. We know every rock, every piece of coral and practically every fish on it. Today, however, we saw it through the eyes of someone with such courage and strength, such spirit and such faith and gratitude for living that we looked at it in a completely different way. It is we who thank you and your family for the day. It is we who can never repay you."

Linda's body may have been broken but her spirit soared. It may have looked like she was defeated but it only looked that way – for through her faith she had found power in weakness by relying on and trusting in a strength – in a stronghold and refuge - greater than her.

For as we journey through this season of Lent we come to the cross. This instrument of torture meant to defeat and humiliate and break a person before they died an agonizing death. It is ironic and surprising that a tool of torture and humiliation used by the Roman Empire to execute, in their minds, a common criminal – could be transformed into a symbol of faith – of love – of hope. But that is the power of the Spirit and the power of what happened on that rugged cross long ago, and continues to this day. For on that cross we see Jesus laid bare – fully open – one with us – one for us. On that cross Jesus knows how we feel, Jesus knows our pains, knows our hurts – knows those times when we are broken and afraid and defeated. For that is why Jesus is there in the first place – for you – for me. Taking our pain – our burdens – our hurts that we might know – fully know peace – hope – relief. This is the gift – for which we have no words – this is the gift of the cross. This is the light of love shining forth like a beacon, this is what a

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deliver looks like, this is what strength looks like, what power in weakness looks like when Paul wrote, 'I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me ... when I'm weak, then I'm strong.'

And so I close with image. When an eagle knows that a storm is coming it will fly to some high spot and wait for the winds to come. When the storm hits, it sets its wings so that the wind will pick it up and lift it above the storm. While the storm rages below, the eagle is soaring above it. The eagle does not escape the storm. It simply uses the storm to lift it higher. It rises on the winds that bring the storm. Don't let adversity impact your spiritual life! Allow your spiritual life to impact the adversity you face. The hurts and pain, the fears and anxiety of life will always be with us, but what a joy that we don't face them alone. For our God of light and salvation, our rock and our refuge gives us the strength and the hope to soar above, so that whenever we feel defeated we know there is help, there is strength, there is grace, there is hope, there is courage, there is a love greater than anything we may struggle with - So, Take heart. Never quit. Stay with God. For we are God's people, standing on the cornerstone of Christ – in the shadow of the cross that holds us up and keeps us strong. Amen.