

Setting out again
Menno Mennonite Church
July 26, 2020

Outdoor worship

Purpose: To give voice to the ongoing path of growth in God.

Message: As people who have lived life, we are invited to sing the songs of God's guiding faithfulness.

Scripture: Psalm 73:1-3, 21-28

Synopsis: The spiritual path invites us to change all the time. We cannot remain still when we are in relationship with our dynamic, living God. We are called to make the things of our life, our living make sense within the context of the living God. Having come through the ways of change, the newness of life that can and does result.

When we have been through these evolutions of faith; sometimes the revolutions of life, we know things newly and differently. We are Re-oriented to God. The world is not as it once was; rather it is new with the blessings of seeing things newly now. In acknowledging this, we have a firmer grasp on the living witness of God with us.

Psalm 73 (NRSV)

Plea for Relief from Oppressors

A Psalm of Asaph.

¹ Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.

³ For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

²
¹ When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,

²² I was stupid and ignorant;
I was like a brute beast toward you.

²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honor.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁷ Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you.

²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
to tell of all your works.

Under the heading of time flying when you are having fun, or just in general, Emily and I arrived here a year ago this week. It has been a good year. Challenging, yes, insanely so, but good all the same. We are profoundly grateful to call Menno and Washington home. In the five years that we have been married, we have moved four times not counting temporary relocations along the way. We didn't set out to accomplish this, it's just what has happened. When you have moved as many times as this, you get into a bit of routine: you know what you need to do, how and when you need to do it. You learn a good deal about packing, of what needs to go where and when. You learn bureaucratic ballet moves of checking of the list of what needs doing; mail forwarded, bank accounts switched, licensing looked after. Even when things don't go as planned or as hoped, there is a familiarity to it all as a process, with its rhythms and ways to it.

One of those processes is that of figuring out the neighborhood that is now where you call home. I am a big fan of spending a day or two early on going out and getting good and lost in order to figure out the lay of the land, which roads go where and the like to get past the need of relying on GPS quite so much. You need redraw the maps in your head. There is a ritual to figuring out which grocery stores you like, making the translations between the things that you leaned on before and their near equivalents in your new context. I am still looking for my official morning granola but am getting close. Each place has its ways, its beauties, its people and places. Each time there is a translation that happens to adapt to what is over what was. In Winnipeg it took us quite some time to remember that we could pop out to the store for some milk for the kids after 5 PM, closing time in Saskatchewan. Over the course of weeks and months you begin to remember and contextualize as you live a new life; never the old life, but a life that has taken on the qualities of the change of becoming part of something new. And soon enough you begin calling where you now find yourself home. Its not easy; it never is, but it does happen as slowly but surely a new chapter emerges.

We all do this. Even if you are still living in the very house that you grew up in, we are always adjusting. To new chapters of life, circumstances planned or not, the realities of the way things now are or are becoming. It is part of living, this relentless change and pulse to our world. We frequently in need of reorienting ourselves to the places we find ourselves now relative to the places we have been. We have been oriented to the way of the world, certain and sure in our directions and paths. We can sometimes find ourselves disoriented, not quite sure which end is

up, or whether, perhaps, up still exists. But none of these conditions last forever, and we are always rotating between these chapters, and we find ourselves at a new place, a new home, having been through what is and what was, but now in our new place, not the same, always changed, but now wiser and altered for the experience of having been re-oriented to a life in a new location, be it metaphorical or physical, where the former conditions have been let go, and something new is now here. That's what we are talking about in terms of reorientation—the state of being that comes after the life that we had once known.

Our psalm for this morning is a perfect example of this. Lying for all practical purposes in the exact middle of the whole text of the Psalms. It tells a tale of sitting with the big questions of life; of why those who appear to be outside the way of god seem to prosper when so many struggle to get by. The author, thought to be either David or one of David's primary musicians mentioned in the histories of Chronicles and the rest, entertains the basic question of fairness of life and how God's Justice might work. As is the case throughout the Psalms the words are not minced, but the realistic possibility of there being another way of life, life outside of God, is considered. But in the final analysis, there is change—God has met us, walked with us, and changed us, reminding of what is most true, most just. It is that fundamental place of change that reorientation speaks. It is the voice of change and difference. They have seen the other side; they have asked the important questions of what it all might mean, and they have cleaved to the God who meets them all the same.

Reorientation should not be thought about as “returning to normal.” There are things, many things in life where what has been simply cannot be gained again. One of the things that I have found as key to my getting on to knowing a new place is the willingness to know that sooner or later I will need to embrace the notion of home that is not what I have known. We find ourselves living history in a far more self-conscious way than what we are accustomed. I wonder: what new home might we find on the other side of all of this? How are we are going to sing the praises of God, recounting the faithfulness of the Lord even here? I really don't know.

But I do know this. Our re-orientation will not be a product of our successfully navigating the way of change that is ours. It is not about successfully and cleanly or clearly grieving the ways that have been. Reorientation is not about the successful completion of our self help routine. It cannot be accomplished. But is given. It is a grace. It is a working of God. It is the reforming of that which we don't necessarily expect to take shape again. It is the work

of God. The gift of the new world is not the re-gifting of the old one, even though we love it. But it is something new, and it is good. And the good news is this: Such is the work of the Lord.

Think of the 19th century hymn: I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew; he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; it was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found, was found of thee. This is a hymn of re-orientation—having come through the task of having sought, actively, longingly, the way of God, and having come out the other side perhaps with something that we weren't necessarily anticipating, but are found all the same. Our values in the way we tell the stories of church hold up the way of unwavering, unaltering faith whose surety is found in the certainty of the bearer and the faithfulness of the witness of the person of faith. We hold it up as our ideal and suppose that this is the way things are supposed to be. I at least find it immensely re-assuring that what we have here instead of unshakable surety is unlosable faithfulness of the God who would remain with us, true to our lives, our living, no matter where we find ourselves or whether we can find ourselves at all.

To me that is a far better way of considering the way of faith, the way of life anticipating change and growth along the way. Its challenging because these psalms of life and faith are not nibbling around the polite edges of life and living, but are getting down into the demanding meat of life. Our middle-class polite church with its ready equilibrium is not the source of many Psalms, I am afraid. Rather, people are driven to poignant, truthful, forceful prayer having lived lives in the edges (and if you want to think of edgy life, think no further than the primary psalmist of David). It is out of these extremes that we get the voice that dares to speak to the Holy One with eloquence and passion, fully and honestly. And in seeing that, we are not only given words and music by which to live a life, but also receive a script that throws out the barriers of safe prayer, sanitized God talk, reminding us always that there is another side to life even when we are not sure whether change is possible beyond what we have now.

The speech of the psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and perhaps a little bit dangerous. It announces that life in faith is not solely that of the streams of pure water, but also endures the places of dark despair where we fear to hope for a God that moves. We have so used the psalms and prayed them as the calm prayers of "business as usual" and the stuff of our routine readings that we trot out for their prescribed purposes that we have denied them their full power. Don't get me wrong: it is good that our psalters are well worn and we have our favorites of comfort. We need to have our familiarity and comfort along the way. But that is not all that is going on

here. When we make the Psalms primarily the anthems of “Business as usual” redirects their power and purpose, and misunderstands the edgier nature of their capacity and alienates the nature of our edgier lives. It is important that we know that even in the midst of the vagaries of our normal orientation there remains the true north of the God who receives us no matter how we find ourselves in life and living.

In the midst of all the rhythms of life, YHWH remains present to us. God searches for us. God walks with us, cries with us, laughs with our joy, celebrates our victory and holds our losses together, no matter what were we find ourselves. We need a vocabulary of faith that can tell all of our stories to contain all of our lives. We might love the “I once was lost, but now I am found” witness story doesn’t mean that we our selves within it, or know what do when we find ourselves in the midst of it. We need our whole lives, our whole songs that are safe within the way of God. We need to be able leave the homes of what have been, grieving them as we must, to embrace the new thing that God is about in this time and what is about to be.

May our psalms—all of them—sing of the truth of our lives, however we find them, and be sung in the faithful expectation of what God is about to do.