

Singing, Always

Menno Mennonite Church

February 2, 2025

Purpose: To celebrate the ability we have to sing of all that God has done.

Message: Throughout the many chapters of life—good and bad—we are invited into the refuge that is God's

Scripture: Psalm 71:1-17 (I will read); 1 Corinthians 13:1-7 (Please read)

Synopsis: Within a short space of time, this Psalm expresses much. It articulates the human condition. It names fear and anxiety, even enmity that exists in a complicated world. It also turns its face toward a gratitude for and a faith in the providing God that is also present within all these things and so much more. As such it does what the Psalms do best for us: connect human reality to the divine promise, inviting us time and again to name our fragile worlds and bring them before a loving God. In these promises we can continue the song, even in the toughest of times.

Psalm 71:1-17 (Message)

71 I run for dear life to God,
I'll never live to regret it.
Do what you do so well:
get me out of this mess and up on my feet.

Put your ear to the ground and listen,
give me space for salvation.
Be a guest room where I can retreat;
you said your door was always open!

You're my salvation—my vast, granite fortress.

4-7 My God, free me from the grip of Wicked,
from the clutch of Bad and Bully.

You keep me going when times are tough—
my bedrock, God, since my childhood.

I've hung on you from the day of my birth,
the day you took me from the cradle;
I'll never run out of praise.
Many gasp in alarm when they see me,
but you take me in stride.

8-11 Just as each day brims with your beauty,
my mouth brims with praise.

But don't turn me out to pasture when I'm old
or put me on the shelf when I can't pull my weight.

My enemies are talking behind my back,
watching for their chance to knife me.

The gossip is: "God has abandoned him.
Pounce on him now; no one will help him."

12-16 God, don't just watch from the sidelines.
Come on! Run to my side!

My accusers—make them lose face.
Those out to get me—make them look
Like idiots, while I stretch out, reaching for you,
and daily add praise to praise.

I'll write the book on your righteousness,
talk up your salvation the livelong day,
never run out of good things to write or say.

I come in the power of the Lord God,
I post signs marking his right-of-way.

17-24 You got me when I was an unformed youth,
God, and taught me everything I know.
Now I'm telling the world your wonders;
I'll keep at it until I'm old and gray.

If we are to listen to the pop-culture critiques, there would be a lot said about the Bible. Beyond the basic lack of comprehension of an ancient text at all, there is a fundamental question of how such a text can ever speak to a modern moment with its unfathomable complexities. Surely, it is suggested, there is nothing about the human condition as WE know it that appears in the words as they knew it then. Even if there was it would certainly be entirely out of touch with the reality of feelings and knowledge, the argument would go. The scripture is out of touch with a world that is mean, isolating, and our inclination to wonder what life is all about, does not concern itself with the feelings of the ordinary person in the ordinary world. It is assumed that the text is what we employ to prove a point and win an argument; quoting scripture to capture game, set and match. Beyond that, there isn't a whole lot of use here to the daily life.

Until you encounter something like this Psalm. I think this is a fairly good counter point to the assumption that there isn't a whole lot going on in the text that is relatable to us. The lectionary suggests only the first 6 verses or so; I expanded from there to give us a far fuller flavor of the text. Even within that more limited selection alone there is a lot: notions of God as refuge in need; a plea for deliverance; Lamentation on the state of the world and the enemies we find within it; trust in God's righteousness and ability to save; and, resultingly, the nature of the praise response by the Psalmist. In other words, a distillation of the whole of the recorded Psalms we have in just a few verses. The whole of the Psalms encompass almost the whole of life and living. Living in the broken world we do, what else do we have but to bring our cares before God? We are part of the brokenness. We know this. We feel this keenly. Not in a sense of being somehow undeserving and unworthy, but in the difficult realities of living in the world within its pains and sorrows. Yes; our personal failings break us. But so do the demands of living in the world as it most humanly is. We have felt this this week, knowing shock, knowing loss, knowing challenges of life and living. We may struggle to name precisely those who feel like they oppose us, but we know what it is like to be opposed and accused. If you are looking for humanity; if you are looking for experience, you need look no further than the Psalms.

Sometimes it is exactly this human brokenness of the world as we know it that leads people to declare that there is no god in which to trust in. The problem of the world being broken as it is must be individual evidence of the challenges of the world. If there is evil in the world and God is all good, then one of these things simply don't make sense. These are old, deep and important arguments that we are all familiar with. None of us can entirely hand-wave

them away as if the problem of evil in the world is somehow an irrelevance. On a grand scale, we know too well that the way of the world and the way of the Kingdom that we are promised seldom resemble one another. On the personal level we know that heartache of all sorts is real, challenges find us and we can spend our times pondering the meaning of it all. While there are arguments to be considered that would seek to find a philosophical fusion that squares this particular circle of why a good God allows the unhappy to exist at all, those are for more the world of academia and contemplation and less the world as we know it. None of us can fully or satisfactorily explain it all even though we all wrestle with questions like these.

There are more earthy ways of getting to this particular truth of working with such problems. It is what makes, I think, this particular Psalm rather special as well. It is not terribly often that we have a voice of an elder bringing themselves before God. The singer of this song is seeking refuge in the shelter of the most high. They are appealing to the insistence on God's righteousness to act for them and in them, expecting that God will do what is right in all circumstances. This confidence is born not in the insistence on it being so or on the blameless virtue of the one making the petition, but on the long experience that the singer has with the most high God. They cite the faithfulness of God in their youth, the days of their birth. Their expectation is born with the length of years and experience in the way and will of YHWH God, leaning into the ways that God has walked with them. They insist that their confidence will be heard because of the quiet witness of their prior experience with the way and will of God. It is a great gift of longevity to put the whole of faith into perspective. None of us can prove the nature of things; not in the empirical absolute way that we might wish. But that is where faith takes over, born of experience, challenged by life, leavened by hope. If the Bible and in particular the New Testament are correct that faith is the first gift that God grants to us by grace alone, then we trust that what this faith tells us about God's love for us and for this creation is right. The psalmist embraced this for certain.

Many of us have people we bring to mind when we consider those who have shaped and witnessed to our faith. Among my cloud of witnesses I consider my maternal grandmother. A person who lived the whole of her 100 year span within a 10 mile radius of her birth, she was one who knew the world and what it could deal out well. A child of the depression, she carried the demands of thrift closely. She knew the world's pain. My grandfather developed heart issues young in life, and lived more than 3 decades with those challenges, taking part in some of the

earliest open heart surgeries available in the country. Grandma lived through this, raising 4 kids, overseeing the farm work that needed to be done, working as a night shift seamstress making drapes for the RV industry in North Indiana. A fierce, determined, gruffly kind woman for it all she knew life's pain, and still found her way to sing, always, of God's goodness. The faith that carried her from cradle to grave sustained her, influenced her, and held her throughout it all. Her hope was in God, and that was something she willingly shared with all who would listen (occasionally whether you cared to listen or not). For me she was one whose lived experience of the divine found its way beyond the challenges and into praise, and that is something for which I am grateful. I am guessing you all have your exemplars of lived faith well in mind as well.

My friends, there is a grace in living years and witnessing the work of faith. It grants us a perspective on the way of God reminding us through lived journey and distance of hindsight to understand faith lived in life and through life. That does not keep the sadness from coming all the same. It does not insulate us from the world and its losses. It does not prepare us for the next turns in the road that can so often feel out of sight and out of our control. But it does allow us to consider the ways in which the God of the universe has heard us before and may well hear us again. We are invited at every age to place our trust in the YHWH who is like no other, as the Psalmist writes later in Psalm 71. In a polytheistic world of competing deities with respective strengths and weaknesses, that is quite a declaration of faith.

In many ways our world is not that much different. There are gods of control and anxiety that would ask for our embrace and welcome whatever power we would wish to vest them with. But we are given the opportunity to declare that there is none like the one who we follow through life, in life, and beyond life. There is none like the YHWH God who walks with us, who knows us and who loves us to such an extent to offer his very own son to be with us and die for us. Through the perspective of years we learn more and more of God's good deeds.

We do not always get the answer to the hardest questions of our life and our world. But we do know that God's love is shown in it and many times in spite of it. We are invited to trust the one on which we can call in every season and to remember that in the end of all things, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

May this be our hope that keeps us singing no matter the time or the season. Amen.