

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
Acts 7:55-60

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 7, 2023

A Divine Committal

Introduction to the Psalm

Today's psalm acknowledges both trouble and danger, but also expresses confidence in God through prayer. On the Cross, Jesus would quote from this psalm. Thus does he commit his spirit into God's hands. Listen to these words from Psalm 31:1-5 and 15-16...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Lesson from Acts on this Fifth Sunday of Easter, we hear an echo of our psalm. Arraigned before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Steven's speech evoked powerful hostility, enough so for him to be stoned to death. And as he was being stoned, he called out to Jesus to receive his spirit. Listen to these words from Acts 7:55-60...

Sermon

In more than 50 years of preaching, I've preached some sermons that were well-received, and some, let's say, that did not go over so well. But I've never had the kind of reaction that accompanied Stephen's message in Acts 7: "When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen." (v. 54) Then when Stephen reported his vision of gazing into heaven, "they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.: (7:57-58a)

The psalmist today has an answer for the enemies he faces. And it can be ours as we face our enemies—including the threat of shame. He does not vow to work harder, to be more careful, to be brave. He does not complain that life is unfair. Instead he turns and asks God for help:

Incline your ear to me;
 rescue me speedily.
 Be a rock of refuge for me,
 a strong fortress to save me. (v. 2)

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
 for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
 take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
 for you are my refuge. (vv. 3-4)

The psalmist asks God to help, not because he himself is such a nice person, but *in order to protect God's name*. As in that beloved 23rd Psalm:

He restoreth my soul;
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake. (v. 3)

The psalmist is among that blessed number who believe that God is for him and not against him. Therefore he can commit himself into God's hands. He can proclaim, "My times are in your hand (31:15a), not meaning that God causes or controls every single event in life, but rather that in every moment of life, from disappointment to success, from sorrow to joy, from birth to death, God mysteriously holds us in his hands. Yes, God works over, under, around, and through all things for those who love him. (Rms. 8:28)

In verse 4 the plea is:

take me out of the net that is hidden for me.

This was the net used to capture animals, the hunter lying hidden in wait. How true to life it is that sometimes we feel caught in a net—sometimes from factors beyond our control, but sometimes of our own doing.

"Take me out," or "Pull me out of this net." (31:4a)

"Loosen me, O God, from this web in which I'm caught."

And in verse 5 there is the committal of the psalmist's life into God's hands:

“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

And thereby we come to the heart of our message today. These words of “divine committal” were said to be the dying words of a number of renowned Christians: Polycarp, the aged and kindly bishop of Smyrna who was burned at the stake in the second century for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. Officials pleaded with Polycarp, asking him to renounce Jesus and proclaim that Caesar was Lord, so that they could release him. Polycarp gave no lecture. He simply stuck to telling what he knew: “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

This verse—“Into Thy hands I commit my spirit”—is said to have been the last utterance of Francis Xavier, the Roman Catholic missionary who founded the Jesuits. Also, the great reformers Martin Luther and his collaborator Melanchthon; John Knox and John Hus are all said to have come to the end of this life with these words on their lips. For these words express the faith of people who have fought the good fight and finished their course. And many a pastor, in the tender conversations he has had with those who are about to experience a serious operation has heard faithful persons so acknowledge their trust: “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

Our lesson from Acts 7 reveals that these same words were the last words of Stephen. Stephen was one of seven deacons appointed by the Apostles to distribute food and charitable aid to the widows in the early church. (Acts 6:1-6) He was a man of broad vision and outlook. Though his was not a long successful ministry, he was faithful where he was. And he proclaimed the fullness of the gospel, seeking to make of faith in Christ, a worldwide faith, not limiting the gospel to one people. He appealed to members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of chief priests and elders in Jerusalem, not to resist the Holy Spirit. He called them stiff-necked and stubborn, like those of Israel who had killed the prophets.

Stephen’s report of that beatific vision, of gazing into heaven and seeing Jesus—the Son of Man—standing at the right hand of God was blasphemous to those who did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. They then rushed at Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him. And while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed:

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (v. 59)

And, “Lord Jesus, do not hold this against them.” (v. 60)

Now, standing by was a young Pharisee who, according to Luke, had consented to the death—and his name was Saul. Yes, this is the man who eventually embraced the Christian faith, following an experience on the road to Damascus, an experience that would transform Saul, the persecutor, into Paul, the apostle. But perhaps Stephen’s example and testimony should get some credit for the way Paul eventually bore witness to Christ. In a similar way, our own words and witness, our own loving and just actions, can also matter for the kingdom of God in ways we cannot foresee.

On the cross—following a prayer for forgiveness of those who didn’t know what they were doing, and a promise of paradise to a thief on a cross beside him—the last words of our Lord and Savior were the words from Psalm 31, with one word added—“Father.”

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

Psalm 31:5 was a source of comfort and hope to our Lord, this verse being the first prayer that every Jewish mother taught her child to say, last thing at night. Just as many of us were taught,

Now I lay me down to sleep,
 I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
 If I should die before I wake,
 I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Likewise, the Jewish child was taught, before the threatening dark came down, “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Well, Jesus took that prayer and made it even more lovely by adding the one word—“Father.”

So we see that the psalmist’s prayer has been used in both life and in death. And it is not the expression of an acquiescence to faith. It is an entrusting of one’s whole being unto the Creator, the Sustainer, the God whose love is steadfast and strong. The One who is a very present help in time of trouble. It is not an expression of belief that the person of faith will never experience suffering. It is an expression of faith that the Good Shepherd, who knows us by name, will be with us and for us, and will lead us through the darkness of the darkest valley.

Although thousands of Christians were martyred in New Testament times, Stephen is the only one recorded in scripture, other than Jesus Christ. A recent martyr was Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop in El Salvador, who was assassinated by the hands of an unknown assailant, while saying mass in March of 1980. In 2018 Pope Francis declared him a Saint, by the one miracle necessary for a martyr’s canonization. That miracle was the inexplicable cure of a terminally ill Salvadoran woman.

Daniel Whittle wrote the words to our second hymn today. Whittle was treasurer of Elgin Watch Company when in 1873, at the urging of Dwight L. Moody, left his successful position to become an evangelist. The chorus says:

But “I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I’ve committed
Unto Him against that day.”

In writing to young Timothy, Paul says:

...But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Paul had entrusted his life and work to God. It might seem that he had been cut off in mid-career. That his life should end as a criminal in a Roman prison might appear the undoing of all his work. But Paul had sown the seed, he had preached the gospel, and the result he left in the hands of God.

As we struggle with our own enemies today—be they sickness, sorrow, or death—the psalmist’s words and the words of Jesus and Stephen are an invitation for us to come before God with trust. That he holds our times in his hands, and as we live in faith, God will be a rock of refuge for us.

What a joy it is to know that eternity is in God’s hands, and that you and I are in God’s hands. And that “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” That God is the loving heavenly Father, revealed to us in Christ Jesus. And that we can pray, day by day, and finally at the end of this earthly life, “Father, into thy hands, I commit my spirit.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.