

## **LUMINOUS PEACE IN THE LIFE OF OBEDIENCE**

### **PSALM 111**

Luminous peace: now that is something for which I am praying. At least, I think I am. I know that I am praying for peace. Everybody else is, and, at an early age, I decided to join them. The question is, “When we pray for peace, for what are we praying?” If I pray for peace, does that make me a pacifist? Am I saying, “Let’s end all war, even in the face of injustice?” Of course, one does not have to look far to find someone who suggests that peace is achieved through violence. I know that argument may seem absurd. It is similar to saying that hunger is satiated by fasting. If I had stronger opinions or were more outspoken, I might be more critical, but given my gentle nature, I will step back and pray for peace, peace that the world does not give, peaces that surpasses human understanding.

Maybe the psalmist is able to “give thanks to the Lord...in the uptight congregation,” because he or she does is comfortable with mystery, and by embracing mystery, the obedient one embraces faith. Oh, did I just call the congregation in this Psalm “uptight”? Scripture says “upright.” “Upright” and “uptight” are not the same terms, though I have noticed that a fine line exists between the up-righteous and the self-righteous, which may explain why this Psalm ends on the note of wisdom and fear.

The fear of the Lord may be the beginning of wisdom, and yet please note that fear is only the beginning. In the end, the psalmist prays for transformation, for God to take his or her fear and mold it into wisdom. Of what are you afraid: snakes, heights or the dark? Scripture suggests that whatever it is, this fear may be a big misunderstanding: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; those who act accordingly have a good understanding (obviously, a misunderstanding is a bad understanding); the praise of the Lord endures forever.”

Notice that it is our praise---not our bodies---that endure forever. I do not know how you are preparing for death, and sometimes I am not so sure how I am, but I do know this: I am not asking if you

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died suddenly, where would you go? I am asking you to think about your legacy. Who would miss you? Why? Of course, if we spend too much time reflecting on this question, our legacy will be that we were self-absorbed. If we do not spend enough time reflecting on this question, our legacy will be a dearth of self-knowledge, and perhaps even more tragic, a lack of self-awareness. Maybe the praise of the Lord endures forever, because of God's great mercy. The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting while our stories are bookended by ashes and dust.

One of the strengths of our faith tradition from Calvin on is the emphasis placed on knowledge. Knowledge of God is intimately related to knowledge of all God's creation, particularly knowledge of one's self. Maybe we are able to give thanks to the Lord with our whole hearts, because we are in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation. Then again, if you have ever beheld a mountain or beach in all of God's glory, you know that God speaks boldly and beautifully through the creation.

The psalmist understands this. Otherwise he or she would not pray, "Great are the deeds of the Lord! They are studied by all who delight in them. Full of majesty and splendor is the work of the Lord, whose righteousness endures forever." This explains why Calvinists have dabbled historically in everything from astrology to astronomy. Do you know your sign? Gillie and I are Leos. Even college students who feel that astrology is the work of the devil know their signs. I know, because I teach them.

As proclaimed elsewhere in the Psalms, the world is fearfully and wonderfully made, and this awe and wonder invites research, but do not worry. I will defer to Chet on the physics of this subject. For now, it suffices to say that the world is an incredibly beautiful and mysterious mix of light and darkness, water and clay, and yellows, blues and greens: "Gracious and full of compassion is the Lord, whose marvelous works are to be remembered," and in remembering and celebrating these works, there is luminous peace.

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Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic monk who climbed the seven-story mountain, is the one who writes of this peace. He is fascinated by how the moral and the mystical converge in the Psalms. His discussion of this Psalm is preceded by a reflection on the work of Ambrose, a bishop of Milan in the 4th century, who describes in graphic detail the intimate relationship that exists between church and earth. Ambrose writes, “(The) Holy Church, who in the beginning of the world was espoused to God in paradise, who was prefigured in the deluge, announced by the Law, called by the prophets, has long awaited the redemption of (women) and men and the beauty of the Gospel. She now runs, impatient of delay, to kiss the Spouse, exclaiming: ‘Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth.’” Among 4<sup>th</sup> century writings, it is rare to find a Jesus as sensual as this, and yet, for Merton, there is something powerful in such intimacy.

Merton concludes, “When we are fully and whole-heartedly united with the will of God and striving to bear one another’s burdens and build the mystical City of God on this earth, we find our peace-filled hearts spontaneously overflowing with that praise of God which is the joy of the poor whom God has deigned to call to the riches of divine sonship. Praise is fitting in those who are sincere with God.” The corollary to this statement is that praise is inappropriate among the insincere. Merton refers to this willingness to bear one another’s burdens to the point that one’s heart is peace-filled and spontaneously overflowing as “luminous peace in the life of obedience.” He finds this peace described in a collection of Psalms and lists Psalm 111 among them.

Peace that is luminous not only is comfortable with mystery; it is comforting. It lights minds and warms hearts. It assuages. It shares burdens, satisfies hunger and calms fear. It takes place within the life of obedience, which is the second half of this phrase that I chose not to introduce until the second half of the sermon. It seemed prudent to lead with luminous peace, because you would probably want to hear more about that. If I had started with “the life of obedience,” you may have been less interested

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in this Psalm. I also waited to introduce this phrase in an effort to let the Psalm provide the structure for this sermon. From the opening “Hallelujah” to the assurance that “The Lord gives food to the God-fearing,” the language is saturated with awe, wonder and praise. It is all about what God does for Israel.

Then there is the second half, which reminds Israel that this covenant is not one-sided: “The Lord has shown the chosen people works of power in giving them the lands of the nations.” Uh, oh, God has given us food, why not give it away? Being chosen translates into being God’s hands and feet, and, as the psalmist explains, “The hands of the Lord work faithfulness and justice; all the commandments of the Lord are sure. They stand forever and ever, because they are done in truth and equity.” One way to preach this is to proclaim, “Since we are chosen, let us be faithful, speaking truthfully and working diligently toward justice and equity.” Another option is to say, “If you want to know if you are chosen, ask yourself, ‘Am I being faithful? Am I speaking truthfully? Am I working toward justice and equity?’” If the answers are “Yes,” then you must be chosen.

Personally, I prefer the “since,” because I believe that God’s grace came before me. I believe that God’s grace came before Christ had a body and before there was a body of Christ. The God who gathered us to worship this morning is an initiating God who loves us and forgives us of everything from uptightness to self-righteousness. It is impossible for us to seize forgiveness. It has to be sent. As the psalmist observes, “The Lord sent redemption to the chosen people, commanding the covenant forever; holy and awesome is the name of the Lord.” Holy and awesome is redemption. Holy and awesome are God’s commandments, as they grant us freedom through structure. By the faithfulness of God’s people, the hungry are fed. The thirsty are satisfied, and there is peace, luminous peace in the life of obedience. To the blessed and only Sovereign, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

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