

JUNE 4, 2021

Psalm 11

In the Lord I take refuge; how can you say to me:
“Flee like a bird to the mountains;
For look, the wicked bend the bow,
They have fitted their arrow to the string,
To shoot in the dark at the upright in heart.
If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?”

God is in God's holy temple;
The Lord's throne is in heaven.
God's eyes behold, The Holy One's gaze examines
Humankind.

God tests the righteous and the wicked,
And the Lord hates the lover of violence.
On the wicked will rain coals of fire and sulphur;
A scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

For the Lord is righteous;
The Holy One loves righteous deeds;
The upright shall behold God's face.

A lot of the psalms make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Even though most of us are somewhere in between most days, being righteous is what we need to aim for, and being wicked is what we need to avoid.

Another word for righteous is 'just'. Righteousness and justice are equivalent words in the original biblical languages. Righteousness and justice in our modern way of thinking, however, can be quite different. Being “righteous” is often interpreted negatively as reflecting a “holier-than-thou” moral superiority and judgementalism. Justice, on the other hand, is a positive word for most of us. But justice can also be confused with retaliation and revenge. Our task in meditating on the psalms and psalm 11 in particular, is to recover the word righteousness from association with a holier-than-thou attitude on the one hand, and a justice that will never be satisfied until the “wicked” gets what's coming to them on the other.

This requires a deeper, spiritual reading. What does this psalm tell us about the righteous? Line 5 tells us they are “upright in heart.” The heart is a place of sincerity and authenticity, whereas external righteousness can all too often be false piety or arrogant morality, deceiving not only others but even ourselves. Authentic righteousness is a matter of the heart.

But the heart is also vulnerable. Unlike the wicked who are ready to hurt and harm using violence, the righteous of heart are vulnerable because they refuse to harden their hearts. To remain upright in heart you have to maintain a commitment to love reflecting the God to whom your heart is beholden.

On the surface, this gives an advantage to the wicked who have fitted their arrows on the string of their bows ready to strike at the righteous who will not use the same kind of violence in return. Additionally, the righteous are vulnerable to temptation or may be triggered to corrupting their hearts with a desire for vengeance: for fire and sulphur and a scorching wind to befall the wicked.

But this threat, this vulnerability to harm and the triggers and temptations to corruption of the heart, are wrestled within a larger faith that ultimately grounds the righteous. Verse 1: In the Lord, I take refuge...” Mid-way: “God is in God’s holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven... the Holy One’s gaze examines humankind...” and the final verse: “For the Lord is righteous; The Holy One loves righteous deeds; The upright shall behold God’s face.” This psalm is like a spiritual reset. We will not “flee like a bird to the mountains” in fear. Nor will we succumb to hate, bitterness or despair at the injustice of the wicked all around. God ultimately reigns and righteousness ultimately rules. Even if our lives in this world can be threatened all too often and our best efforts at justice for the vulnerable are too often frustrated, we will reset our commitment to uprightness of heart.

PRAYER: We seek an uprightness of heart, O God. Reset us, as we are thrown off our footing many a day and many a situation. Injustice and violence are all around us. We weep at the sad, painful and lonely death of all indigenous children, those whose graves have been found, and those whose graves have yet to be found. We are part of a nation and churches whose history is stained with wickedness, O God. We need healing beginning with repentance. We need forgiveness, O God, for there’s much too much we can’t restore to an innocence before the violence and abuse. Forgiveness costs, because it has to involve a letting go of what cannot be changed or erased. Only your love is large enough to fill the vacuum of pain and loss, O God. Bring us into the

circle of the righteous. Resurrect us through the dying of our collective sin into a new day of healing and reconciliation. In the name of the one crucified with all the abused and discarded; Amen.