

I Had Almost Slipped

Psalm 73; John 16:33

I discovered this Psalm as I worshipped at St. John's Abbey and heard the monks read it back and forth as we have today. I might say the Psalm discovered me. Sometimes we read scripture; other times scripture reads us.

Have you ever been walking down the street and almost slipped? After a moment of fear you recover your balance, but for a moment you were sure you were going down. Psalm 73 is about that kind of moment in our spiritual, emotional lives. And it's about regaining our balance.

I

The Psalm reveals the heart in those times when envy or cynicism or despair about the world take hold. Envy is the sin of what the Bible calls the evil eye. It looks maliciously on those it sees as better, more successful, more beautiful, more famous. It's what sells the magazines at the checkout lines in grocery stores. Frederick Buechner writes, "Envy is the consuming desire to have everyone as unsuccessful as you are."

Cynicism? It sneers at anything good and assumes the worst about everyone and everything. It succumbs to the belief that everything good act has a

seamy underside, an ulterior motive, that everyone acts only in their own interest. It is apt to give up on the notion of true goodness.

And despair. We are talking here about the despair over the state of the world. The powerful and rich get what they want, others languish. Evil seems to be winning, virtue losing. We begin to lose hope. We slump in despair about the world and its future. As somebody's wife, not mine said, "Behind every silver lining there's a big dark cloud!"

It's easy to lose our balance and slip toward envy, cynicism and despair.

II

In the Psalm we see a person regaining their balance in four phases:

Phase One: The beginning of Psalm 73 (in Steve's Paraphrased Edition of the Psalms):

*O, God, my feet had almost slipped,
I was filled with envy at the prosperity of the proud
and the success of wicked.*

*People magazine makes me want to puke.
Look at their tanned, sleek, smooth bodies.
I'd like to see their plastic surgery bills.*

And money can buy anything.

*We have the best Congress money can buy,
not to mention the highest court in the land.*

These fat cats are untouched by human suffering.

They wear their pride like a string of pearls.

But their clothes are woven in violence.

Their minds seethe with plots against the rest of us.

They mock God.

There's no one in heaven keeping score, they say.

And people drink it in, drink it in!

They worship power, wealth, celebrity.

Look at them.

How the wicked prosper,

they laugh all the way to the bank.

*It makes me want to give up, throw in the towel,
chuck the Bible in a can.*

The problem here is not the Psalmist's analysis of the truth of things, but what the truth is doing to his soul.

Phase Two:

I've got to stop this.

If I keep thinking and talking like this

I will betray my children and all God's children to come.

What good can come of this,

my grumbling and negativity will poison me

and those around me.

I'll end up a bitter old man

and my children will inherit my bitterness.

I have fallen in love with my discontent.

I tried to figure all this out,

why evil prospers in God's world,

but all my mind did was flail in the dark.

Note, the Psalmist's breakthrough came when he began to think about the children, his and all, the ones to come. What kind of legacy did he want to give? A pottage of envy, cynicism and despair? As the scripture says: "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

The world around us does not help. Social media feeds these feelings. A writer once said of the literary world: "I'm tired of the fine art of unhappiness." But the Psalmist has become humble of mind:

"I tried to fathom it all, but failed. Then I came to the sanctuary."

He had made the right turn. And now the breakthrough.

Phase Three : The Vision In The Sanctuary.

He went to God's House. He heard the scriptures, he sang the songs of his faith.

"Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

God showed him the long view, what God was doing and would do. And now the Psalmist sees.

How slippery are the paths on which you set them.

They slip, slide away, they see it all come to ruin.

It takes a renewed faith to believe, to see what we cannot now see. It takes faith to believe that evil always overreaches and brings its own ruin. We saw it in

Hitler and his Third Reich. But this faith is not an invitation to complacency. Yes, the terrible reign of Hitler came to a close, but now much more quickly could it have happened if more had faced the horrible truth earlier?

The Psalm is a call to faithful action even when action seems doomed to failure. I remember our joining Congregation Emanuel in their Shabbat service after the horror of the massacre of Jews at worship at Tree of Life Synagogue. There I read these words of the Jewish Talmud for the first time:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now.

Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Astounding faith.

Phase Four: Grace and Praise in the Sanctuary. The Psalmist bows before God:

*I was dull and ignorant,
like a water-ox toward you.*

(We all have our water-ox days)

*Yet I was always in your presence,
You were holding me by my right hand.
It was You who kept me from falling!*

My body and my heart faint for joy.

I will never stop telling of your works!

And there the Psalm ends.

Conclusion

Now the Psalmist tosses the Psalm to us. Will we take God's extended hand to right ourselves, will we choose to see beyond the visible how God is at work?

It was 1934 at a Sunday service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Martin Luther King, Sr. was preaching. The time came for the Invitation Hymn. Martin Luther King Jr.'s older sister started down the aisle to profess her faith and be baptized. Young M.L., as he was called then, five years old, would not be beaten by sister, so down the aisle he ran to profess his own faith before she got there! Does God ever use sibling rivalry for his purposes? Yes, that too.

Little did young M.L. know that Sunday that God would lead him years later to lead the Civil Rights movement in our nation, the most powerful movement of non-violent social change in our nation's history. There are always those ready, even today, for violent social change. At the close of the history making march from Selma to Montgomery, he gave one of his most powerful speeches, not as famous as the I Have a Dream speech you have heard thrillingly

offered today, but an amazing one, and today's psalmist today would be cheering. Dr. King did not allow the terrible injustices of the day and of our history cause him to slip, but to soar.

Here are the closing words of the speech:

I know you are asking today, "How will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the minds of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

How long? Not long because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

How long? Not long, because "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

It was the message of Jesus who said these ringing words: "In the world you will find tribulation, but be of good cheer, be of good courage, I have overcome (Did I hear "overcome"?!) the world!"

