

7-26-2020 SERMON Psalm 27: 1-8 The One Thing

The Celtic Christian tradition comes to us through Christians from the British Isles centuries ago. In the Celtic tradition, there is a belief in “thin places.” Thin places are places where the wall between the physical world and the spiritual world is thin enough that we connect with God, and God’s presence. Rob and I have a friend who went on a spiritual journey in Ireland a few years ago. He had become discouraged with the dry mundaneness of the American church. The church seemed to be little more than some American ideals with a coating of Jesus thrown in. Although he never used these words, I believe he was searching for the Celtic experience of “thin places,” where God is experienced, not just spoken and sung about. Lourdes is such a place for many people; the quiet of monasteries are for others.

Perhaps you have your own ‘thin place’: a beach somewhere, or a mountain, or a cemetery, or somewhere in the countryside where you can go and immediately feel connected to God. It’s not the place itself that is sacred so much as the experience of the divine that opens for us and we realize that God is closer to us than we may think most days. We need thin places, especially when life is difficult, confusing, or dry and mundane. I believe Psalm 27 speaks about ‘thin places’ without using the words.

Psalm 27 was written by David. If you remember, David was anointed King of Israel after Saul was rejected by God. But Saul refused to give up the throne, and tried to kill David instead. During this in-between time, David gathered a small army. But Saul put out a reward for anyone who brought him David’s dead body. There were no safe places for David and his army; they hid out in caves and hill country. And yet, David writes,

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

This is an amazing declaration when we think about living in caves. Caves have no light. The deeper the cave, the darker it is. And we need light. Lighted places are safer, we can see where we are going, and what is around us. In lighted rooms we trip over stuff less and find things easier. Most crime takes place in dark areas so we leave our porch lights on at night. David only had 2 sources of light- the sun that lighted the day and light from a fire source- like a campfire or the small handheld oil lamp- at night. David and his men had two challenges having light. First, both kinds of light- being out in the sun and firelight at night made them more vulnerable to Saul’s men finding them. Light was dangerous for David.

Second, the light from an oil lamp only let them see a few steps ahead. They didn't have our flood lights that light up entire football fields. Isn't floodlight the kind of light want from God? Don't we want to see far enough ahead to know what's coming and be prepared? It's what I want during this pandemic- – to know how long until a vaccine will be ready? How long til we can eat in a restaurant or have company over? How long until this congregation can meet together, then we can know how to plan. But in my experience, the light that God provides is more like that small oil lamp - enough to light our path, but not the whole field. Just enough to let us see the next few steps, so we have to keep trusting for the steps after that. During this pandemic, I'm trying to learn that seeing just the next few steps is enough because the LORD is our light, not what we see.

David also called the LORD his stronghold. A stronghold was a place of defense against attacks by an enemy- a fortress, like a high wall around a city. Soldiers with weapons would be stationed along the top of the wall watching 24 hours a day. Enemies had to get past the soldiers and the wall to attack the city. Those inside the walls were secure. We understand the need for security. We build gated communities, put bars and locks on our windows and doors, we have security systems on our homes, guns are kept for security. David and his men lived in caves with no such things. Yet he lived without fear because his stronghold in life was the Lord. Who or what is our stronghold?

“One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD.”

David wanted one thing- to be in God's presence. The tabernacle was his thin place where God's presence became apparent. The tabernacle, the tent of worship God had Moses and the people of Israel build in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. It was a place of majesty- with brilliantly woven fabrics, gold and silver, beautiful inlaid woods, the golden altar, candles, 12 loaves of bread baked weekly to remind them of God's covenant. Icons of God's faithfulness from the past- Aaron's rod from the wilderness, and some of the manna God provided. God's presence became real for David in that tent. It reminds me of when Rob and I have visited churches built years ago with marble floors, pictures of Bible stories on brilliant stained glass windows, grand sweeping ceilings and candles lighted in prayer, and a peaceful silence. We were drawn to sit down and just be in God's presence. We experienced a taste of God's majesty and holiness, God's face, and a sense of awe filled us. Hiding in the caves, David asked for one thing- to be back in

that thin place where the veil between the eternal and the now was open and he sensed God's presence and gazed on God's beauty.

But being in the tabernacle wasn't an option; he was hiding for his life. And yet, in verse 8 David says, "Your face, LORD, will I seek." Right there in the caves and hills he would seek the Lord's face. Was it even possible? Could there be thin places besides the tabernacle? This pandemic makes churches face the same question. Because of COVID-19, we are separated for our safety, but we long to be together. To worship together, experience God among us. We can talk by phone and we all do, but it's not the same. We want to see each other's faces. And yes, Facetime works OK, but unless you're good with Facetime, you end up looking up each other's noses instead! It's not a pretty sight! But then we get together on ZOOM; we see each other's faces and get a taste of what we long for. Seeing our faces on ZOOM makes us more in each other's presence. The same is true for God's face. The Hebrew word for face here is also translated presence. Seeking God's face is about seeking God's presence. In God's presence, all is well, in spite of what is happening. Even in his cave with people seeking **his** face to kill him, David could have peace. In God's presence, we can find light, and wholeness and refuge, wherever we are. It doesn't make the troubles go away, but it does make the fear go away.

We're like David during this pandemic; we can't meet together in the house of the LORD. For many of us, being together at church was our thin place. We miss it deeply. Singing together, sharing prayer requests and praying together, listening to God's Word together, fellowshiping afterwards. Where do we experience the thin places where heaven and earth meet during this pandemic? David said, "Your face, O LORD, will I seek." The word, seek, means to chase down, to research, to focus our attention on, to really look. For example, Rob and I needed a better sprinkler to water the two long narrow grassy places on the sides of our house. We researched online, shopped at Home Depot, read recommendations, and then bought one. Do we seek God's face with the same focus as we seek a new garden sprinkler? Jesus said to seek first the kingdom of God- make it our #1 priority in life. How much of a priority is for us to seek God? How often does God get our full attention?

During this pandemic, let's be intentional. If you have a special thin place where you experience God, go there if you can. Give God the glory there. But we can't always go there. So let's seek, give attention to, chase down God's face in

everyday thin places- they're all around us if we're paying attention. We walk with the One who is Emmanuel- God with us- which means anywhere can be a thin place where we experience God with us- if we're paying attention. In the joy of waking up to a new day, in the beauty around us as we walk, in the laughter of a loved one, in the light shining at night, in music, in God's Word. But we have to seek Him to sense it. The old hymn says, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." Let's turn our eyes during this pandemic.