

Psalm 57

“David in a Cave, Jesus in a Tomb”

July 10, 2022

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Pentecost Season

Listen now to God’s word from Psalm 57, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

Psalm 57

To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.

*1 Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.*

*2 I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.*

*3 He will send from heaven and save me;
he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah
God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!*

*4 My soul is in the midst of lions;
I lie down amid fiery beasts—
the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.*

*5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!
Let your glory be over all the earth!*

6 *They set a net for my steps;
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my way,
but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah*

7 *My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast!
I will sing and make melody!*

8 *Awake, my glory!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn!*

9 *I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.*

10 *For your steadfast love is great to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

11 *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!
Let your glory be over all the earth!*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

One of the great blessings of the pastoral life is how much time I am able to give to reading, studying, discussing, teaching and preaching the scriptures.

The Scriptures are endlessly fascinating, endlessly rewarding to our attention, and I see a huge part of my call as your pastor is simply to seek to encourage you see the beauty and power of God's word, that you might come to believe and act as though the words of Psalm 19 are true, that God's word is "more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold; [that it is] sweeter than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb."

One of the most fascinating aspects of God's word is how the different parts of the Scriptures relate to one another - how the themes and images build on one another, how the stories of the Old Testament saints take on deeper and richer meanings when they're read in light of the story of Jesus.

We can see this clearly in the Scripture readings we heard already this morning - stories which, though separated by hundreds of years in time serve to illuminate one and grow in glory, story by story.

The first story is from 1 Samuel 24. Importantly, this story serves as the background and context for David's composition of Psalm 57, our sermon text this morning.

David is being pursued by Saul and his army, and he and his men have been forced into a cave for hiding. David is overwhelmingly outnumbered, and his position seems hopeless.

There is literally nowhere for them to further run - they have been forced into a hole in the ground, while Saul's army passes by right outside. And then, Saul himself enters the cave.

This, of course, is a moment of extreme danger for David and his men.

But God is with David in the cave. He is with him, there, in his moment of terror and desperation.

And when David resists the temptation to kill Saul in the cave (which not only would have been wrong ethically, but also would have brought about David's destruction, as Saul's soldiers would have surely entered the cave in search of Saul if he had not returned) and David's moment of desperation turns into an experience of deliverance - Saul is convicted of his sin against David and, for a time at least, turns away from persecuting him.

The second story this morning comes from Daniel 6. Over 400 years have passed. Judah is now in exile in Babylon.

Now, this story, Daniel, a righteous and holy man, has been conspired against by his enemies (in much the same way that David was conspired against by Saul) and those wicked men have succeeded in throwing him down into a pit, into a hole in the ground.

And this hole is full of lions, ready to tear Daniel limb from limb. The desperation and danger of this moment couldn't be more acute. Daniel is helpless against a violent and painful death.

But God is with Daniel there in the pit, in his moment of terror and danger - and in the kindness and faithfulness of God, the pit of destruction becomes the place of Daniel's deliverance.

An Angel of the Lord comes and shuts the mouths of the lions, keeping Daniel safe all night, and when the morning comes, Daniel is brought out of the pit safe and sound, and his enemies are thrown in and consumed.

And so the words of David in Psalm 57 are fulfilled, not only in his experience, but in Daniel's as well: "They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves."

And that brings us to our final story. 600 years have gone by since the time of Daniel, 1000 years since the time of David, but their stories reach their glorious fulfillment in the story of Jesus.

Like David, like Daniel, Jesus' enemies have conspired against him, and like David and Daniel, they have put him into a pit. But this time, Jesus is not, like David and Daniel, simply in great danger.

No, this time, Jesus is dead in the hole in the ground in which his enemies have placed him.

Jesus has gone into a pit a way that his forefathers never did, for his pit, his cave, is a tomb, and his body is cold and lifeless, fully given over to death.

But God is with Jesus there in the tomb. God has not abandoned his soul to Sheol, and he will not let his holy one see corruption.

And again, like with David, like with Daniel, but in a more glorious way than even they experienced, the pit, the hole, becomes the place of God's deliverance - for on the third day, Jesus is raised from the dead and breaks free from death's power.

Death and resurrection, Beloved. Death and resurrection.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not only the actions of God that brought about our salvation.

No, death and resurrection is the fundamental movement of the Christian life.

David and Daniel both experienced symbolic deaths and symbolic resurrections when they went down into the cave, into the pit, and rose out of them victorious.

And for Jesus, death and resurrection was more than a symbol, more than a picture - it was literal death and literal resurrection.

But this pattern of symbolic death and resurrection is the pattern of our lives that we live in union with Jesus.

Remember the words of Jesus in John 12: "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also." Jesus doesn't say, "Wherever my servant is, there I am."

No, he says - you must follow me if you would serve me - your life must be conformed to mine, for where I am, there you will be.

Beloved, this is what it means to follow Jesus - to follow him into this pattern of death and resurrection that will permeate all of our lives, that will culminate in a true death and a true resurrection.

And what Psalm 57 wants us to see is that, understood rightly, the cave, the pit, the tomb, the place of terror, of desperation, of death, is not a place where we are abandoned by God - no the cave, the pit, the tomb is the place of God's special presence, his special and abiding faithfulness of love.

Psalm 57 is written, the preface tells us, "when David fled from Saul, in the cave."

Psalm 57 is a psalm of the cave. It is a psalm written in a place of danger and desperation and death. Yet here is how it begins:

*1 Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.*

For David, and for Daniel, and for Jesus, the cave, the pit, the tomb, is not a place of terror. It is a place of refuge.

It is a place of refuge because God is there. And his wings overshadow and provide refuge until the storms of destruction pass by.

Listen to the confidence of David as he prays from the cave:

*2 I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
3 He will send from heaven and save me;
he will put to shame him who tramples on me. Selah
God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!*

God's purpose, David understands, is being fulfilled in this place of danger and darkness.

And that is because it is when he is in this place, when he is in the cave, when he is at his lowest point, when he is at his most vulnerable that David knows that God will send from heaven and save him - that God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness.

Beloved, what if the darkest periods of your life - the moments of danger and terror, the times when you lost your job, the moments when you experienced heartache in relationship to your children, the moments when friends abandoned you or you experienced trouble in your marriage or you lost your health - what if these moments weren't accidents, weren't moments when God took his eye off of you, but rather moments where God was fulfilling his purpose for you, moments when God's steadfast love and faithfulness was being sent out from heaven to you?

This psalm, and the triple witness and testimony of David, Daniel and Jesus invite us to consider our experiences of the cave, the pit and the tomb differently.

They invite us to see these places not as times when God abandoned us, but moments when God's presence was especially near, when we were actually being hidden and given refuge under the shadow of his wings, moments when his steadfast love and faithfulness were made real to us in a new and profound way.

David then speaks from the cave again in verses 4-6, describing the danger of his situation, but praising God for the deliverance he promises.

*4 My soul is in the midst of lions;
I lie down amid fiery beasts—
the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.*

*5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!
Let your glory be over all the earth!*

*6 They set a net for my steps;
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my way,
but they have fallen into it themselves.*

David confesses his fear and danger openly - but right in the middle of that confession he bursts into praises - asking God to be exalted, for his glory to cover the earth.

To praise God, even in the midst of our crisis, our darkness - surely, that, in many ways, is the ultimate expression of faith, of confidence in the goodness and trustworthiness of God.

And in verse 6, the deliverance comes - the net dug by his enemies has become a trap for David's enemies to fall into - a promise that is fulfilled not only in the life of David and his adversarial relationship to Saul, but in the lives of Daniel and Jesus as well.

Then, in verses 7-11, the psalm just explodes with praise.

As you listen to these words, think of them not only being prayed and sung by David, but also by Daniel, and by Jesus — for these are words given for all of God's people who are delivered from their cave, their pit, their tomb. This, beloved, is resurrection language.

*7 My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast!*

I will sing and make melody!

8 Awake, my glory!

Awake, O harp and lyre!

I will awake the dawn!

9 I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;

I will sing praises to you among the nations.

*10 For your steadfast love is great to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

11 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens!

Let your glory be over all the earth!

These are words of victory - these are words of praise. And they are a reminder that the Christian life is not only a calling to follow Jesus on the way of the cross - the Christian life is one of union with Jesus in his resurrection.

Death and resurrection, beloved. Not only death, but resurrection as well. That is the pattern of our lives. Resurrection on the last day - yes. But resurrection in the here and now as well.

Beloved, what I want you to see is that the faith and confidence and victory that Psalm 57 describes is not only for David, and Daniel, and Jesus. It is something you are invited into as well.

For your life is bound up in the life of Jesus, and his death and resurrection are yours - not only someday far out in the future, on the last day, but here and now, in the midst of your life today.

In Romans 8, Paul gives the Church this remarkable promise. He tells us that the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells also in us.

The same Spirit that dwelt with David in the cave when he was pursued by Saul. The same Spirit who dwelt with Daniel when he was cast down into the pit among the wild beasts. The same Spirit who dwelt with Jesus when his dead body was laid in the tomb.

That same Spirit who delivered David, who rescued Daniel, who raised Jesus from the grave - that same Spirit dwells, beloved, in you.

And that means that in your life, death will never have the last word. Despair does not win.

No, your life is bound up with the life of Jesus.

And that means that your cave will become your place of deliverance, your despair will turn to praise, and all your deaths will be met with resurrection - resurrection wrought by the Spirit of God as he sends out his steadfast love and faithfulness.

And so we say, with David, with Daniel, with Jesus, with the Church around the world:

*7 My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast!*

I will sing and make melody!

8 Awake, my glory!

Awake, O harp and lyre!

I will awake the dawn!

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