

Sermon Archive 140

Sunday 12 March 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 121

John 3: 1-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The order of service referred to this work not as a sermon, but as a meditation.

-ooOoo-

In the back of my mind I keep a lovely old psalm. I go to visit it sometimes – when I need reminding of the presence of God. And in recent times, I’ve had a sharpening need for that – a deepening longing to understand that God is close. So the psalm and I are deepening our friendship. When we meet, first it speaks to me of someone looking up to the mountains, and realising that God is not way up there. Not in distant rumbling thunder, not in obscuring volcanic smoke. God is here. In the act of lifting up my eyes, God is here. When I am kept in constancy, God is **here**. Where my feet find firm foundations, God is here.

- When I am sheltered from the heat,
- when I am protected from the dark,
- when I am enabled to live in goodness,
- when I am loved, and my “going out” and “coming in” feel companioned,

God is here –

here in the graces and blessings that follow me – in the people who make it real. **This** is my help. This is my **comfort**. As we are kept and cherished, befriended and supported, God is here. That is what I have told people when they’ve asked me. And that’s what I’ve told myself when I’ve been needing to know. Not up a mountain, but **here**. God is here – the presence of God.

I mentioned, didn't I, that I've been visiting these thoughts, conversing with this psalm, quite a lot recently. It's true. Even though I'm a teacher of these things, a "professional believer" as it were, sometimes I need assurance. I think every human being, living a real human life, seeing what we see, is going to have times where God isn't easy to see. If things are lonely, or if things are scary, or if things are dark, it's hard to talk about the presence of God. So the psalm *is* a lovely old psalm – a very good friend. I'm pleased to have it dwelling in the back of mind. I'm grateful I can visit it, and that it brings itself to our friendship. We all need encouraging by our friends in our believing in the presence of God.

-ooOoo-

There was this man. He was a teacher like me, but not like me. He didn't yet talk about the presence of God; but people around him found themselves speaking about it. "He couldn't be doing the things that he's doing", they said, "if God weren't present. What sorts of things" I'd asked. There was something about some wedding in Cana, some miracle with wine and people nicely celebrating. There was something about some scuffle in the temple, some amazing courage and self-consuming zeal. There were rumours about him reading the mind of a man called Nathaniel. Light shining in darkness, the Word becoming flesh, grace and understanding emerging. Disciples gathering and new lives being born.

In the act of lifting up my eyes, God is here. When I am kept in constancy, God is here. When my feet find firm foundations, God is here.

- When I am sheltered from the heat,
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God is here - - -

Is *this* what we were seeing in this teacher? The old psalm coming true? The becoming real of the presence of God?

I knew I had to go and see him. So I did. One night, when the other teachers wouldn't be watching, I went to see him. "Rabbi", I said, "we

know you're a teacher who's come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God".

I thought it a good commencement for a conversation; but it didn't go well. He said one thing, and I heard another. He's talking about spirit, and I'm hearing about flesh. I'm opening with words about signs that we've seen, and he's responding by talking about the blowing of a wind that's invisible. Then he's saying that we've already seen all we need to see, but doggedly refuse to believe. "Are you a teacher of Israel", he says, "and yet you don't understand?"

"Jesus, I want to see God. I want to know that God is present. This is a terrible conversation. I've lifted up my eyes for help! From where will my help come? Please, won't you help me understand?"

At verse 13, there feels like there's a change of mood. Jesus' speech becomes calmer, more reflective. He feels like he's now speaking not so much to a nation that's refusing to receive him, but more to someone who's receiving power to become one of the children of God – born not of the will of the flesh, nor of the human will, but of God. Now he's speaking to someone who's in the process of being born from above.

"Jesus, I want to see God. I want to know that God is present."

In this new mood of dialogue, now he speaks to me of an ancient legend. It's a story about my ancestors afflicted in the desert. A plague of snakes is attacking them. The people are dying. The people are crying – and asking for help. (From where will my help come?) Moses fashions a snake from bronze, lifts it up on a pole. The people are commanded to look at it, and suddenly they're healed - healed following a vision of that which afflicts them. Even so, before **my** eyes, Jesus says to me, the Son of Man must be lifted up – for my healing.

This again is stretching my capacity to understand. Jesus becoming a vision of that which afflicts me? Jesus reminding me of all the dreadful things that human beings do to one another? Jesus, being lifted up on a pole, and I am forced to watch? Somehow, this awful vision becoming something beside the road along which I am healed? There are dark shadows around this kind of thinking; there are disturbing deep hues in

this picture. Jesus, I lift up my eyes. I think I'd rather see a mountain – not someone suffering. God seems distant from that. From where will my help come?

Jesus doesn't speak to me now about resurrection. Easter is still a long way off, and we who are being born of the Spirit have yet to be formed. But for now Nicodemus is told, and I am told, and any honest Christian listening in and seeking the presence of God is told, that God loves this world – in which we seek holy presence. We're told that there is no divine desire that any child of God should be condemned. We're told that belief in the only Son will lead to life. Not death. Not darkness. But life. God is here. God is close. There is no condemnation. The gift is life.

-ooOoo-

I turn now, from my night time conversation with Jesus - the one whose work and words cause people to speak about the presence of God. And I go back to my old friend, the psalm – with whom I speak when I need to know that God is present. That self-same psalm seems different now - like its affirmation (the closeness of God) has been demonstrated in an extraordinary life - that has touched my life. It feels like, even though it was always about the presence of God, now it's also somehow about the presence of love, and the gifting of life. The presence of God, and the giving of life.

- In the act of lifting up my eyes, God is here. Life.
- When I am kept in constancy, God is here. Life.
- When my feet find firm foundations, God is here. Life.
- When I am sheltered from the heat,
- when I am protected from the dark,
- when I am enabled to live in goodness,
- when I am loved, and my going out and coming in feel companioned,
- when Jesus speaks to me of a great love that holds the world,

God is here – and it is life.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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