

## 1st SUNDAY IN LENT

February 18, 2018

Text: Psalm 25:1-10

Theme: Lift Up Our Souls

Dear God, so far (today) I have obeyed all the commandments. I have not gossiped once. I have not lost my temper nor have I been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over-indulgent. I am grateful that everything is going so well but in a few minutes I am going to get out of bed and from then on I will need a lot more help from you. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen

We are now in the Lenten season and we tend to make this into a time of intense self-reflection. Once we are out of bed and start our day we intentionally measure our every step, we monitor our every word, and we mentally account for all that we do before we retire again at night. And before we close our eyes we take inventory:

*Did we sacrifice enough for Christ today?*

*Were we good enough? Did we say the right thing?*

*What more can we do to make tomorrow even better than today?*

And in the background the sound is still ringing in our ears from Ash Wednesday when we heard the trumpet blast the alarm as his prophet spoke directly to us: Return to the Lord your God.

During this Lenten season I have something different in mind for us. Instead of concentrating on our miserable, sinful selves let us spend our time together reflecting on the true nature of God. On this first Sunday in Lent let us move quickly to Psalm 25 and study together this prayer offered to God from someone who (as soon as he stepped out of bed) needed the help of God to guide him through his day. It will inform us on how we can approach these 40-days of Lent (not out of fear) but with a clear understanding of our relationship with God.

In Verse 1: To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust.

Here are two sentences that could start every prayer from now until Easter morning. In Israel, when the people lift up their hands in a stretched-out position they are beckoning God for help.

But to lift up our very souls to God means we direct our whole being up to him. We place all of our trust in God and we say through this one gesture that our lives depend completely on God alone. And in the second verse we hear the cry of one who knows he has failed the Lord. He does not want to be put to shame. He does not want the rest of the world staring at him as if he wore a visible sign of his sin. His human struggle with human relationships encourages him to ask God for wisdom. He wants to learn from God. He wants to know what path to take that will lead him to the truth. He wants to be taught by the God of his salvation.

By the time we get to the end of verse 5 I have an image in my mind of a mediocre student standing before a demanding teacher. Before anyone else has entered the class, she approaches the teacher and promises to do better next time. She will listen to his every word moving forward. Holding a paper in her hand that has the word *failed* at the top, she does not want to be put to shame before the other students. She wants to learn from this wise teacher. And after she sings his praises she sits down in her seat and waits patiently for the lessons to begin.

But as the psalm continues, the author is not waiting patiently for the lessons to begin. He is not done with his praise of God and continues with his prayer. He reminds God that he is a God of mercy and steadfast love – characteristics that have been part of God since the beginning of time. He tells God not worry about our sins that we have been committing since we were young. Forget about all those things we have done. Remember us now for you are a good and upright God. You teach sinners. You always lead us to the right path. So just remember us. Remember the covenant that you made with us.

Let me take a brief detour from the psalm to help us comprehend the importance of the covenant he brings up in verse 10. It is because of the covenant that God made with his people that the psalmist can offer such a bold prayer. In his studies, he would know that God is without a doubt just and hates sin. He would also know God as one who was gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He would know it is in God's nature to save, and it is in God's nature to create.

When we hear the word *covenant* we recall the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 15. But even before that we have the story of the flood in Genesis 9. In the ancient world it was understood that the One who created all things also stood as judge over all things. The creator was entitled to destroy anything that proved counter to its will. But in the case of the God we worship, God did not destroy all things. Yes – God wiped the slate clean of the evil he saw but he left a remnant and started over with the survivors of the ark. And then this God we worship made an incredible promise. God said he would never again destroy the earth and all its inhabitants in such a way.

This is what we learn about God through that story. We learn that God willingly bound himself to humanity in a new and different way. God is not only our creator but God is our protector, committed to refrain from punishing humanity or destroying the world. The sign of the rainbow serves as a reminder that simply of the beauty of the earth after a rainstorm but of God's refusal (ever again) to take up the divine bow against humanity. And (this is the really exciting new for today) by binding himself to us in this way, God became deeply invested in our fate.

So along with all the other adjectives we use for God – like powerful, just, patient, and loving – the God we worship is also self-giving. God willingly entered into a relationship that put limits even on God's choices.

This is like the most incredible news we can hear at the start of Lent because what we learn about God in this very first week will be lived out for us on Easter. Jesus Christ will demonstrate to us what God did in this one covenant. Jesus will put limits on his divinity to die on the cross and will sacrifice his freedom to put to death sin and evil.

And here is another hidden gem in what God has done for us. If God (who alone has the right to despair, judges, and destroy we miserable and sinful creatures, but surrenders that right for our sakes, might not we consider the same? Might not we who have tasted this mercy look upon the other people in our lives who drive us crazy and say to ourselves that they, too, are worthy of our forgiveness.

Now that we know what the psalmist knew before he sat down to pray to God, this psalm becomes even more powerful.

Now we know to whom he prays. Pray this psalm until the sun rises on Easter morning and ask God to make his ways known to us. Ask God to teach us his ways and lead us to his truth. Because the God to whom we pray is the God of our salvation. Amen