

Sermon 08-30-2020
 “Praising God in a Storm” – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 Psalm 34:1-4

*¹ I will bless the LORD at all times;
 his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
² My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
 let the humble hear and be glad.
³ O magnify the LORD with me,
 and let us exalt his name together.
⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
 and delivered me from all my fears.*

1)

Another black man gets brutally shot in what appears to be a complete overreaction if not a crime by law enforcement officers. This time it happened in our own home state. The reaction and aftermath, similar to what we’ve seen in Minneapolis 3 months ago. It impacts a lot of people:

I’ve been in dialogue with people of color who feel they are ganged up against, that things are getting worse not better. I’ve talked to members of the police who feel they are mistreated for the sins of their colleagues. We’ve heard the stories of property owners who are broken due to the irresponsible behavior of some protesters who took to violence...

And all of this is happening in the midst of a time when families in our whole nation are distraught about chaotic back to school scenarios. Some parents are worried about their kids going back to in-person education. Other parents have to quit jobs so they can home school their kids or go into debt so they can afford sending their kids to private school because the online-only strategy of their public school is not working for them.

And then let’s not forget that there are countless of our vulnerable people out there who live in fear of getting sick. Some members of our church have not left their home since March.

These are hard days.

How have the lyrics of the song that Jack sang for us connected with you? “Praise you in this storm,” written by Mark Hall and Bernie Herms and famously performed by the band Casting Crowns, speaks powerfully into times such as these:

“As the thunder rolls, I barely hear you whisper through the rain” – isn’t that what you experience so often in your life. When the storms of life hit, it’s hard to hear and see the gracious goodness of God.

And yet it is then when the Lord speaks most powerfully to us:

“I’m with you”

I personally find this song such a great witness, because it brings something together that we often are tempted to separate: Real pain and hardship on the one hand – praising God for his goodness on the other.

Wouldn't you say our gut tells us that hardship and praise don't go together? It's the mystery of faith and the reality of a life lived in faith that brings the two together:

**“And every tear I've cried You hold in your hand
You never left my side And though my heart is torn
I will praise you in this storm”**

2)

I don't know what was going on in your mind and in your heart when you heard today's scripture reading.

You may have been stuck in worries about racism, about school, about the health of a loved one. Psalm 34 is one of those Psalms where we may have a gut reaction. And this gut reaction is: *“Ah, these words, they just don't fit into our times right now.”*

¹ **I will bless the LORD at all times;** *his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

² **My soul makes its boast in the LORD;** *let the humble hear and be glad.*

³ **O magnify the LORD** *with me, and let us exalt his name together.*

How can you say this right now?

How can you say this right now when you are a person of color and fear for your life and retaliation?

How can you say this when you're a police officer and you keep earning so much hatred and suspicion these days?

How can you say this when you were so excited to start college for the first time and you just found out that instead of moving into an awesome dormitory in North Carolina you have to study online from your parents' home?

How can you *praise* God then?

I'm not sure I can answer this question. I think I can only point to the same testimony that the writers of the song “Praise him in this storm” expressed: We don't ignore our hardship, instead we bring it to God. We cry it out to God and we wait for our tears to be found in God's hands.

Interestingly, we find the same instruction in the Psalm itself:

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

When you're in the middle of a storm, it may seem counter intuitive for you to praise God – and yet the life experience of so many people of faith shows that this is *exactly* what has helped them. They sought the Lord by praising him and through their act of praise they heard the Lord and felt deliverance from fears.

You know what happens when you're delivered from fears: All of the sudden you can think about racism in a new way, all of the sudden you can deal with people who attack you because you're a police officer in a new way, all of the sudden you can brainstorm your kids school schedule with new energy, all of the sudden you can come up with new ways how you can care for your aging parents in a pandemic...

God may not deliver you from your fears instantly– but what we learn is this:

- **Praise is not limited to the good times only.**
- **Praise sets you free to act in new ways.**

How do you feel about that? This may be a lesson that is not your cup of tea – but I urge you: Try it! What do you have to lose? If you are already feeling you're in the midst of a storm of life – it can't get any worse by trying a new spiritual practice?

Praise the Lord and see where that leads you. There is no reason why a member or friend of FUMC can't find God in the storm through the old practice of praise!

3)

You know, I've been thinking of our Methodist funeral liturgy. The greeting for a funeral service in our Methodist Book of Worship goes like this:

“Friends, we have gathered here to praise God and to witness to our faith as we celebrate the life of...”

Isn't that interesting? I confess, I don't always use these words – I too struggle with the idea of praise in the mist of hardship and grief. But there's power to it. I think the people who wrote our liturgy knew what they were doing.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

You may not be a person who comes up with extraordinary words of praise like that of Psalm 34. You don't have to. You may praise God in much simpler but nevertheless authentic ways. You may just say a simple “thank you God” when you praise God in the storm of your life. Start there and maybe it leads you to further words of praise. Maybe you start with “thank you God” and then you move on to something like: *“God, you are so good...there's so much that's **not** good in my life right now, but **you're** good – and for that I thank you, for that I praise you God. Thank you that you're God, thank you that you're good, always. I love you.”*

The Character of God does not change due to the stormy circumstance of our lives. When evil and hardship are all around you, God is still good and nothing changes that.

May you find this to be true. May you find that...

[And] every tear I've cried You hold in your hand
You never left my side And though my heart is torn
I will praise you in this storm

Amen.