



UNSEEN FOOTPRINTS AND SHARING STORIES

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Psalm 77

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Summer Sundays at Brick Church are always a stark reminder to me. They remind me that I am not much of a singer. Left to my own devices I can read a little music and sort of get in the neighborhood of the right pitch as I seek to cling to the melody. But it is a rather weak effort. If the notes get too high, I get flat. If the melody gets too unfamiliar and intricate, I get lost.

I do not have this problem during the program year. On those Sundays I am surrounded by a wall of sound that carries even my voice to greater heights. I can sing with confidence because the male members of the choir lift me up and carry me along for the ride. I find myself singing with gusto and certainty.

I can have a similar experience in my spiritual life. Sometimes there are Sundays where the questions I carry feel palpably heavy within me and my faith can feel as faint and shaky as my singing voice left on its own. Where are you, God? And what exactly are you up to in this moment? But when one of those Sundays arises there is a little story I tell myself.

It goes something like this. A parishioner makes an appointment to come and meet with her pastor. She has been a member of the church for over 30 years and is one of those rain or shine Christians who can always be found in her favorite pew every Sunday. She knocks timidly on the minister's door. "Susan, please come in. It is so wonderful to see you." The minister warmly welcomes her and gives her a hug. But she can immediately sense a reticence, almost an anxiety within her. She wonders if Susan has received a scary health diagnosis. "Please come and sit down and tell me what is on your mind today." As Susan sits down it is as if she has



shrunk into the chair. She nervously picks at her skirt and has trouble making eye contact. The minister starts to share her anxiety, wondering what is so troubling for her. But she stays calm and waits for Susan to speak.

“Reverend Jones, I don’t always believe all of it.” Reverend Jones waits for her to say more but clearly Susan is reluctant to do so. “Susan, what do you not always believe?” “The Confession of Faith. Some Sundays there are parts of it that I just cannot find the faith to believe.” She paused for a moment and then it all just came tumbling out. “Like some Sundays when we say the Apostles Creed when we come to the part about Jesus being raised from the dead, I just get silent. This all started right after my sister died last year. There is just so much death; it is hard to imagine that anything or anyone can defeat death. It is not every Sunday, but some Sundays it is just too hard for me to believe it all. And not saying it makes me feel guilty about being in church. Like I am not doing my job or something.”

Reverend Jones replied, “You know Susan, I have days like that too.” “You do?” “Yes. I have days when I struggle to believe as well.” “So what do you do?” “Those are the days that I let you carry me with your belief. I am sure you have noticed that in those times when you find yourself silent during the Confession of Faith, the entire room does not go silent. Others are raising their voices and their belief on your behalf. And there will be days when you do the same for them. That is why we gather together into community. Together we share this faith and carry each other forward in good times and in bad.” Susan just smiled, stood up, gave Reverend Jones a hug, and walked out looking as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

This is the story of Psalm 77 and the story we are called to share. The psalm opens with a desperate plea for deliverance. *“I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.”* We are not told what is causing the anguish but each of us knows what anxiety and anguish tastes like in our mouths. We know the texture of the darkness at 3 AM when we toss and turn with torment and worry. The psalmist wonders if he has been spurned by



God. Listen to verse 10 again, “And I say, ‘It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’” The New English Bible translates this as “Has God’s right hand lost its grasp?” In difficult times it can feel as if the divine has just let us drop and we have fallen into a forgotten place beyond God’s care.

And then the strangest thing happens. Verse 11 feels as if we have turned a page and are reading from a different psalm. “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.” There is no talk of anguish. Nor is there any talk of problems resolved. And God goes from being referred to in the third person to directly being spoken to in the second person. Some people have actually argued that this is a different psalm.

But it is not. And that is an important distinction for us in times of struggle. How do we move from a place of doubting God’s presence in our lives to once again trusting that God is indeed lovingly present with us in all times? How do we go from lamenting that we have slipped from God’s loving hands to praising the “God who works wonders?” How do we leap across a chasm that wide and deep? None of us can make that remarkable jump solely on our own. Our anxiety and anguish in the darkness of 3 AM may be ours alone, but it is together that we begin the journey beyond the darkness. The Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann puts it like this, “Everything depends on having the public, canonical memory available which becomes in this moment of pain a quite powerful, personal hope.”¹ In other words, there are times when I need you to believe for me and remind me of who God has always been and will surely continue to be. And there are times when you will need me to do the same for you. Each of us is called to remember the story of God’s faithful love and continue to share it with each other.

It has been said that in Mesopotamian culture, the “dentist” who was likely just someone with a crude pair of pliers would recite a liturgy which was a short account of how the world was created just as they were removing a tooth.² When children are anxious or in pain it is often the telling of a story that allows for them to calm down. And when we are hurting, there is a story we need to be told to us.

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



The psalmist speaks to the divine of just what story we should collectively carry with us to share with each other. “When the waters saw you, O God, they were afraid; the very deep trembled.” We are called to collectively remember that at the dawn of time it is our God who out of chaos fashioned our creation and gifted us with this world. The psalmist again speaks to God, “Your way through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters,” and “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” We are called to remember God’s saving act of liberation leading a rag tag bunch of slaves to freedom and the Promised Land and promised freedom for us all. And if we were the psalmist we would also tell the tale of Jesus Christ whose love was greater than all that assails us, conquering even death itself, promising us life eternal.

We are called to remember all of God’s salvation history, all of the ways God has lifted us up for generation upon generation and time after time in each of our own lives and in our life together as the church.

Of course remembering this is not always as easy as just rattling off a few stories from the Bible and having our eyes opened to how God is at work in any particular moment. As our text today also states, in the midst of God making a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters, O God, “your footprints were unseen.” Even in the midst of the divine’s most mighty and loving acts, our perception of God’s purposes at work can be cloudy.

I dearly wish there was some special set of x-ray specs we could wear that would allow us to see those unseen footprints every day of our lives but there is surely not. J. Clinton McCann Jr. writes, “Faith is no guarantee against the possibility of despair.” He is correct. It is a consummate truth that woven into the tapestry of our human condition are threads that can lead us to dark places. But McCann is also correct about this, “we are a people of memory and hope...even amid despair, the faithful will remember that God has been our help in ages past and will be our hope for years to come.”³



Some days you will remember, and it will give you just enough of a glimpse of those unseen footprints, and you will believe, and share the story with me. Some days I will remember, and catch just enough of a glimpse of those unseen footprints, and I will believe and share the story with you. And together we will trust that God's right hand never loses its tender grasp upon us.

Once upon a time, before time began, God fashioned order out of chaos, forming an abundant creation and then created us in God's image. Once upon a time, God saw the people in bondage and against all odds led them to freedom and a home of their own. Once upon a time, God's only Son took on human form to teach us and heal us, and transform us, and even die for us. Rising from the dead, Jesus Christ defeated death for us all. Once upon a time, God's Holy Spirit filled the disciples with passionate energy and they proclaimed the gospel in all languages to all people and the church was born. Once upon a time, that same Holy Spirit led disciples to found a congregation that would one day become the Brick Church. And that Spirit abided and continues to abide with Brick in every season of its faithful service, rain or shine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Cousar, Charles B., et al, *Texts for Preaching: Year*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, p. 405.

2 Craddock, Fred B., *Preaching Through the Christian Year: C*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994, p. 314.

3 McCann, J. Clinton, *The New Interpreter's Bible: vol IV*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, p. 985.