

## **Psalm 77**

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. Selah

You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: 'Will the Lord spurn for ever, and never again be favourable?

Has his steadfast love ceased for ever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?' Selah

And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

## **Luke 9: 51-62**

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

### **“Let Me First Say Goodbye”**

**Rev. Joel Kershaw**

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Grace be yours, and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So it's time. The time has come to say goodbye. I've always thought the sermon should be more about good news, than goodbyes, so I thought, let me first say goodbye. And then

we'll get to the good news. It's been a fun trip for five years, and for longer. It's been fun because I get to work with teenagers, and they make life interesting all the time. You get to meet all kinds of interesting people. There's one person I met on a lovely highway in West Texas, driving the youth in the church van, down to Mississippi for a mission trip. I met a very nice Texas state trooper who pulled me over because I missed a speed limit change, and this very gracious, lovely man, in his big cowboy hat, walked up to the church van and took one look at the gaggle of youth that I was hauling behind me, and took mercy on my soul, and gave me a warning, that I still have to this day.

It's been a fun trip. A lot of fun, and I want to thank you all for letting me be here, for entrusting your teenagers to me, for allowing me to be their minister, for without you and your support, there could be no youth ministry. No one to help them with their troubles and guide them through life, no one to help them learn what faith might be about. It's all because of you. The youth of this church are amazing, and it's because you give them the space to be amazing. So thank you for giving me the space, and allowing me to be with them.

Preparing for today has been a bit of a challenge. What do you say on your last Sunday? What can you say? What can you say to the congregation that has been your home for so long? What can you say to the youth that have grown up knowing you as their minister? What can I possibly say, to say goodbye? Well, attempting to answer that question has led me to some conclusions about saying goodbye. First of all, there are times when we need to look back. We just need to. Times we need to look back, to seek comfort in the past, to remember when we faced something hard in life and God was there. To remember when we faced something hard in life and then realized we weren't facing it alone. We faced it together, side by side.

The Hebrew people, they knew a little bit about facing hard times. They had suffered oppression and slavery in Egypt, they had faced hunger and dire thirst in the wilderness. They watched as their once-prosperous kingdom was split in two by sibling rivalry. They stared down the sword of conquering empires, only to wind up in exile, banished to strange lands. The Hebrew people knew what it was to go through hard times. And in those hard times, they would call upon God, as we heard in the Psalm. "I cry aloud to God, in the day of my trouble I seek the Lord." We seek the Lord. They sought God by remembering what had been. We heard it. You heard the recounting of how God had been with them. The Hebrew Bible is dripping with these rehearsals of all that God has done for God's people, to bring them hope in a new day.

But why do we remember? Why do we seek the past? This isn't my first goodbye, not even my first goodbye to a church. Being the son of a minister, we moved a bit. But one goodbye stands out in my memory. We were moving from Wray, on the eastern plains of Colorado, to Pueblo. I was pretty happy about this move because I had struggled to be the new kid in a small town in Wray, so I wasn't at all disappointed to leave. We packed up our stuff and loaded it in the truck, and off we went to Pueblo, and our house, my parents' first house they ever bought, this beautiful home, had this huge swimming pool in the back yard. So the next day, my brother and I celebrated our new home by spending most

of that day in the pool, while my mom took to unpacking the dishes and deciding which boxes to unload first. The one thing I forgot to unpack was the sunscreen, and I got horribly burned, one of the worst sunburns I've ever had. What made it worse was, then the next day we loaded back up in the car and drove the six hours back to Wray, so my Dad could preach his last Sunday.

At the end of the service we lined up outside the sanctuary, and we were greeting all the people as they came out, and every one of those lovely, lovely people just simply insisted on hugging me as hard as they could. And with each loving embrace, I was ever so subtly reminded of the pain that had been my time in Wray. After about half the congregation I finally got fed up and went into the sanctuary and grabbed one of the prayer cards, and stuck it in my pocket with a little sign that said, "Sunburn - hug gently."

Sometimes our past is not far enough in the past. But eventually, we seek it. Eventually we seek it, but why? We seek the past because we need to know that we are not alone, that we are not the first nor the last to face the stuff of life. That we and God are in this together. We need to know that we stand on the shoulders of those amazing, inspiring, dynamic leaders, the Abrahams and Isaacs and Jacobs, the Moses and the Aarons, the Davids and the Isaiahs. The Christ, Jesus. Those amazing and inspiring and dynamic leaders that brought us through the stuff of life to this very moment.

Who has led you through the stuff of life? I've got a whole pew of people who've led me through the stuff of life, right here. The people in your life that inspire and bring you through. When we face the times that bring us down, that strip us of our hope, that seek and seem to suck the life out of living. We need to remember that there have been times that have breathed life into our spirits, that have inspired our souls and left us awash in the love of God. We need those memories.

Too many stories to share in a single sermon, but so much of the last five years came rushing back. On that same Texas trip that I got the warning from the lovely state trooper, we stopped at a church in East Texas on our way home from Mississippi. It was a Saturday and we were going to go to church. Some of us went to the traditional service and some of us went to the contemporary service, and we were meeting up after that worship to load up in the vans and continue on our journey home. Some of our more outgoing youth had befriended some folks who seemed to play in a bluegrass band that led worship in the space they were in, and they had managed to get an invitation to come and sing with them a little bit. "Come on in and join us."

So, before I knew it, I was being ushered into a worship space, and I was handed a guitar I'd never played by a man I'd never met, and one of the other youth grabbed the piano, another grabbed the microphone, and the rest of them piled in behind us, and we took over their worship service. We just took it over. We were invited, of course, but we took it over. Now, the youth may have stayed on their floor that night, but they breathed life, they breathed life into those walls. They brought our unique life to those walls, and for five years, they have breathed life into me, into my spirit, inspired my ministry.

I got a call a few months ago from my district superintendent. "Would you like to go to Brighton?" "Gosh, I don't know. When I get back to you?" "Well, we need to know tomorrow by one." (I love DS's, right Chuck? He knows.) So. Earlier that day, I'd received another call, a call from a friend, a youth sponsor and a parent. His daughter was in the hospital, not doing well. They weren't sure what was wrong. It went from bad to worse, and by that weekend, Abby and I on a Sunday afternoon, went down to Children's Hospital to visit her. When we got there, she was in a coma. She was hooked up to one machine that was filtering her blood so it wouldn't poison her. Another machine was breathing for her. She was hooked up to enough IVs to scare anyone. I hugged her dad, my friend. When we walked out of that hospital, I was sure we had said goodbye to that young woman. I was sure I was going to get a call, "Come, she's gone." But instead, I got another call. "They found a liver. It's not a match, but it will do. Can you come?" She got that liver in March, and she preached for you on Youth Sunday. She walked out of that hospital, and she's going on a mission trip in three weeks. She inspires my soul. Her whole family and the way they faced the hardest stuff of life, inspire my soul.

Every moment in ministry that I spend with these youth breathes life into my spirit, inspires my soul, and leaves me awash in the love of God. Every moment. That's why we remember. That's why we look back. Now, as often as you might be tempted to look back, sometimes we need to look forward. We need to look forward. Sometimes we need to do it. We need to turn our eyes on the horizon and see what is dawning in this new day.

In our passage from Luke's Gospel, we meet three would-be disciples. The first comes and says, "I will follow you," and Jesus says, "The road will be hard. There's no place to rest." The second says, "I will follow you, but let me go bury my father first." Jesus replies, "Let the dead bury the dead." A third says, "I will follow you, but let me return home and say goodbye to my family." And Jesus says, "No one who puts their hand to the plow and turns around is fit for the Kingdom of God." Ouch! That hurts! That's pretty harsh. Imagine the look on my face when I read that passage as the assigned Scripture for this morning, knowing that Jesus' rebuke of the man wanting to go home and say goodbye to his family was to be the inspiration for my coming home and saying goodbye to my family. Scriptures are kind of fun that way, aren't they?

Now, why would Jesus be so harsh? Why would Jesus be so harsh? Because, as often as we might be tempted to look back, sometimes we need to look forward, and the sacrifice that Jesus is calling for from this would-be disciple is far greater than I think we realize. You see, this was not an age of cell phones or Blackberries or email or Facebook. This would-be disciple couldn't Twitter home and say "Hey, I'm okay. I'm with Jesus. See you soon." If he doesn't go home to tell his family goodbye, then his family is left not knowing what happened to him. So why is Jesus so harsh? Why would Jesus respond like this?

It's because Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and it's no party. He's turned his face toward the cross. Jesus knows that this will be a road with no home, where anyone following him must understand that they follow him to the foot of that cross. This disciple does not understand the urgency of his time, the great demand of his discipleship.

And as often as we might be tempted to look back, sometimes we have to look forward. Jesus' time was one of rigid religious legalism. It was a time when how you related to God was so prescribed that it was disconnecting us from God. It was a time when looking back was less and less about comfort and inspiration in times of trial. Looking back had become a roadblock, an obstacle to faith. The religious authorities had become stuck in the past so deeply that they could not see how God was working in the now, could not see that today, God is doing a new thing in a new way. Jesus in his life and teaching, in his death and resurrection, is God calling us out of our backward slumber, awakening us, turning us toward what God is doing now.

So, what is God doing now? Well, God and the bishop (not the same thing) have called me to serve in a new way, in a new place. Change is upon us, and because of my answer to that call, we have come to that place that is not yet our past and not quite our future. The goodbye place. In this moment, we are positioned between our two passages, our Psalm and our Gospel. We are drawn to remember all that has been over my five years here and longer. We remember all the mission trips, and the friendly encounters with Texas state troopers, and the retreats, and the meetings, and the worships, and the sermons and the classes and the movies, the conversations, the Christmas decorations (I've already assured Lorraine that the youth know how to put the tree together), the laughter and the tears that we have shared over the stuff of life.

But the thing about remembering all of that which has made up our time together is that if you go back far enough, if you remember deeply enough, you'll remember that I was once the new. I was once the new, facing our future. I was new, and so were you. You were new here once too. As we mine our past and remember all that has been our time together, all of that was birthed by our daring to dream, to set our sights on the future, to creatively imagine that next step in God. What could that look like? It is from this place, this goodbye place, that we begin to birth a future as we remember the past. It is this moment that links what has come to what is becoming in God. It is in this goodbye place that we say hello to the next chapter we will write for God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is a reality that becomes more real with every moment that we dare to share with God. It is already here in this place, in this moment, and yet it is forever becoming, forever becoming. Every time we choose to love another, to share a meal, to give a gift, to welcome a stranger, and heal a wound, to dream of the future together, we reveal more deeply that kingdom of God. There is much to remember, far too much for one sermon. But the kingdom of God calls for urgency in our work as we dream big, as we dream big, as we catch a glimpse of the new thing God is doing in and through each of our lives, catch a glimpse of what God is doing in and through this church. Our chapter together may be done, but the story of our faith is not. God's kingdom is not, and so today, our good news really is goodbye. Our good news is a goodbye that makes way for the future, and God will be there. Amen.