

“Heeding the Warnings”

Sermon from Psalm 42

Given Sunday, June 28, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

“Like a stag, a doe, longing for streams of cool water, my whole being longs for you, my God. My soul aches with thirst for God, for a god that lives! When can I go and see God face to face? My only food, day or night, is my tears; they recriminate me: ‘Where is your God?’ they say.

These things I remember as I pour out my soul like water - how I’d go with the crowds and lead them into God’s house, amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, drunk with the dance of celebration.

‘Why so dispirited?’ I ask myself. ‘Why so churned up inside? Hope in God!’ I know I’ll praise God once again, for you are my Deliverance; you are my God.

This is why my heart despairs: I remember other days with you, in the land of Jordan, on Mount Hermon and the Hill of Mizar. The primeval Deep is echoing in the sound of your waterfalls; your torrents rage and break over me, overwhelming me.

Every day, God, you ordain your love toward me, and during the night you bring me your song. In my prayers to the God of my life, I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do you keep me in mourning, oppressed by an unseen enemy?’ My bones are shattered by their words. Foes taunt me constantly: ‘Where is your God?’

‘Why so dispirited?’ I ask myself. ‘Why so churned up inside? Hope in God!’ I know I’ll praise God once again, for you are my Deliverance; you are my God.”

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When I lived in Kansas I always lived in a house with a basement. Basements are useful in Kansas because of all the summer evenings when the sky stills, the air goes silent and the sirens sound, and you’re instructed to take cover while the tornado passes through. So growing up, and even as an adult, I spent a lot of time in basements, hands over my head, listening to the radio for news of the storm’s progression. And because there’s not always a tornado, we’d use that space in other ways, too. In the last house I lived in, I had a desk in against a basement wall where I’d write, a chaise lounge stacked with blankets where I’d read – it was usually cool, and quiet down there. My grandmother had portioned off a whole room for her collection of Christmas decorations. My grandfather’s woodworking tools, and a whole host of half-finished projects, covered some large slab tables. The boys had a Lego station they could entertain themselves at for hours. There was a chute from the main level where we could drop our laundry, and it would travel through the floor and end up in a basket right next to the washing machine. The cats would chase each other up and down the stairs to the basement, tumbling over each other, but when they decided to stay down for a while, they’d disappear, exploring every stack of boxes, every old cabinet, every secret corner they could find.

And one day, my black cat came upstairs from the basement, meowing proudly. She came to where our family was gathered – and in the middle of our circle, she dropped a snake from her teeth.

And it was dead. It was clear she hadn't just killed it; it looked like it had been dead for a long time. And if I know a snake is around, I don't mind; they're kind of fascinating and beautiful, I think. But the idea that I might be digging for Christmas decorations or sorting laundry and a snake would slither out from around a box of ornaments or inside a pile of socks made me nervous about that basement. And I kept wondering – how long must it have lived down there to have died down there?

We're in our third week with Teresa of Avila's classic spiritual teaching, *The Interior Castle*. Teresa was a sixteenth century nun who wrote this work that compares our soul to a home, and the spiritual journey to a tour through that home. In this home – this castle, carved from a diamond – there are seven dwelling places, and each has its own distinct character, its own learning, its own possibility. In the very center is where God makes a home. That's what we're winding our way, too. Today we're exploring the second dwelling places – we've heard the invitation to enter the home, we've considered the importance of paying attention, of getting to know our own spirits, and we've stepped inside: last week we heard the way to do that is through prayer and reflection. This week we've come to the second dwelling place... and there are snakes.

Teresa does not think snakes are fascinating and beautiful, or at least, whatever they're representing in this vision of hers is not fascinating and beautiful. They're dangerous. They're vile. They'll strike as you're trying to make your way through this house. They know your weak points and they'll bite. Perseverance, she tells us, is most necessary here. As we grow make our way closer to God, to the very center of ourselves, we awaken to new ideas, new emotions, new pieces of ourselves we were previously unaware of – and these snakes come,

and strike at our heels, to try to prevent us from journeying any deeper.

She includes a prayer for the journey in this second room – “Oh my Lord,” she writes, “your help is necessary here; without it we can do nothing. In your mercy do not consent to allow this soul to suffer deception and give up what was begun. Enlighten it that it may see the good within this castle and turn away from the bad. And draw near.” And then she turns back to her conversation with her readers and advises them: “Let the soul always heed the warning not to be conquered.”

This is the most intriguing line to me here in this description of the second dwelling places. Let the soul always heed the warning not to be conquered.

I like it for a couple of reasons:

First, to me it rings of soul freedom, that foundational Baptist principle. I wouldn't have assumed that a sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite nun would center the same ideal as contemporary American Baptists... but she does. The idea that each of us can seek God on our own, with our own tools and passions, using our own experiences as a lens to know God through and our own wisdom to interpret those experiences, bringing them to community for affirmation and to draw on collective wisdom, but not sacrificing our own understanding in the process – this is what Baptists hold dear. We guard our souls against being conquered when we claim and practice our Soul Freedom.

And I hear this call in the Psalm we read today. This scripture is a conversation with a soul. “Why so dispirited?” the Psalmist asks himself. “Why so churned up inside?” He acknowledges the pain; he lets himself live there for a little while. He knows both that his sorrow will not last forever and that he needs to let it breathe, for now. I think that’s a way of protecting a soul – giving it space to experience what it will, not policing it, not censoring it, but trusting it to endure all that comes its way – the times that call for dances of celebration, and the times when the snakes are slithering in. “I know I will praise God again,” he writes – even if the place he’s in now is one of questioning and yearning.

And it seems to me that another way of protecting a soul, another way of not letting a soul be conquered, is what’s happening in the streets these days. In McMinnville and around the country, June has seen a flood of rainbows fill our communities, a call for every person to proudly proclaim who they are and who they love, a reminder to us all of the LGBTQ+ people who fought for the rights of all of us today, a reminder that that struggle continues and will not cease until those rights are assured. And these past few months have also been the context for a movement for Black lives like we’ve not seen before. Books on anti-racism are selling out as fast as they can be reprinted. Confederate statues are coming down and young black women are dancing on the ground where they used to stand. Police forces and other social institutions are committing to new kinds of training – they’re being called out for their violences and called on to do better. We are in a moment where souls of those so long abused and threatened by our society are yearning for the attention and care and protection they deserve; a moment where the soul of our nation is called on to do this deep and difficult work of examination, and confession, and reimagination.

And that all takes energy. The energy of the soul, writes Gary Zukav, is not like the energy of our five senses. There, the questions are: “how much energy do we have? Are we getting enough sleep? Do we need more vitamins?” For our souls, he teaches, the question is: “What kind of energy do we have?” And here, there are only two possible answers. He admits that anger, stress, jealousy, resentment, addiction, compulsion may all feel like their own energies, but they are all really experiences of the energy of fear.

And the other energy of our soul is love. This can manifest in lots of ways, too: gratitude, patience, awe, contentment. All of these might feel different, they might create different physical sensations for us, but in terms of the energy of our soul, Zukav says, it comes from one of two places: fear, or love.

And the lines between these two are not as obvious or clear-cut as they may seem. Much of what we call love might be motivated by insecurity, by selfishness, by a need for approval, by a desire to cultivate a particular self-image – actions that on the surface appear to be loving, and maybe even are, are motivated from a fearful energy of the soul.

But Zukav says there is more energy in love than in fear. There is more energy in love than in fear. In the kind of love that Buddhists call the Great Compassion, the kind of love that Christians say “passes all understanding.” Not the love from me to a particular loved one, but the kind of love that embraces everyone and everything. The soul is damaged when it’s motivating energy comes from fear; it is protected by spilling itself out in love for the world.

The energy from love is how the soul opens. It's how it deepens. It's why the snakes might come, might even bite, and we'll still be ok. It's love that gives the Psalmist the assurance to say, "right now, this is hard, and heart-breaking. And I know I will praise God again."

I want to invite you to think about the energy of your soul. I want to invite you to think about the ways you might protect it, in your everyday experiences. What Teresa writes about is abstract, is ancient, but there are ways that it matters immensely here and now. Henri Nouwen wrote, "The spiritual life is not a life before, or after, or beyond our everyday existence. The spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pain and the joy of the here and now."

So during these next few moments, Geoff will play and as you listen to the music I'd invite you to pull out your paper, and your pen, and to sketch or to write or to doodle about that idea. I'd invite you to answer the question, "How is it with your soul now? What are the pains and the joys that are giving shape to your spirit in these days?"