

SOME CURES FROM THE PSALMS

5. "A Cure for Indifference"

Psalm 85

August 23, 2015

Some of you may recall way back in June I began this summer sermon series on "Some Cures from the Psalms." Memory is a fleeting thing but I recall we looked at things like "Fear", and "Worry", and "Depression" and then a couple of weeks ago we talked about the cure for "Doubt." I have said each time that calling it a cure is probably more than a 20 minute sermon can deliver but I wanted to get your attention. I wanted to ask the question "Why do you allow these things to dominate your life?" I also wanted to challenge you to look at the book of Psalms again. If you started reading the Psalms the first Sunday in June and read 2 a day most days ... you should have finished last week or be finishing today or close to finishing. Anyone want to raise your hand as reading all the way through the 150 Psalms? Good things happen when we read the Bible.

Today we come to a cure for indifference. A word that is not as troubling perhaps as fear or worry or doubt but just as destructive. It's not a word that is easy to get a handle on is it? One definition is, "a lack of interest or concern or sympathy." *He was asked his opinion on what salad to have for lunch? He shrugged his shoulders in indifference.* Don't you just hate it when you have an opinion about something, passion is burning and you run to a friend to get them fired up and they look at you with a blank face, indifference is written all over them, "why are you so excited about that," they ask?"

Indifference. A lack of interest or concern or sympathy. Football season is starting soon, do you want an indifferent quarterback leading the "Bulldawgs?" Probably not. "I don't know whether I want to do this or not," he says, "I could get hurt out there playing, on the other hand I could lead the team to victory, what should I do?" You may be indifferent as to what you want for breakfast others aren't. The chicken is involved but the pig is committed. I don't want an indifferent pilot on an airplane. I want his whole attention to be centered on what he is doing. Do you know the story about the plane that was flying through a terrible rainstorm? It was more than a bumpy ride, terrible turbulence. Everyone had fastened their seatbelts and pulled them tighter in their seats. Everyone was worried and grim faced. Suddenly the cockpit door opened and the pilot emerged wearing a parachute. "Don't panic," he said. "Stay calm, I'm just going for help."

I don't like indifferent people in church! Does that surprise anyone? I stand up here most Sundays and pray that you will be what? "Startled with the wild improbability of what we say we believe!" Being startled is not reacting with indifference is it! John wrote in the book of Revelation in the letter to the church at Laodicea, "I know your works; you are neither hot nor cold. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Have you ever been served lukewarm food? Did you like it? Most know what to do with food that is too hot ... you wait until it cools off maybe? Most know what to do with cold food that wasn't intended to be served cold, right. Once I was served cold potato soup in a fancy club in Houston. The French have a name for cold soup, vichyssoise. While eating, another minister

came in late, found a chair next to me and start on his soup. After two spoonful he stopped and shouted, “My soup is cold.” Most stared, others chuckled. Finally someone said, “It is French soup, served cold on purpose, it’s called Vichyssoise.” He didn’t say another word. Generally when you get cold food you send it back to the kitchen for a warm up. Is there anything worse than a cold baked potato?

But food that is lukewarm ... what do you do? You eat at it maybe. Try to find the warmest part of the food and probably never go back to that place again.

In the Psalm reading, Psalm 85, written sometime around 530 B.C. The exiles have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. The Persian King Cyrus had conquered the Babylonians in 538. He then declared in an edict that “the Jews” as he called them, naming them after their homeland, Judah could go home if they wanted to. Cyrus is the first of the benevolent conquerors who didn’t think you kept the peace by displacing people hundreds of miles from their ancestral homeland. Let them go home and they will thank you for it and live in peace. They are passionate about going home nothing indifferent about that. Many wanted to go home.

And they did. They had been living in Babylon for about 50 years—most carried off into captivity in 586 when Jerusalem fell and was utterly destroyed. Many had been born in Babylon and had never seen the “land of promise.” They had only heard stories about how good it was back home. So, you can imagine the enthusiasm when the first caravans left Babylon heading towards home. How far was it? Not far, about 200 miles is all.

Their enthusiasm was tempered when they arrived by what they found. Not much. Little shanties built up here and there, ruins of buildings, nowhere to stay. There was hardly a place to even pitch a tent. There were a few people hanging around the old ruins but they were a motley crew. Anyone who was anyone had been carried off into captivity. Those who were still here were descendants of unskilled laborers and others just looking for a place to hang out. We would call them squatters today. The first thing the returning pilgrims did was throw out the undesirables and then establish the perimeter of the city of Jerusalem and start building a wall. When you want to keep the undesirables out you do what ... you build a wall and police the perimeter. The enthusiasm begins to wane in the third or fourth year when the building wasn’t going particularly well and then a draught hits.

This is where the author of the 85th Psalm picks up. The Old Testament people believed that they lived in a “cause and effect world.” If bad things happened to you then you had somehow displeased God and God was punishing you. That is what the book of Job is about, remember? Job’s friends come and sit with him for seven days and then begin to ask him to examine his life to figure out how he had sinned against God for all that had gone bad. Job gets angry with his friends. He hasn’t done anything wrong. In the New Testament remember when Jesus healed the blind man in Mark 9 the Jewish authorities asked him, “Who’s sin caused this man’s blindness, his parents or grandparents?” Jesus answered them bluntly, “No person’s sin caused this man’s blindness.” But we still don’t believe it do we? There are still vestiges of this today, when something bad happens someone will ask, “Why did God allow this to happen, did someone do something wrong to cause this?”

The people who had returned to Jerusalem were trying to figure out why this bad thing was happening to them? They had a problem, a draught was making life tough for them. History had a purpose for these people. Nothing happened by accident. They knew their history. God had delivered them out of Egypt. Their faith had been strong as they crossed the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his army in hot pursuit. But a few weeks later as they rested in the wilderness they could care less about their God as they had their minds on the land of promise they were going to. Their indifference to God cost them 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. See most of the book of Exodus for the details.

In fact most of the history of God's people was a story of mountaintops of obedience and valleys of indifference. The whole Babylonian experience from which they had just escaped was another chapter in their life story of indifference when they thought they could make it on their own instead of being obedient to God.

Now again, through the Psalmist, the people are calling out to God and asking God to rescue them. They were willing to pledge their commitment, their faithfulness and their obedience if God would only save them. In the words of our text, the Psalmist asks God, "Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation."

The psalmist isn't dramatic doesn't have a vision, nor pulls out a miracle stick. He reminds them that their God loves them and has led them time and time again out of bondage into freedom. The problem is once they get their freedom they act as if they are on their own. They forget about God and depend on their own devices. Sound familiar? We can take it from here God. "Thanks for seeing us through the crisis, we will call again when we need you." God cares about us and wants our love and obedience.

That is what separates the Judeo-Christian tradition from the other religions of the world, God cares about us and wants to be involved in our lives.

The cure for indifference has to begin with the fact that God is not indifferent about you and me. That is what the psalmist is saying. In his plea for God "to revive us again" he knows that it is not an idle request. The God we worship is active in our lives. He cares about you and me and is not indifferent.

The psalmist then rehearses the stories of God and God's people. Most of the people complain. "Will God be angry with us forever?" No, says the psalmist don't you remember: don't you remember the promises of God ... "When faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness shall look down from the sky."

"When we speak the promises of God we find ourselves speaking of a day that we have yet to know: "Of a day when the law will be written on our hearts," (Jer. 31:33), as Jeremiah promised and spoke of a day we have yet to know. Or, speak of the lion lying down with the lamb, as Isaiah did, or the hungry being filled with good things, as Mary did, and we speak of promises yet to find fulfillment.

“Those who speak such promises speak of another day. Their mouths have been filled with language to describe the full salvation of God, where steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, where righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Such promises of God, when remembered and proclaimed, have served to lead the children of God in hope-filled faithfulness even in the darkest hours.” (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, Are, Jr., pg. 228)

But we are quick to ask at times, “If God cares about us so much why did God allow this to happen or that to happen? If God really cares about us why didn’t he stop that?” We want the “Wizard of Oz” god at times don’t we! It would be so much easier to just blame God. It’s God and us working together. Why did the hurricane destroy New Orleans ten years ago? God did care about New Orleans when the hurricane came, but there were not enough people including some religious people to convey that caring by speaking out or challenging the developers who said “Don’t worry, the big hurricane will never come.” So they were allowed to fill in the protective bay in front of New Orleans. Why did the holocaust happen? God did care at Auschwitz, but there were not enough good people, including many who thought of themselves as religious, to convey that care by speaking out or challenging the demonic forces of Nazism. Why is there such unrest in the Middle East today? God does care about the people in the Middle East, but there are not enough people, including many who think of themselves as religious to convey that caring to the 30 million people living in refugee camps for an entire lifetime and they have lost their hope for a future.

I am not playing the blame game here. I am suggesting that God cares for us and expects us to be committed, faithful and obedient in return. The ancient people, like some of us were asking, what has gone wrong? Why is this draught so severe? Why is my life falling apart? But then the Psalmist answers, “You are looking in the wrong direction. You are listening to the wrong voices. Listen to God before you open your mouth.” Let us hear what the Lord keeps saying. He declares that he is speaking to the saints, to his people. Tell my story he keeps saying.

The final episode of the hit TV series “Seinfeld” has the main characters: Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer on their way to Paris. (Remember it is a comedy) But they get side-tracked in a small New England town because of plane problems. While the airplane gets fixed they idly walk through the little village. Ironically, they stand and watch as an overweight man is getting car jacked. They do nothing, except for Kramer who videos the whole carjacking. The others are laughing and joking about how hard it is for the car jacker to get the overweight man out of the car. They don’t know the man, they are visitors to this town, they don’t have time to get involved, they don’t want to get hurt. They do nothing ... indifference ... who’s story is this? We laugh me-thinks until we cry.