

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 118:19-29 & Psalm 69:16-17
(Hymns – 217, 214, 221, 220)
March 24, 2013

When God Answers

When we are in distress, most of us get impatient with God.
We want answers.
We want answers that remove the distress.
We want God to get us out of the mess.
We want God to save us.

And when we don't get the answers we want,
we often turn against God.
We get angry, thinking God has abandoned us.
We get arrogant, thinking God simply doesn't exist.
We get apathetic, thinking nothing can help in our distress.

But did you notice something in what I've been saying so far?
It's all about "we."
Often, in our distress, is really all about "me."
God exists to answer our, or my, perceived needs.
God exists to get us out of our, or my, distress.
God exists to do our, or my, bidding,
and do it right now!
"I'm hurting here!
Get me out of this mess."

This is Palm Sunday.
We remember the stories of Jesus entering Jerusalem.

In Luke's account (19:28-39),
Jesus goes on ahead of his disciples and goes up to Jerusalem.
It's the centre of Jewish power in those days,
filled with a festive atmosphere as the city prepares for Passover.
Jesus sends two disciples off to get a colt.
Matthew specifies that it is a colt of a donkey,
making reference to the details of prophetic promise in Zechariah
that God will restore the full glory of Israel.
The excitement seems to begin with Jesus' followers,
then spreads to others.
They spread their cloaks on the road,
reminiscent of the anointing of Jehu as king of Israel in the 800s BC.

As Jesus passes by,
they sing words from Ps 118:

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!*

There is a heightened sense of anticipation here
that is contagious throughout the crowd.

It is so contagious, in fact,
that the Pharisees try to dampen it down,
telling Jesus to get his disciples to stop.

He refuses.

But a week later, with Jesus hanging on a cross,
in the throes of dying,
these excited, welcoming crowds have disappeared.
He dies with his mother and his beloved disciple at his feet.

The others have disappeared,
disappointed and discouraged,
deserting this One who had failed to answer their prayers
for the restoration of Israel's glory and power
the way they had wanted them answered.

And that's the point I want to emphasize this morning.
When God answers prayer,
it is not always in the ways we expect or want.
This whole enterprise of redeeming the creation,
of realigning the energy of the universe to serve God's *Shalom* or Well-Being,
is really about God and what God wants.

God does want our best interests,
but we don't always understand what those best interests are.

In the grip of the kind of anxiety that comes from feeling alone,
we grasp at sources of security, esteem, and power
that serve our fears rather than God's steadfast love.

We close ourselves off. We withdraw.

We shut down.

We find our answers in false gods –
drink, drugs, thrills, and porn.

And at times, we just stop looking for answers,
descending into a semi-human state of depression and despair.

We lose contact with the steadfast love of God that is giving us life,
one breath after another,
whether we recognize it or not.

We lose contact with the steadfast love of God that is seeking our welfare,
one healing moment after another,
whether we recognize it or not.

We lose contact with the steadfast love of God that is calling us to significance,
one opportunity after another,
whether we recognize it or not.

Our prayers are being answered,
one breath after another,
one healing moment after another,
one opportunity after another,
in terms of God's steadfast love rather than our fearful wants.

So, the issue is not whether God is answering our prayers.
He is.

The issue is how well we are recognizing and responding to those answers.
This is the heart of redemption,
or re-deeming,
or seeing afresh and anew in the light of God's steadfast love.

On that first Palm Sunday,
the hopes and dreams of the people gathered in Jerusalem for Passover
were primarily focused on a Messiah
who would free them from the rule of Rome
and reform the religious structures
to bring about greater equity and justice.
That was not God's answer.

Instead, incarnate in Jesus Christ,
he confronted the powers of that day
with a different way of being, a different way of acting,
a different way of dealing with the suffering of his people.

God's answer came in his actions –
a refusal to accept the way Pilate and the Pharisees saw the world,
an outrage at the way the Jewish priests had distorted worship,
a gentle and assuring teaching of his disciples,
a sacrificial death on a dung heap with the discards of his society,
and an unimaginable defeat of death in all its forms.

God's answer to our prayers is life with God.
God's answer to our prayers is life for God.
God's answer to our prayers is the life of God
flowing within us and through us for the blessing of the world.
It is life that death cannot defeat.

But how do we recognize when God answers?
That's really the crucial question, isn't it?

First, we allow God, through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit,
to enable us to "get over ourselves,"
as the saying goes.

It's not all about us.

It's all about God's reign of *Shalom* or Well-Being.

God created us to work in companionship with God
for the well-being of God's creation.

God answers prayers in ways that serve that purpose.

That's the core message of our memory verses this morning.

*Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.*

*Do not hide your face from your servant,
for I am in distress –
make haste to answer me.*

The Psalmist sets the prayer in a particular context.

The Psalmist is the servant of God's steadfast love and abundant mercy.

The distress arises from barriers to being that with and for God.

The prayer for help is directed at restoring the power to serve
as God would have the Psalmist and the Psalmist's community serve.

God's answer is to empower them to do that,
taking away any fear of death
that might hinder them from taking up that mission.

God's answer to prayer will always strengthen us
to be God's witnesses in the world,
to engage with our whole being in God's blessing of the world,
to use all our gifts in God's service.

I trust our reflections this morning
will help us all understand more fully
the ways we can expect
God's answers to our prayers.

When God answers, we do indeed flourish.