

A Sunday Devotional for People and Families at Home

The First Church of Evans

Week Ten - Sunday, May 24, 2020

Greetings from Jerusalem Corners,

Last week, my own walk with God and my attempts to serve him and his kingdom through the pandemic hit a crossroads. Since the emergency began, it has been three times harder to reach out to people as I had always done for decades, face to face and heart to heart. I have not been able to steep my heart each week in one book of Scripture, one passage after the other, building every week on what I had learned last. Everything has been catch as catch can, upside down and backwards. Every week I have had to wonder: Is this the passage I am meant to teach? Is this the way I'm meant to deal with people? And then there comes grief, a parade of losses that the pandemic makes all the more sad. Yet God is still there, and we are still his. This week, Psalm 50 spoke to me at my breakfast table. It sings of our Savior appearing as our Judge, and I found it strangely comforting.

Call to Worship

Psalm 50:1-6

The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God comes, he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him is a mighty tempest.

He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people:

"Gather to me my faithful ones, who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice!"

The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!

An Opening Prayer

Almighty God and Father,

We have learned from your Word that the truth of your commands and the faithfulness of your promises are the rock, the only ground on which our souls can safely stand. Please forgive us when we defy your commands and when we trust in anything other than your steadfast love and unchanging grace, the gift you gave us through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Devotional

Psalm 50:7-15

"Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God.

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me.

I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds.

For every beast in the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.

I know all the birds of the hills, all that moves in the field is mine.

If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and perform your vows to the Most High,

And call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

Months before the emergency descended on us, I began to keep breakfast dates with Moses, reading about his forty years in the wilderness with God's people, learning the stern lessons of walking with a holy God over long stretches of time. And this week, in the book of Numbers near the end of their journey, along came Balaam, a strange mystic who was not an Israelite but was still a prophet. At first glance, Balaam seemed to take his calling seriously, yet on his journey to meet Israel in the wilderness, "the angel of the LORD" confronted him, warning him that his way of life was "perverse" or "reckless" or "contrary" depending on what translation you read. Balaam went on in the book of Numbers to sing some of the most breathtaking early prophecies about Christ you can find. And yet by the end of the book, Balaam had thrown in with Israel's enemies despite his own prophecies.

For a man in my line of business, the story of Balaam is a disquieting puzzle. And the next place I found myself that morning at breakfast was Psalm 50, a psalm in which the Almighty appears as a Judge demanding an interview, not with his enemies, but with his "faithful ones, who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice..."

The notion that God might appear as Judge to his "faithful ones" sounds strange to modern ears because we tend to imagine that the gift of God's grace means that we believers don't ever have to face God's judgment. But the truth is that trusting Christ and finding grace involves our facing his judgment. It is God's commands that teach us how far we are from him and how much we need Christ's "sacrifice" on the cross so that we can walk with God in a relationship founded on the sort of forgiveness that frees him to work with us redemptively and constructively.

So in Psalm 50, God is constructive as he addresses believers like you and me. He says, "It is not for your sacrifices that I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me." This is great news because, in the Old Testament, the animal sacrifices brought by God's people looked forward to what Jesus would do for you and me on the cross. And what God is saying to Israel is: Keep those sacrifices coming! Because I really want to forgive you! And the sacrifices they offered are what stood between Israel and what their sins deserved. So God's first word to his people in those days was that forgiveness is very much on offer.

But next came God's rebuke: "I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds...I own... the cattle on a thousand hills!" The problem was that the Israelites had begun to imagine that it was their offering, the value of their sacrifice that moved God to forgive and to love them. So they thought that their virtue, an expensive, heroic sacrifice from them would evoke love and forgiveness from God. And God tells them that they had missed the point entirely. It was the Savior the animal foreshadowed, not the value of the animal that evoked forgiveness from God. It could be an ox, it could be a pigeon, their death spoke of Christ's sacrifice and that's what buys forgiveness for lost souls like you and me. And what flows from a lost soul once he or she has understood grace? Gratitude and obedience. So God commands us to, "Offer...a sacrifice of thanksgiving." It's not the size of the offering but the gratitude in our hearts that evokes grace from God. And then God tells us to obey, "perform your vows to the Most High". So we should live out the things we learn as God shows us grace. And if we fail at that, it's back to grace. God says, "...call on me in the day of trouble...I will deliver you...you will glorify me."

Offering

Proverbs 3:9,10

*Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce,
then will your barns be filled with plenty, and your vats overflowing with new wine.*

Thank you for the faithfulness you have shown Christ and his kingdom during this season. Please mail what your heart leads you to give to: The First Church of Evans, Attn: Cindy Fanara, P.O. Box 364, Derby, NY, 14047.

(What follows is the script for the worship video we will offer this week via a link on our website: TheFirstChurchofEvans.com. If you cannot access the video, you can still join us by reading and praying and singing through the printed Order of Worship that follows.)

Greeting and Prayer

Hymn

"King of the Nations"

See Insert

Table Talk

Psalm 50:16-23

*But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or to take my covenant on your lips?
For you hate discipline and you cast my words behind you.
If you see a thief, you are pleased with him and you keep company with adulterers.
You give your mouth free reign for evil, and your tongue speaks deceit;
you sit and speak against your own brother, and you slander your own mother's son.
These things you have done, and I have been silent; so you thought that I was one like yourself.
But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.
Mark this then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!
The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
and to the one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!"*

So this morning we are looking at Psalm 50, which was written by a man named Asaph, who as it turned out might have been a bandmate with David, Israel's great king and songwriter. They were contemporaries, Asaph and David, and in 1st Chronicles 16, Asaph led the worship team when David sang and danced the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. I've already noted in the first print devotional we sent out this morning that, in Psalm 50, Asaph sees a vision of the Almighty appearing possibly in the great worship tent David had set up next to his palace. And if you read our Call to Worship this morning, you know that this was one of those scary visions that prophets often saw in old Israel during the centuries before Christ. God shows up dressed in storm clouds, winds swirling, lightning flashing to have a word with God's people about the way they'd been worshiping him.

The good news is that God's first word with his people was constructive, "*my faithful ones,*" he called them, "*who've made covenant with me by sacrifice*". And we've already seen in this morning's first devotional that their hearts were essentially right, beginning to drift a little wrong, but still in a place where forgiveness was in play, where God could invite them to pray and promise to help them. But this last stanza I've just read is addressed to a different crowd, still Israelites, still in the sanctuary tent, I think, but they were "*wicked*" God tells us. Wicked and religious.

So God takes up with them: "*What right have you to recite my statutes or to take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline and you cast my words behind you.*" The point being that it's entirely possible for us to handle God's word, to speak of God and for God, and still not take him to heart, still not apply his word to ourselves. God said to them, "... *you hate discipline and you cast my words behind you.*" In the biblical universe, discipline is that accountability believers gain by following God in the company of other believers. We're all prone to drift south if there's no brother or sister around us, strong enough and sound enough to tell what we're doing is nonsense.

"If you see a thief," God tells them, "you're pleased with him and you keep company with adulterers."

Now Paul taught the early Christians in Corinth that there was no way to disassociate from unbelievers who don't keep commandments. We meet them everywhere and we're supposed to reach out to them in love. But here in Psalm 50 in Asaph's vision, the Almighty is inside the worship tent and God is telling us that his sanctuary is no place to pretend that wrong is right and commandments don't matter. In the sanctuary among God's people, believers must tell each other the truth, in love mind you, but still the truth. The psalm goes on about gossip and slander. The noise people make to justify themselves and deflect blame on others.

And all too often God seems conspicuously silent. *"But now I rebuke you..."* God says to the wicked souls in his worship tent. The point being that judgment comes woven part and parcel with grace. The psalm ends with a promise. Even to the wicked, God says, *"The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to the one who orders his way rightly, I will show salvation."* Because a hard word from God is usually meant as a kind thing. Grace is still there, forgiveness is still possible even for those people with whom God must be hard.

Prayer *Matthew 7:7* *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."*

Please keep the governing authorities in prayer that they make wise decisions in response to the pandemic. Please keep our medical people and other first line public servants and their families in prayer as they selflessly face this danger to save the lives of sick and vulnerable people. Please remember our elderly loved ones who are at home or in care facilities. Please especially remember the Pfalzgraf, Maybee, Willer, and Norton families as they mourn loved ones, and Eric DePan as he continues to recover from eye surgery.

Hymn

"I'll Fly Away"

See Insert

An Ancient Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you his peace."*

With love from The First Church of Evans, till our eyes meet and our hands touch again.