
“Unless the Lord”

Psalm 127

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery, preached at Duke Chapel on November 11, 2012

There are so many reasons to love the book of Psalms, the Church’s hymnbook or prayer book. The psalms are God’s word to us but they are also our words to God. We chant them. We pray them. We memorize them; I sure did as a PK, a preacher’s kid. The Psalms are literary mirrors of the human soul. Reformer John Calvin said that the Psalms represent “the anatomy of all the parts of the soul.” And he was so right because there are Psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation (Brueggemann). Sounds a lot like the rigmarole of human life. We can find many of our experiences in the journey of life embedded somewhere in the Psalms—trust, lament, questioning, anger, vengeance, hope, praise, thanksgiving. “Nothing to be found in human life is omitted,” says fourth century Church Father and theologian Athanasius. Nothing is omitted in the Psalms. Nada. Rien. Nichts.

Maybe you have your favorite psalm verses. I know I have a few that I remember. “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul....”

- “The Lord is the light of my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid?”
- “Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits.”
- “I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in mouth...O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt his name together.”
- “Praise the Lord all ye nations, praise him all ye people, for his merciful kindness is great toward us and the truth of the Lord endureth forever. Praise ye the Lord.”
- “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”
- “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness, come before his presence with singing, know ye that the Lord he is God, it is he who has made us and not we ourselves.”
- “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”
- “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.” “Sing unto the Lord a new song.”
- “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”
- “As a deer panteth for the water so my soul longeth after you...My tears have been my food day and night while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”
- “Why do the nations rage and the people plot vain things?”
- “How long O Lord?” “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”
- “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”
- “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord.”
- “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”
- “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.”

Scriptures for the journey. I could go on and on and on quoting these, filling an entire 20 minute sermon. Maybe you have a favorite one that you've held on to as a life preserver. What would the Christian life be without the Psalms?

The thrust of the Psalms in my opinion is to remind us that God is indeed present. The Psalms are a type of poetic literature of remembrance—reminding us of who we are and whose we are and who God is and how we should relate to God, a God who is present. Each Sunday we enter the doors of this chapel to participate in a liturgy of remembrance, like the Psalms, to remind us that God is present with us in word and table and water and gesture and sound and sight. Why would we come here if there was no God living among us? Is our Sunday morning chapel attendance only an expression of a socialization process or does it say something about the Theological Heart at the heart of life and in our hearts? When we come on Sundays, we place our human gaze on the sanctuary of God to remember God, yet something strange happens frequently Monday thru Saturday—our worship ethic does not match our work ethic and we live or perhaps live to work (not work to live) as if we were god and everything depended on us. How soon we forget God after the choir sings “God Be in My Head.”

Why do we do this? Succumbing to the temptation of our own human agency and genius as if all power is in our hands. The children of Israel were warned against this after God delivered them out of Egypt—“Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth....”(Deut 8:7-8). Remember the Lord. Sounds like this psalm. But we are proud products of the Protestant work ethic, valuing efficient hard work and believing that it will pay off, joining our sense of worth with our work. Through this ethic, we become our work, feeding on it to live. “Be all that you can be” not just in the army, in whatever domain you find yourself.

But what's wrong with work? The psalmist suggests that it may not be the work itself that is the problem, but us—our approach to the work and our perceived role in it, that without us, nothing worthwhile or of substance or meaning will happen. This psalm “of Solomon” as indicated in the superscription suggests otherwise and Solomon was a master builder of houses and cities in Israel's history. He performed excellent work, however, the psalmist boldly declares that our human work is in vain “unless the Lord” does it ultimately. “Those who build it labor in vain...the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.” The psalmist makes his point through repetition three times. One “vain” is not enough but he thinks in a Trinitarian fashion and gives us 1 for the Father, 1 for the Son, and 1 for the Holy Spirit.

The psalmist reminds overachieving, workaholic, anxiety-ridden people of the dangerous vanity of it all. The vanity of our human agency in thinking that nothing will get done without us or if we don't do something right now like respond to that email at 3am in the morning, we will get left behind in the economic rat race. We feed on the communion bread of anxiety striving to reach the pinnacle of success, striving to outdo others in a capitalistic campaign, striving to get ahead, but for what? Our work is futile if it does not correspond with the work of God in the world. This psalm tries to steer us away from the praise of humanism and anthropological muscle with which we so easily get consumed.

Do you remember the original 1985 musical hit, “We are the World,” written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and recorded by numerous artists for famine relief in Africa? There was even a remake of that song produced to benefit the victims of the major Haiti earthquake in 2010. Do you remember the lyrics?

We are the world, we are the children

We are the ones who make a brighter day
So let's start giving
There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day
Just you and me

Just a quick hermeneutical analysis of that text reveals the undercurrent of the affirmation of human agency and power. “We are the ones who make a brighter day...we’re saving our own lives...we’ll make a better day.” Really? We’re building, guarding, waking up early and going to bed late, saving our own lives, activating our inner superhero. We can change the world! Really? Thanks for the advice, God, but I think I can handle this one with my MBA.

In a recent Q & A, “Get to Know the Dean” session at a Pathways Chapel scholars event, one student asked, “Who is your least favorite person of the Trinity?” They never covered that in seminary! What a question! Whatever the answer would be, with this “we are the world” mentality, we could replace our least favorite person of the Godhead with ourselves. At a world-class major research university, like Duke, that desires to be at the top of its academic game, it is tough not to tap ourselves on our intellectual back and say “well done, good and faithful scholar.” Ongoing creative innovations in medicine research and global health. Latest technological advancements in the humanities. Cutting edge of open access online education. Social entrepreneurship to eradicate extreme poverty in the world. These are all grand, meaningful initiatives in and of themselves—knowledge in service to society.

But the Psalmist wants to warn us of perhaps being blinded by our own brilliance, trying to do everything on our own, in our own strength, all hours of the day and night, without the Lord. He wants us to avoid signing up for Workaholics Anonymous because we don’t recognize our human limits, our finiteness, our need to cease from striving and need for God and rest. He reminds us that there is a tendency even among Christians to suffer from theological amnesia and forget God’s role in our lives and work.

So what does the Psalmist do in the midst of our frenzied, busy, intense, multitasking, anxious, toilsome lives? He proclaims something and points to something. It’s as if he taps us on our frantic, hurried, church-going shoulders and whispers slowly in a sacrament of pause—remember “unless the Lord.” He reminds us that any power we have is impotent without the power of God, “the Potentate of time” (Crown Him). “Unless the Lord.” Twice, he reminds us of the providence of God. As one commentator writes, “No projects are completed unless they are embedded in the larger purpose of God. The anxious toil of those who believe that it all depends on them is in vain” (James Mays). “Unless the Lord.” This psalm is rooted in a fundamental trust in God rather than trust in our own anxiety. Our toil, our work, can then become an act of trust, not arrogance, even an act of prayer that good will come from our hands and feet and minds by the gracious work of God. The psalmist reminds us that there are no guarantees about the outcome of our work, “unless the Lord.”

But with the Lord, fruit will be born from your work as a sign of the blessing of the Lord (Ps 128). With the Lord, construction, protection, and provision will be the order of the day. God is the one who ultimately provides for us and our families, and communities. “Unless the Lord” is the One to whom we turn our gaze, what we do will be in vain. The psalmist proclaims “unless the Lord” but he also points us in the direction of the Lord.

He helps us remember through sound *and* sight. Psalm 127 is a part of the body of Psalms known as a “song of ascents.” There are fifteen of them in the book of Psalms and scholars say that these songs were

used by pilgrims on their way, on their ascent to Jerusalem and perhaps the temple there, for annual festivals. The psalmist points us to Jerusalem as the goal because it is the place where God is present for God's people. In other words, the psalmist points us to God, the source of our lives and the power behind any fruitful work. He reminds us that we are dependent on God for everything. He turns our gaze to the hills from whence cometh our help and he reminds us that our help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth. We hear "unless the Lord" in our ears, but the psalmist helps us see it with our eyes as well, as we ascend to the house of the Lord every Sunday. The chapel is an icon of God. I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord at Duke Chapel.

When we come here each Sunday to enter God's liturgical time and space, to breath in God's holy pace apart from the rat race of life, we slow down to gaze on the sanctuary of God and to experience the Wellspring of our lives. To look toward the One on whom we depend. Whether we realize or not, our church attendance implies "unless the Lord." We may never voice those words but I bet those words are inscribed on your hearts. "Unless the Lord." It's your spiritual heartbeat to the gospel. "Never would have made it/ Never could have made it without You/ I would have lost it all/ But now I see how You [God] were there for me" (Marvin Sapp). You couldn't have made it through some tough times in life, unless the Lord. You wouldn't be alive right now unless the Lord. As you look back over your life and think things over, you might want to throw an early Thanksgiving party and testify today "unless the Lord."

Many have asked me, during my long two-month tenure at Duke, "What are you going to do? What are your plans? How are we going to be changed?" If it were as easy as three simple steps to a successful marriage, I would have laid out my three steps on the first day. But I'm no fool (though I may look like one). I have been engaged in what I call listening sessions, listening to the various constituencies connected to Duke Chapel. I have been listening as a way to learn about others and Duke but it also has been a way to listen for God's voice and leading. I have heard the psalmist's voice and felt his biblical tap on my shoulder this week reminding me, "unless the Lord." Unless the Lord builds the ministry of Duke Chapel, we who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord provides, it will all be in vain. The fruitfulness of our work always depends on God's work. If God does not bless, our work will be a mess. That's the beginning of a righteous rap. If God does not bless, our work will be a mess and we won't have any rest, because we'll be eating the bread of anxious toil.

But God gives sleep to his beloved, not during any Powery sermons of course. Sleep. Rest. Isn't that what we desire more than the ceaseless striving that creates stress and anxiety in us? The psalmist slows down our anxious selves to remind us that God gives sleep to his beloved. There are at least two possibilities for understanding that verse: God provides sleep for his beloved or God provides for his beloved during sleep. The bottom line is that God provides what we need when we need it. In other words, you can take a "chill pill." It doesn't mean that we stop working and become Christian couch potatoes because we work in partnership with God as co-laborers. But it does mean that our anxious and overachieving selves may actually realize that our greatest achievement in this world is to find rest in God and not to run the rat race but to run the pilgrim race to the Source of life and to remember, as St. Augustine said in his *Confessions*, "our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee."

I've been reminded this week that in God we can "come into the presence of still water" (Wendall Berry) and find rest even as we work. I think I have a new favorite verse from the Psalms to add to my earlier list. It's a life preserver. I really hope that those of you who worship work will memorize it with me. Can you guess what it is? "Unless...." I'll let you finish it.