

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 27, 2010
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Kingdomtide)
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 19:15-21
Psalm 16:5-11
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Each of our scripture lessons this morning is so laden with meaning that it could be tempting for a preacher to preach four sermons instead of one. I might just do that one of these days, but not today.

If I had opted to preach the Gospel lesson, the sermon might have focused on the challenges and demands of following Jesus. Those challenges include choosing loyalty to Jesus above and beyond the best of our human and family relationships.

If I had settled on the passage from Galatians, the sermon might have explored the truth that sometimes freedom can be far more demanding than slavery. We moderns often think of freedom as the absence of all restraint, but the apostle Paul paints a different picture. The freedom given to us in Christ is a freedom to serve God and one another in meaningful relationships, as we saw last week.

Our Old Testament lesson, and the context behind it, show us the prophet Elijah at a key point in his life. Having just experienced a profound spiritual experience of victory on the mountain against the prophets of Baal, Elijah finds

himself plunged headlong into depression and discouragement, and God has to help him through that experience before he passes on his mantle of leadership to Elisha. One of the lessons of Elijah's experience is that often times some of our greatest tests and trials in life come on the heels of great victories or successes.

That leaves us with Psalm 16. Assuming this is a psalm of David, there are some fascinating features of David's experience here that I hope may help us this morning in our own journeys of faith.

David begins by speaking of the Lord as being his "portion and his cup," and his boundaries enclosing a pleasant land.

This was not always the case for David. There was a time when David was a fugitive, a man hunted and on the run. King Saul was trying to kill him. David's life was reduced to the fear and uncertainty that came when he was constantly looking over his shoulder, constantly hearing noises at night as he slept in caves and wondered what the next day would bring.

At one point during this time David encountered Saul, and he asked Saul this question:

You have driven me from my home, so I can no longer live among the Lord's people and worship as I should. Must I die on foreign soil, far from the presence of the Lord? (1 Samuel 26:19-20)

This brings to mind Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson about foxes having holes and birds having nests, but the Son of Man having no home of his own.

Indeed, David and others who have sought to follow God's will have at times experienced the feelings of isolation that go with that decision. But David's experience here is instructive for us, I believe.

For David learned that ultimately it's not so important *where* you lay your head at night, for the sense of place that we seek is to be found in God, not in a physical place or space. God is our portion and our cup. God is our provision. God is our source of security, not our physical address. David had learned this, I believe, from living in a period of his life where he literally had no place to call home.

David learned that the important thing in his life was not so much where he found himself as it was *who* was with him. So he made a decision to focus his attention and energy on God. That's why he says (v. 8): "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not fall."

Psychologists tell us that two of the greatest sources of stress and anxiety in our lives come from focusing our energy on the past (which cannot be changed), or on the future, where we take on a great deal of fear or anxiety about what might happen.

One key to help us, the same psychologists say, is to be able to focus our energy on the present, and to stay in the present moment. This is what David seems to do. He makes a decision to keep the Lord constantly in the center of his

conscious thinking. He focuses his energy on the fact that he is near the Lord, and the Lord is near to him.

This yields a marvelous peace. Notice David's words: "My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope. For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit."

I had an interesting conversation with Donna Beukelman this week while she was in the hospital. We were talking, and at one point she said, "I have many different feelings and emotions about death, and I wish I knew a little more about the actual passage or transition from life to death."

I had to confess to Donna at that point that I wasn't much help, and we reflected together on how it's difficult to know about this transition from life to death until we each make that transition.

But then I added this thought that came to me at that moment. I said, "Donna, even though we don't know a lot about the actual passage from life to death, I have to believe that if God is waiting for us on the other side, the transition has to be marked by peace, and joy."

I now wonder whether David's words were bleeding into my consciousness at that point. For David seems to be at peace also, and he says: "for you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit. You will show me the

path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

David, and no doubt all of us, learn at some point that the challenges that come from following Jesus can be demanding. At times they can stretch us beyond what we think we are capable of doing. There may be times when you feel displaced, alone, and without direction in your life.

In those moments, the Spirit comes along side you to empower you. The Spirit will help you, in those moments, by pushing you out of past regrets and pulling you back from fears about the future, and by placing your focus solely on Jesus in the present moment. You will realize again that the Lord is near to you, and you are near to him. Such an awareness will gladden your heart, and bring joy to your spirit.

As we come to the table this morning, allow the blessing of God to be in your hearts and on your lips. Give thanks for the joy that comes from being in his presence. And rejoice and receive the blessings that come from his right hand.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.