

Spirituality with a Purpose

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

I will confess that at the point in time I started planning our first canoe camping trip, I was already very much in love with Michele. I wanted this to be the best camping trip ever. I pictured beautiful sunny days, canoeing together and camping in Canada's Algonquin National Park with glorious sun rises and sun sets. I had, however, done enough camping to know that once you get into that canoe, you best be prepared for whatever weather comes your way. I decided that I would do everything I could do to be ready for the rain. I brought rain ponchos, a tarp to put under our tent to keep any rain from seeping in from the bottom, a tarp to put between trees so we would have a place to cook if the rains came. I put our sleeping bags inside of plastic bags. I put all of our clothes inside of plastic bags. I did everything I could think to do. I was hoping for beautiful sunny days. I prepared for the rain. It rained for five days straight. She still married me. We are still canoe camping.

For the Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, he wants believers to know then and now that a spiritual life is about preparation. We hope for sunny days with everything going our way. We prepare for rainy days knowing that the storms will come. "Be strong in the Lord", says Paul, and in the strength of Christ's power. Put on the whole armor

of God, so that you may be able to withstand against the wiles of the devil.” We do not need to believe in a literal devil to know that we can be tricked into believing things that are absent of truth and love. Hope for the warmth of the sun. Prepare for the storms so that as Paul says, you can stand firm in the love and justice of God.

Paul takes as a given that he is writing to people who are in love. Paul assumes followers of Christ are in love with God and therefore all that God loves, the powerless and the powerful, the ill and the healthy, the city and the country, those who are our friends and as Jesus says love for those who are our enemies. Paul writes to people who are in love and he wants us to stand firm in our love, not to give up, not to despair, not to lose hope, but to remain strong in Christ and the power of Christ’s love.

Paul anticipates the storm. Standing firm in the love and justice of God is no easy thing. This past week I saw what for me was a very disappointing conversation between Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and two young representatives of Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter had come to a Clinton campaign appearance, but by the time they arrived, the hall was full. To Hillary’s credit she agreed to meet with them privately. In this meeting, Secretary Clinton was asked a very direct question about how she felt about the issues of racial justice being raised. The two Black Lives Matter representatives noted that as part of the political leadership in this country she shared responsibility

for the way things are. They wanted to know, “how have the events of this past year caused you to feel differently and how will those feelings shape the actions you will take as President?” It was an opportunity for Hillary Clinton to stand firm in this storm of racial justice and to speak from her heart about police violence, mass incarceration, economic inequity. If she were particularly bold she could say a word about what it meant to be white in this country and what it meant to be a person of color. Instead Hillary took the easy road, the safe road and began speaking abstractly about child welfare policies she thought would make a difference.

All of us have been in Hillary’s shoes where it is much easier to keep the notion of forgiveness, the promise of love, the reality of compassion, the hope of justice a abstract principle rather than something we apply with heart and soul to the challenges we face in our daily lives. It is much easier to talk about forgiveness on Sunday morning, than it is to live out forgiveness in our daily live? It is much easier to talk about loving our neighbors, loving our enemies, than it is to connect on an honest and deep level with the reality of living out these values. It is much easier to talk about justice, than it is to speak up when we need to speak up, risk the sunny days we prefer for the storms of uncertainties that might come when we act?”

The Apostle Paul is speaking to Christians living in Ephesus under the domination of Rome. Paul himself is in jail, as Paul says, “an

ambassador in chains.” Paul knows without a doubt that when you live in faithfulness to the justice making, peace proclaiming, love fulfilling Realm of God you are inviting the storm. If Paul had a weather app on his I-phone, every day would have heavy rain clouds for this is what it means to stand strong in the love of God. It is to know the storm is never far away.

On the surface Paul’s approach to a spiritual life seems in direct contradiction to that of the Psalmist who says, “happy are those who live in God’s house, ever singing God’s praise...For the sovereign God is a sun and shield.” Given a choice, most of us would choose the happy sun filled days of the Psalmist to the storm cloud filled days of Paul. But, for Paul there is no contradiction. In jail and out of jail Paul was often heard singing songs of praise to God. Even when the storms brew on the outside, the Apostle Paul knows it is possible, it is essential to experience the sun of God’s light and love giving us strength, hope and courage.

“Be strong in the Lord and the strength of Christ’s power....Stand firm.” One biblical commentator gives us this litany of people who have stood firm. “Martin Luther King, Jr. stood firm on non-violence. Margaret Sanger, the twentieth-century suffragette stood firm on women’s rights. Nelson Mandela stood firm and resolute against apartheid. Barbara Lee stood firm against the war in Iraq....” Rachel Carson set in motion the modern day environmental movement by

standing firm against pesticides. Their lives give example to what the Paul means by standing firm, with strength and joy.

Be prepared. Anticipate the storm. Sometimes the storms come because that is the way life is. Life comes with challenges, disappointments and heartaches. It is true for all of us, with no exemptions, young or old wealthy or poor. The storms of life will come. But, storms also come precisely because we are standing firm in the values of God's Realm that we proclaim. The Apostle Paul insists that even when the winds blow and the rains pound on the outside, we can know the light and love of God's love on the inside.

Are we prepared for the storm? If you are planning a canoe trip, I might have some preparation suggestions for you. But, if you are asking about the storms that come from living in faithfulness to God, then I would advise listening to the Apostle Paul. Living under the domination of Roman military, every day encountering soldiers who enforce the power of Rome with violence as needed, Paul uses the outfits worn by soldiers to create a metaphorical preparation list for Christians, dedicated not to war, but rather to as Paul says, the Gospel of Peace.

“Put on the whole armor of God...Fasten the belt of truth around your waist and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As for shoes put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation,

and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Paul offers us a spiritual life that will make us strong in God’s love and the strength of love’s power so that individually and as a community we can without fear face the storms and yet stand firm in God’s love.

Maybe Michele would have married me anyway, but I am glad I was prepared for that first canoe trip we took together, with its five days of continuous rain. That preparation made a difference and as Paul and the Psalmist remind us today the preparation we make in our spiritual lives will make a difference for living boldly, standing firm in God’s love, proclaiming the Gospel of Peace.

Psalm 84

The Psalmist never claims that following God will lead to a life of prosperity or free from trouble. The Psalmist does affirm that union with the God of love and justice is the source of true happiness and strength. The place of worship is a place where we might come together and encounter the joy of God's presence. Yet, as the Sparrows remind us, all of creation represents the house of God and the place where God may be found.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O God of hosts, my Ruler and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion. O Sovereign God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. For the Sovereign God is a sun and shield; God bestows favor and honor. No good thing does God withhold from those who walk uprightly. O God of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Ephesians 6:10-20

Like the Psalmist, the Apostle Paul affirms the necessity of being spiritually grounded in the presence of God as the source of our strength. Yet, Paul is clear that a spiritual life following the Way of Christ is never about enhancing our own comfort and well being while ignoring the needs of the world. On the contrary Paul insists, a spiritual life connected to the God of love and justice puts us in conflict with the systemic powers of the world that deny God's love. For this reason Paul encourages us to draw upon the fullness of all the spiritual resources we are offered.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.