
For You, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
Upon You I have leaned from before my birth;
You are He who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of You.
Psalm 71:5-6

Over the years you have probably witnessed many baptism. Some of these baptisms probably mean very much to you, involving friends and families. As you know, baptism is an important part of our identity as a Lutheran Church. We know that different Christian denominations see baptism differently. We also know that we are not to judge one another as to the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ of baptism (Immersion? Sprinkling? Infant? Adult?). Today’s meditation is not a treatise on baptism itself. Rather, we note that baptism is important to us because there is something about it that resonates with our sense of ‘belonging’ to ‘the family of God’. Sometimes people do get anxious if a loved one is not baptised. But our anxiety should not rest in this place. Rather, our concern is that people know in their hearts and life a sense of ‘belonging’ to ‘the family of God’. Our heart is that people would know God from their earliest moments, and the blessings He seeks to bring to life.

In our Scripture this day we hear of different situations of people seeing to ‘know God at work in their lives’. In our First Reading (Jeremiah 1:4-10) we read, “Now the Word of the LORD came to me [Jeremiah], saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Whilst this word presented itself as a very particular (and difficult) challenge to a very young Jeremiah. Jeremiah began prophesying in Judah halfway through the reign of Josiah (640–609 BC) and continued throughout the reigns of Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609–598), Jehoiachin (598–597) and Zedekiah (597–586). It was a period of storm and stress when the doom of entire nations—including Judah itself—was being sealed. This word pointed to a very difficult call to Jeremiah. But within this ‘call’, God reminded Jeremiah that He was ‘with him’, and indeed had ‘been with him’ even before Jeremiah could realise this. This is a word of comfort and peace.

When we then come to the Holy Gospel for this day (Luke 13:10-17) we hear of “a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. And Jesus laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.” This is also a very profound reading, reminding us that God is ‘with us’ throughout the journey of life. And the conflict Jesus had with the ‘religious leaders’ was not that Jesus was ‘breaking the law’.

Indeed, Jesus had said (Matthew 5:17-18): “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Jesus was fulfilling ‘the law’, because ‘Sabbath’ means ‘rest’, and Jesus was bringing a profound ‘rest’ into this woman’s life through this miraculous healing. Here again is a person wanting to ‘know God was with them’.

And when we come to the Second Reading for today (Hebrews 12:18-29) we hear of a great contrast. The writer to the Hebrews says “For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest... Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.””

In this Reading there is again a sense of ‘fear’ people had when it came to ‘knowing God at work in their life’. This letter was written soon after Jesus’ resurrection – when many Christians were being persecuted for their faith. The writer to the Hebrews could see that there were some people who were ‘fearful’ of attending worship for fear of persecution and ridicule. He could also sense the ‘fear’ that some had of attending worship, wondering if they were ‘good enough’.

And so the writer to the Hebrews says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

In all these readings there is a sense that people ‘want to know God at work in their life’. But their ‘life experience’ was telling them otherwise. Paradoxically, each of the Readings – whilst speaking of God’s reassuring presence in people’s lives – is addressing a sense of ‘fear’ and ‘loneliness’ and ‘isolation’ that many may experience.

There are many people who live with a sense of ‘fear’ in their lives.

This ‘fear’ might not be so obvious in a person wearing an ‘unhappy face’. Indeed, many a smile masks the fear that people feel welling up inside. ‘Fear’ can actually motivate many people to do amazing things. More than one sportsperson, or business person, or other ‘successful person’ has spoken of a sense of ‘fear’ that drives them. Of course, this can be unhealthy at times when people try to use a sense of ‘fear’ to ‘motivate people’ to their cause. But we need to be aware that so often this sense of ‘fear’ that may grab us comes from an unhealthy sense of ‘trust in self’.

The Bible speaks of two sorts of ‘fear’. (1) “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov.9:10 etc). (2) “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). A ‘healthy fear’ has to do with respect and honour and awe (and a healthy sense of dangers that may lie ahead).

An 'unhealthy sense of fear' has to do with 'being afraid' that 'debilitates' and 'holds us back' in life from loving God, and loving others. And there are two ways this may work. On the one hand the 'sinful self' says, "You will really never be able to get it together. Look at your past: your sins and the hurts that others have done will never go away. No one can really help me. It's 'too far gone'." And sometimes we just don't want to hear God's Word; we want to 'push God aside'.

Conversely, there times when we do want to present that we 'have it all together', And so our sense of 'fear' is 'diminished', and we move ahead 'confidently' in life (too confidently), and not properly weigh up the challenges ahead? Jeremiah was properly aware of the challenges ahead. He had properly assessed the difficulties that would befall him. And so he felt 'fear' from a human perspective (as any normal person would).

There is always a sense of 'fear' in people's lives. This is a 'natural part' of 'being human'. This 'fear' may manifest itself in a 'fear' of failure' (which can at times manifest itself in a false bravado). This fear may rest is a fear of the 'unknown' (What may the future hold?). ;And this 'fear' can be such that we 'fear of honestly dealing with one's problems (because we know we may have to actually make changes, or reprioritise in life). There can be a 'fear' of dealing with one's own sins. And, quite honestly, there are times when we are 'fearful' simply about 'being honest'.

The Psalmist has said (Psalm 71:1-6): "For You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon You I have leaned from before my birth; You are He who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of You."

The Psalmist for today (whom some have said is King David in his twilight years)... the Psalmist speaks of responding to a difficult situation. It is as if David is approaching life's end, and he may have in mind the machinations of those around him (even from his won family: Adonijah) who were trying to make themselves 'king' after him. But the Psalmist speaks to anyone who finds themselves in a difficult situation. And the questions we may ask ourselves are this: When we have a sense of 'fear' in our lives, how shall we respond? And when we don't have a right 'sense of fear' (ie: awe, respect, desire to 'do the right thing') when we know we ought to, how shall we also respond? The reality is that we all have troubles in life. The question is, to whom shall we go when we experience trouble (or inflict trouble upon others)?

The Psalmist speaks of God as his 'rock and refuge' and his 'hope from youth, even from birth'. In Jesus, this Word is truly fulfilled. Irrespective of how we 'feel' in life, God is always with you. The Psalmist says, "You have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From my birth I have relied on You; You brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise You."

Sometimes people are fearful to admit to the problems they have had to face in life. This is part of our human nature. But why be afraid of this? Has not Jesus taken our sin to the cross? Has not Jesus borne all our griefs and sorrows (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)?

Is there anything in life – death or life, angels or rulers, or the present or the future, or any power, or anything else in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus? If Jesus has destroyed death, why be fearful of death? And if Jesus has brought forgiveness through the cross, why be fearful of life?

In You, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Indeed, because of Him, every moment of 'fear' is an opportunity to trust in Jesus.

Life will have difficulties... You will sin... Others will hurt you... Terrible things will continue to happen in this world... Such is the nature of a 'fallen' and broken creation. But our 'trust' is the LORD, and in Him will never be put to shame.

Oh, the joy of those who trust in the Lord. Amen.