

Grace Lutheran Community, 1st April, 2021: Maundy Thursday

- ¹ I love the LORD, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy.
² Because He turned His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live.
³ The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'LORD, save me!'
Psalm 116:1-4

Over the past few weeks we have been reflecting on The Lord's Prayer, and what this means for us as Christians. As we gather now on Maundy Thursday we have an opportunity to reflect further on our life of prayer. But have you ever felt like no one is listening?

"I just don't think God hears me." Those are words that are spoken or thought by new Christians as well as veterans. When you're going through tough times, that sense of loneliness may cause you to feel like God has left you all by yourself.

From the time we were children, we probably pictured God in heaven looking down at us and listening to our simple child-prayers. But as we got older and experienced some of the hardships in life, we wondered how well God was listening to us, particularly when he doesn't respond immediately. We may think that maybe God deliberately ignores us with His disapproval when we disobey Him. Or maybe He gets too busy addressing all of the needs of His creation. Others are in line for His care ahead of us. In short, maybe God is like we are in the way that we pay attention to some people, but ignore others who annoy us. And so, we think He ignores or forgets us.

Why does it feel like God isn't answering my prayers? When we suffer, it's easy to believe that God is either absent or has forgotten us. But God assures us that he is present and has not forgotten us: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

What has God told us in His Word about his hearing our cries and responding to them? Without hesitation, the psalmist shouts, "The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer" (Psalm 6:9). He is confident that God hears him.

The Bible warns against trusting your heart for absolute truth. When emotions are running high, don't operate in what you think; operate in what the Bible says.

Our Psalm for tonight says (Psalm 116:1-2, NKJV), "I love the Lord, because He has heard my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me. Therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live."

The Message Bible translation paraphrases these verses this way: "I Love God because He listened to me, listened as I begged for mercy. He listened so intently as I laid out my case before Him."

One writer reflecting on this writes, *"There's no greater gift than to be listened to. Hearing is a biological experience; our ears hear sounds that are processed in our brains that foster and deepen our understanding. But listening takes on a deeper process where we bring our lived experiences into what we hear to find sympathy, empathy or common threads that connect the listener [to the] speaker."*

Hearing is the process of receiving sound, words, noises and tones. Listening on the other hand means to pay attention to the sound, the tone, the expression of words that are being used to understand the deeper meaning that is being communicated. And it is at this point we may sometimes ask, "Is anybody listening?" We make sounds, but it seems like no-one is listening.

In Psalm 116, the Psalmist would remind us out of his own dire experiences, that there is one who hears and listens to our cries and the cries of His people, even when no one else will give us the time of day. We worship a God who listens to our cries. Notice that the Psalmist does not begin with his testimony of what the Lord has done for him, but he begins where all praise and thanksgiving should start.

There are many things the Psalmist could have named as the first of many actions that God undertook in his behalf. The pangs of death surrounded him (V3), trouble and sorrow found him (V3), the Lord preserved him (V6), he was brought low and the Lord saved him (V6), his feet were falling and the Lord delivered him (8).

But he doesn't begin with what God did for him, he begins with the fact that God listened to him. "I love God because He has listened to me, listened as I begged for mercy. He listened so intently as I laid out my case before Him."

When it appears that no one is listening, really getting deep inside the meaning of your words and actions with some empathy and a sincere understanding of what you are going through, know that God is always listening, and God hears your cries.

We must believe in this wonderful reality that no matter how bad things might be, the cries of the righteousness, the cries of those being misused, abused and kicked to the curb, our cries pierce the heart of God, and with a listening ear, God will move on our behalf.

God said to Moses, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry, because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows, so I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians." (Ex.3:7-8)

When Sarah out of her jealousy put Hagar out of the house because she had born Abraham a son, Ishmael, and mother and son where out there wandering in the wilderness, with no place to go, out of water and Ishmael began to cry, God way up there in a distance eternity, heard a cry out of time, and God dispatched an angel from heaven who said to single parent mother, “Hagar, do not be afraid, for I have heard your son’s crying.” (Gen. 21:17)

On Maundy Thursday we reflect on our love for God and God’s love for us. On Maundy Thursday we remember what God has done for us. On Maundy Thursday we thank God and are sent out to live out that thanks by being God’s loving people in all the world. How is that connected to this Psalm?

Just moments after giving His disciples Holy Communion for the first time, Jesus and His disciples sang the words of our psalm as part of the post-Passover meal ritual (The ‘Hallel Psalms – Psalms 113-118, and here Psalm 116:1-4): “I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy. Because He turned His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, save me!”

The Psalmist says, “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.” The Psalmist said, “Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, save me!” And the Psalmist says (vv.8-9): “For You, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”

When Jesus was praying in the Garden, He said (Matthew 26:39), “O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as You will.”

Is anybody listening? Is God listening to our cries in times of trial and trouble? At times we may feel that is not the case. But one of the beautiful things about our Maundy Service traditions is that we leave the building in silence. And why do we do this? On the one hand we are preparing for Good Friday to remember the incredible suffering of Christ on our behalf. And surely this deserves silence, and reverence, and awe. But maybe there is another reason also.

Have you ever felt in those times of pain and suffering you actually want to experience silence? If you have experienced chronic pain, it occupies your mind. Have you wanted silence here? If you have experienced abuse, it echoes in your mind and heart in so many ways. Have you wanted silence here? And with the right sort of silence, our hearts and souls can be reorientated to a heart of light and hope. And to listen to God, to know that He hears us, we too need to grow in the right way of silence. And this ‘silence’ comes not from our own souls (or our ‘good works’, or our ‘spiritual disciplines’). Rather, this comes from

knowing that The Lord listens to me. He listens to you. And we know that because of the sufferings and prayers of Jesus Christ.

The Psalmist said (vv.15-16), “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His faithful servants. Truly I am your servant, LORD; I serve You just as my mother did; You have freed me from my chains.” The Psalmist goes on to say (vv.17-19): “I will sacrifice a thank-offering to You and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfil my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the LORD – in Your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.”

Our Father is waiting for us to call to Him in our distress. He is with us and walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, and we are comforted by His rod and His staff.

The significance of Psalm 116 for Maundy Thursday, then, is that it invites us to remember and rehearse how we too have been “delivered from death” by the death of our Lord and Saviour and cultivates in us a posture of thanksgiving and praise for all God’s goodness to us. For on this night, as is the case whenever we celebrate the Lord’s supper, Christ holds out to us the cup that is poured out as a new covenant in his blood, inviting us to drink in the benefits and blessings of his sacrifice, to say with grateful hearts yes to God, yes to salvation, yes to dying to sin, and yes to our new life as God’s kingdom people in Jesus Christ.

On Maundy Thursday, then, in the shadow of cross, let us profess with the psalmist, we love You Lord, for You have heard our voice and our cry for mercy. You have delivered us from death, our eyes from tears, our feet from stumbling. Praise the Lord!

Almighty God, help us to see and receive the Work of Christ for our salvation. Let us call out to You and cry to You for our daily needs and distresses and for all the hopes of our future – in this life, and in the Kingdom. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.