

## Meditation 1: "The Times Only God Will Do" January 24, 2021

### Scripture Lesson 1: Psalm 62:5-12

<sup>5</sup>For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

<sup>6</sup>He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup>On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup>Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah

<sup>9</sup>Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.

<sup>10</sup>Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

<sup>11</sup>Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God,

<sup>12</sup>and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

"<sup>9</sup>Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath." I find those words from the Psalmist very insightful, very descriptive of both our nature and our functioning as human beings. We are creatures of respiration; our lives are involved in breathing in and breathing out the atmospheres of our context. But this applies to much more than air.

I have recently found myself scouring the news and Facebook posts quite a bit more than I used to - and no, not just to watch silly cat videos or postings about motorcycle racing. I find myself drawn to the internet more to see how things are turning out in this time of great upheaval. Perhaps this is not so unusual as most of us are anxious to see how things are unfolding in these days of historic change. I approach these internet postings with both fear and hope, fear that things will get worse, hope that things will get better, all the while knowing I cannot really control the future, though I know what we say and do will absolutely affect the future. Thursday, after the inauguration of our 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, I came across a one-word post on Facebook that pretty much said it all -- in one word, displayed upon a simple background of a sort of wavy blue pattern, it captured what perhaps most people were feeling and thinking, even those on polar opposite sides of the political arena. That word was "exhale."

The inauguration went without a hitch - no small thing, being that it came on the heels of an act of insurrection, in the middle of a pandemic, and the continuing struggle to come to grips with misinformation and less than helpful tweets. The vaccination program is well underway, albeit with some glitches and new learnings, all the while crossing an ominous threshold, with over 400,000 people in our country dead from the virus. Personnel at state capitols held their breath as they anticipated a repeat of violent protests which were threatened by groups

committed to violently upend our democratic process; such threats largely failed to surface. For these reasons, and many others, we as a people and as a world, are more than validated as we exhale, as we breathe a great sigh of relief that many of the things we had feared have not come to pass.

Yet in our sigh is also the sadness we feel that much which is worthy of fear has indeed come to pass, with the upheavals and deaths and rhetoric leading to darkneses we have not had to face before, at least not exactly in the ways or degrees we have recently. So we sigh a conditional sigh of limited relief, exhaling momentarily in order to go on.

Perhaps this describes our present reality, where we have come to the end of the respiration cycle, and must let go of what has been. By "let go" I do not mean forget or excuse, for we must remember in order to learn, and we must hold responsible entities accountable. But we must at the same time exhale in some way the grip upon us of the wrong things that have happened, we must exhale the impact of the attitudes that were ugly and destructive, we must exhale the animosity that has arisen and the ignorance that has been revealed, and most significantly we must exhale the anger and outrage that has arisen in people of good conscience and character. It's time to exhale such air; there is no oxygen in it, there is no life to be found in its pressure. We need to exhale.

But we must complete the cycle. After we exhale, we inhale. In order to inhale the freshness of new air, it is necessary to exhale the spent potential of the old. But, inhale what? New air is needed, air that is not saturated with the illnesses of prejudice and deceit and hypocrisy and worldly power; new air is needed which holds within it the oxygen of hope and love, of integrity and justice. This is the new air to which faith provides access; this is the refreshing wind of the spirit, the renewing good news of Christ. More specifically, it is the fresh air of the principles modeled by a loving God which provide the only foundation for a hopeful future. This is the new air described by the Psalmist, when he says,

<sup>5</sup>For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

<sup>6</sup>He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup>On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup>Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us."

This is the air we need. And this is the air God provides. It is time to breathe out the old, so we can breathe in the new.

## Meditation 2: "The Times Only God Can Save"

### Scripture Lesson 2: I Corinthians 7:29-31

<sup>29</sup>I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, <sup>30</sup>and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, <sup>31</sup>and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Most of you know that in our church we usually follow the lectionary to shape our worship content. The lectionary is a sort of standardized schedule of scripture lessons which try to cover the essentials of scriptural themes over the course of three years. In essence, the lectionary tries to make sure what is most important in the bible gains coverage and focus in worship services. Most of the time, I have found that following the lectionary is a tremendous help, in that it draws our attention not just to the passages of scripture which are comforting, quaint, and easy on the ears and heart, but also to the passages we'd rather not read or think about, such as loving our enemies or taking a stand for justice or acknowledging our own brokenness through confession. We need both to be comforted and challenged for our faith to have substance, and the lectionary can be so very helpful to this balance.

Yet, every now and then, I notice that the lectionary contains a glaring exception, something which I think was left out which is absolutely essential to what God is trying to get across. Today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is one such example; it contains a glaring exception. In the lectionary, it lists verses 29-31 as our passage for today, but leaves out verse 32. I think I know why, for the way it was written, in Paul's hand, it doesn't flow smoothly - but its content is essential to what I think Paul is trying desperately to get across. I'm going to read that passage again, but this time with the added verse, which is only eight words long, but adds substantially to both the interpretation of the passage and the understanding of God's will for our lives.:

"<sup>29</sup>I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, <sup>30</sup>and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, <sup>31</sup>and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. <sup>32</sup>I want you to be free from anxieties."

"I want you to be free from anxieties." What an essential message for our times! What an essential message for any time! Paul is advocating ways to deal with our fears and worries in order to meet the demands of a very troubled time - and it involves what we might call "constrained detachment."

Constrained detachment is not detachment from the world as it is, but detachment from the eternal significance of the world as it is. It has its parallel in other professions where the term "Proper distance" is used. "Proper distance" is the term used by professional counselors, social workers, and pastors, where the profession demands a proper emotional and relational distance from the subject in order to maintain an objective perspective that can see more of what is helpful to the subject. "Constrained detachment" is similar, in that it denotes a faithful distancing from the world without losing sight of that world's significance in the eternal scheme of things. In other words, to get the most out of the world, do not get so close to the world that you are blinded by the world. Or, from a faithful perspective - in order to live most fully in the world, always strive to see that world from a perspective greater than your own.

I happened upon someone who spoke this truth to a global audience in a very powerful way; her name is *Amanda Gorman* who is *our nation's first National Youth Poet Laureate*, and she spoke profound and beautiful words at the inauguration. It was tempting for me to read all of her words again, but I have neither the experience nor eloquence to do it justice (nor do we have the time!); instead, I am drawn to the beginning of her reading, which speaks profoundly about the anxiety of our days and how to understand that the energy in that anxiety can be transformed by greater vision. Here's how she put it:

"When day comes we ask ourselves,  
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?  
The loss we carry,  
a sea we must wade  
We've braved the belly of the beast  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace  
And the norms and notions  
of what just is  
Isn't always just-ice  
And yet the dawn is ours  
before we knew it

Somehow we do it  
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed  
a nation that isn't broken  
but simply unfinished

WE ARE NOT BROKEN, BUT SIMPLY UNFINISHED. This is so powerfully true of our nation; this is so powerfully true of our world. And perhaps it is the source of our greatest anxieties that we feel we should be finished by now, that we should be complete in this day and age, that we should have seen the end of racism and hatred and ignorance and violence and deceit and hypocrisy. If these are the measures to assess the success of the human race, then we are indeed broken. But if these dark realities are more accurately understood as evidence of the work that needs to be done, work which we now perhaps see more clearly than ever, then we are not so much broken as unfinished - and perhaps, uniquely motivated and positioned for change.

As with any work that has great significance, it is essential to keep in mind what one is working towards. But for there to be any hope of making progress towards that goal, we must make sure we do not fixate so much upon that goal that we fail to take action. It is in the progress towards worthy goals that life finds its consistent integrity. And it is in the progress towards worthy goals that our anxiety is transformed into hope.