

Ordinary 5

Salem United Methodist Church

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Alright God! I'm here! I'm ready! I said the words. I said "here I am!" I took off my shoes!

I'm here! Just me. Bare before you. Open. Ready.

...

Come on.

Whatever you're gonna do, do it!

Save me.

Fix me.

Fix this.

Change this.

Change the world.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

I'll be an instrument of your will if that's what it takes, just... COME *on!*

...

Where are you?

I thought... I thought all I had to do was show up ready.

I thought...

I don't know what I thought. I just thought you'd show up, too.

Where are you, God?

Where are you when it hurts?

Where are you when I hurt?

Where are you when my neighbor hurts?

Where are you when our Asian neighbors are being killed? Or our black and brown ones? You said you are Lord of all. Where are you when this happens?

Where are you when my grandma can't get a vaccine, but my 20-year-old neighbor did?

Where are you when my best friend is lonely, and I can't seem to do a single thing to make it better?

God, here I am! Fix me. Fix this. Change this. Change... *me*.

I'm here.

...

Does this sound familiar to any of you?

Have you ever cried out to God, determined to change your life, to give yourself over-whatever it takes! -just for God to DO something to make it better?

We've all heard stories of it working-right? We've heard stories of faith healings, addiction recovery, amazing and unexpected reconciliation. And, yet, many of us have personal stories of illness unhealed, families divided, prayers unanswered.

What does it mean? Some will say that it's that God simply has a better plan. Or that, as the song goes, we'll "Thank God for unanswered prayers."

But, honestly, when a child dies? Or any loved one? Or when a life is ruined? That doesn't sound like an unanswered prayer I'll be thanking God for. That just doesn't even make sense.

This isn't getting fired and then finding out you actually have a different, more fulfilling passion. This isn't a kid praying for a crush to notice them only to grow up and find out that relationship would have been a disaster.

Death can't be God's plan. It doesn't fit. Jesus conquered death. Its not a fitting Christian punishment. It's not God needing another angel or working some manipulative plan into our lives as if we're puppets on strings.

That's not the God that I know.

So. What do we do? Why are we still Christians? Why do people who experience tragedies still turn to God? Why do people who don't see God's immediate action

still show up in church and talk about a God who loves them and makes a difference in their lives?

Is it possible they are experiencing something from God that we can't quantify on the outside?

Is it possible that-if I'm talking about you-that you aren't waiting for God to solve your problems? Perhaps you have a different relationship with God. Perhaps you spent time angry but learned something new about God that sustains you now. Perhaps you don't blame God for unanswered prayers, but instead have a deep sense of God's presence with you within your pain. A deep sense of blessing that doesn't erase your feelings or change your immediate reality, but instead leads you into an ordinary experience of our extraordinary God.

So... what does that look like?

Well, today we have Psalm 23 before us. It's the kind of Psalm that many of us memorized. I hear it often. In fact, it's the only passage that I still read in the KJV.

It's a passage that is passed down through families. We love the imagery of God as a shepherd who cares for us. But, you know what, if we really think about it, how comforting is this Psalm, really?

I mean, look closely. The first 3 verses are nice, Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Green pastures, still waters, restores my soul. Very nice.

But then, "even though I walk through the darkest valley I fear no evil."

Wait a second. If I'm with the shepherd I still need to walk through dark valleys? So... I won't be afraid of evil, but will it still be there? Around me?? Just because I'm not afraid doesn't mean that I'm not experiencing it!

And then! "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

In the **presence of my enemies**?!

#1 What do you mean I still have enemies?

#2 Why am I with them?!

And then, "you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

That part... that part is nice.

This Psalm is not a promise of a peaceful life free of conflict. If you only read the first 3 verses, you'll miss the meat. If you read just the last verse, you won't get it. You won't get to see how this is part of our everyday, ordinary relationship with God. This isn't a psalm about the extraordinary circumstances in our lives. It's not about life with God on a spiritual retreat that eventually ends. It's about a life with God in the midst of... our life.... Well, our life that's just our life!

God doesn't intervene with magic or miracles here. No, God is simply present as a companion through the journey. And God chooses to make God-self known through a blessing with something ordinary-oil.

Our Psalmist is anointed in the presence of enemies. At a table! Where their cup runneth over. And THAT's the symbol that God's goodness and mercy shall follow them forever.

In the Middle East, we're talking about olive oil. They have an entire industry around olive presses and the different kinds of oils that they can produce. Everything from cooking oil to health supplements, to skin care products. Olive oil matters over there!

Throughout the Bible we have images of anointing.

Now, I have to confess. This anointing? I normally picture this as an intimate, quiet moment between me and God. A quiet blessing. A moment where God touches the oil, then touches my forehead softly while whispering a blessing of love.

Just enough oil that I'll worry about getting a finger sized pimple if I don't wash it off soon enough. But worth it because it's a blessing from God!

But... that's not how it happens in this Psalm. Its not intimate and alone. Its not for just me. Its in the presence of my enemies. The enemies are not dismissed or asked to leave. The enemies are not driven off so I can rest in the presence of my God. No, this is a public blessing that doesn't start with solving the problems.

This is a public blessing that happens in the midst of the problems.

And its certainly not going to be a small drop of oil on our foreheads. No, other scriptures tell of an anointing that leads to oil dripping from a man's beard.

Can you imagine how much oil I'd need to pour onto your head so that it would drip over your face and then through a thick beard onto the ground?

Other scriptures talk about anointing so that the whole face shines with blessing. That's an abundant blessing!

Now, the romantics out there may be thinking about how lovely it would be to be blessed with this abundance. Others, however, may be thinking about how hard it is to get oil out of your hair. Has anyone had to get bubblegum out of kids' hair with mayonnaise? The bubble gum is out, but you're left with an oily mess that needs its own solution. Eventually the hair is soft and lovely, but that takes a TON of shampoo.

We have a pretty strange relationship with oil in our lives.

If you want down a skin or hair care aisle, you'll see product after product promising to be moisturizing without oil-for sensitive skin! Or you'll see products with added oils promising to be the best moisturizer you've ever had.

Some do-it-yourself blogs are devoted to teaching you to use different oils to make your own skin care products. Others are committed to helping you remove stains from oils on your favorite clothes.

If you wander into a grocery store, you'll see rows and rows of fat-free, trans fat free, or substitute oils promising to be healthier than the fatty alternatives. On the

other hand, there's the whole keto and whole food movement promising that real butter, real bacon, and real olive oil are the salvation for our arteries.

I'm not sure we have any idea what to do with oils anymore! We haven't even touched on drilling for oil and the way we watch gas prices!

I get confused about how to feel about oil just laying this out. Is it good or bad?

Does it help our economy enough to outweigh the environmental destruction?

Does it clear my arteries or fill them?

Does it moisturize my face or clog my pores?

And what on earth does it have to do with unanswered prayers and offered blessings??

I say all this because we probably can't understand what oil meant to the original audience for the Psalm. We're so mixed up about oil that we aren't sure if it's a curse or a blessing. The ancient people didn't wonder that. They knew it was the substance that flavored their food, added needed calories, gave moisture for their skin, and allowed them to shine like Moses after seeing God. It looked like health and flourishing.

In the New Testament, we see a story of a woman dumping expensive perfume on Jesus' feet to anoint him. His disciples are mad about the waste. He is honored by the sacrifice.

Oil is a blessing. Not to be wasted. Not to be used without purpose. And not to be ignored or feared.

So, how does it relate to prayers and blessings? Sometimes God is blessing us in ways we don't see. Sometimes God is giving us opportunities for praise that don't make sense in the situation that we're in.

Sometimes Psalm 23 is exactly what we need to say in the midst of something tragic because it promises that God is with us and leading us through. It's promising that we don't need to be ruled by fear, we will never be alone, and that even if enemies are before me, goodness and mercy are right behind.

Thank God for that!