

“ARE YOU A GOD-SEEKER?”

Date: August 5, 2007

Text: Psalm 24

This summer we are looking at some psalms from the book that often is called “The Songbook of the Bible.” Your response to these sermons on the psalms only reaffirms the basic point that these “songs” touch so many lives because the writers have captured the flow of human emotions from the high mountaintop experiences to the deep and dark valleys of life. I have changed from what was announced in the newsletter and today we look at beautiful psalm 24. Actually three ancient pieces of liturgy make up this psalm: verses 1 and 2 are a hymn of creation; verses 3-6 are part of a pilgrim’s song when approaching the temple; verses 7-10 are an ancient chant used as people carried the Ark of the Covenant into the worship center. Let’s see how this liturgical literature, parts as old as the 10th Century B.C., might apply to our lives.

Verse 3 asks a question that never loses its meaning: **“who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?”** We might say, “How can we draw close to the Almighty and tap into a power greater than ourselves?” “The Message,” a contemporary translation of the Bible calls people who asks the question of the psalmist “God-seekers.” Several years ago the late Peter Jennings had a special on the life of Christ. It was announced afterwards that ABC had been leery about putting the show on because they were not sure how many people would watch a religious program especially in the middle of summer. To their amazement the special ranked as one of the top three shows of that week. The show proved there are a lot of seekers and wouldn’t we count ourselves among them?

The response in verse 4 is spelled out quite clearly: **“have clean hands and a pure heart and do not lift up your souls to what is false.”** The prophet Micah put it another way that has had great meaning throughout my ministry and life: **“what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”** Note that the psalmist and prophet are lifting our sights a notch above just being “nice” and baking a cake for a neighbor in need. “Doing justice” calls for a look at the inequities in our society; “loving kindness” means applying one’s faith at work and home; “walking with God” implies a spiritual dimension to daily existence.

People who try to follow the words of the psalmist will soon be asking, “Who in the world has clean hands and a pure heart?” Some of you already have learned how difficult it is to take Jesus’ command to “love God and others” out into the working world. The difficulty leads us to the end of the psalm and the chant heard while people were carrying the Ark of the Covenant into worship. The Ark was like a treasure chest containing the sacred symbols of the Israelite faith. So when the worshippers bearing the ark cried out, **“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory?”** they clearly were looking to God for help.

Early Christians immediately perceived that God’s answer had come in the person of Jesus who is “the King of glory.” He is the One who by his life, death and resurrection makes “our hands and hearts pure.” We can’t always be the loving and caring kind of people God meant for us to be. Christ makes up for our imperfections and fills in the gaps between whom we are and who we were created to be. We will deal further with the promise of forgiveness when confession is honest and true later this month when we consider psalm 51.

This ancient liturgy, then, in a very powerful manner helps us to remember that we are made to live close to our Creator and that God has sent one to help us walk in His paths. The psalmist, however, sets our calling in a much broader context than we normally assume. So often the Word preached is all about what God can do for you personally. The psalmist, in contrast, gives us a wider perspective in the first verse: **“the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.”**

Psalm 8, which we looked at a few weeks ago, gave us a vision of God as Creator and now Psalm 24 reinforces the world-wideness of God’s concern. Walter Rauschenbaush, who taught at the seminary in Rochester eighty years ago, wrote about the implications of that verse: “The sooner we learn that this earth is a very small planet and getting smaller every year, and that our welfare is bound up with all the other passengers, the better it will be for us.” We nod in approval but I am not sure we really do see the world as “a

global village.” “Our school,” “our town,” “our nation” all too often not only take center stage but dominate any list of concerns we develop. Indeed, one of the great challenges facing the Church is to expand our horizons so that what happens in the Sudan or Rochester or some other place certainly concerns us. I am pleased to say that Randall Shea’s visit from Guatemala last Sunday is only one of many signs that this community of faith is moving out while serving needs at home.

The first two verses of the psalm declaring that “**all the earth belongs to God**” provide a basis for our theological understanding of “stewardship.” I referred to stewardship last week but let me dare venture into that arena again. I suspect that when you hear the word “stewardship” you immediately think about giving money. That is part of what the word involves and I hope that when November rolls around you will ask yourself: If it all belongs to God, how much do I plan to return as a thank offering? But if it all belongs to God, then taking care of God’s gifts, stewardship, involves global warming and the destruction of the Amazon forests and even how we treat nature around here or on vacation. It certainly is more than just giving money as important as that is. The psalm challenges us to look at our attitudes toward all of life. I was astounded when we first went to Mexico on a sabbatical to discover that even in places like Acapulco the beaches are free for everyone to use. In contrast, I grew up in New Jersey where after you paid \$10 for parking and \$8 for a beach permit you were lucky to find space for your blanket. Do you wonder why I say that we have much to learn from other cultures?

Native Americans especially can be our teachers when it comes to parts of the scripture like Psalm 24. In 1855 one of the great Native American leaders, Chief Seattle, wrote: Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our Mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. If we spit upon the ground we spit upon ourselves. This we know, the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth...One other thing we know, which the white man may one day discover, our God is the same God. You may think that you own Him as you want to own our land, but you cannot. He is God of ALL people, and his compassion is equal for all. This earth is precious to God, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. So love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. And with your entire mind and with all your heart, preserve it for your children and love...as God loves all of us.

Few words better reflect the understanding of the psalmist.

Psalm 24 makes three significant theological statements that are not revolutionary but which merit continually attention:

- The earth and all in it belongs to our Creator;
- We live in partnership with our Maker when we share in making this earth a good place for all to live and not just ourselves;
- God will send one who will be “the King of glory” to help us in working for this greater good.

Live out these three ideals and you too will “ascend unto the hill of the Lord.”