



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sacred Spaces for Starving Souls

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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for Starving Souls**

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Psalm 13

We come to the fourth and final Lenten sermon following the theme keeping the Sabbath, wholly and holy. I'm going to be reading the 13th Psalm, and I would like for you to follow along.

It's only six verses; I'm going to pause between verse 4 and verse 5... there's literally a space between verses 4 and 5, but even more; you'll hear the difference between verses 1-4 and verses 5 & 6.

Literally, there is a space between verse 4 and 5, but I will suggest that this is even more a sacred space, a space in which something happens as we find ourselves today crying with the Psalmist and looking for the day we will rejoice with the Psalmist

(Read Psalm 13)

I remember the first time I ever heard of Lent. I was in the 8th Grade and Lent was not part of the Presbyterian life. We had moved from Protestant majority north Louisiana closer to south Louisiana and more Catholics.

It was after basketball practice. A few of us would go to a little neighborhood market and have a candy bar and Coke while we waited for our parents to pick us up.

But on this day, my friend Doug Hebert, didn't get anything. "Do you need some money?" "No, I gave up chocolate and soft drinks for Lent." "You what? Lent, what's that? You gave that up for how long? Why?"

As I ate my Snickers and drank my Coke, I was glad to be a Presbyterian!

But here we are, liturgical life has changed and we Presbyterians now observe the season of Lent; and in this season of Shelter in Place, as so many have said, "I didn't realize how much I was going to give up for Lent."

David Brooks, in a recent column, wrote:

"The great paradox, of course, is that we had to be set apart in order to feel together...It's like when you're starving, and food is all you can think about."

I know that feeling!

When I was in seminary, we would receive a Sunday assignment for preaching in a pastorless church, usually a small church, somewhere within a 3 or 4 hour drive from Decatur, GA, where my seminary was located.

I remember very well one such preaching assignment to a church in eastern Alabama. The directions from Decatur, GA were: Go to Roanoke, AL and take Hwy. 431 South. At Buffalo Crossroads (If you get to Lafayette, you've gone too far, that's what the directions said!) turn left, cross the railroad tracks, and take the right fork in the road. Follow that road a few miles until you come to a cemetery on the left and the church is back off the road on the right!

In other words, directions to the middle of nowhere! My wife and I pulled up in front of the church about 15 minutes before the service, but no one was there. This church only met twice a month...had I gotten my dates mixed up...but then, there suddenly appeared about 8 to 10 cars and trucks in front of the church.

My wife and I were standing outside after the service, and the custom for most of these rural churches was either to invite you to lunch or give you a little lunch money.

We were waiting, we were hungry, but just as suddenly as the vehicles appeared, they disappeared, except for one car...an elderly couple, he was on a walker and she had her cane. She got him in the car and just before getting behind the wheel, said, “Y’all are welcome to come home with us if you want a little bite to eat.”

As we followed them deeper into the Alabama wilderness, I told my wife that a ‘little bite’ ought to hold us until we got back to civilization.

We walked into their kitchen. She pulled a tablecloth off the kitchen table and revealed a table set for four and then proceeded to serve us and didn’t sit down until we were on our second helping of ham and creamed corn and butter beans and green beans and sweet potato casserole and cornbread!

As we waddled out to the car to return home, she told us to wait a minute; went back in and came out with a paper bag, saying, “Y’all might want this if you get hungry on the way home.” In it were a dozen home-made fried apple and peach pies!

In the midst of our wilderness nowhere, the invitation for a ‘little bite to eat’ was for more than we ever expected, more than what we could have hoped for!

I think there are a lot of people who are in the middle of nowhere today, between that rock and a hard place – economically, emotionally, physically, spiritually – wondering

how and where we're going to find nourishment for a soul starving for hope, for peace, for something to hold us until we get back to some semblance of safety and security, to rejoin and rejoice.

I think this Psalm leads us to a sacred space between that rock and a grace place, and that when we cry out in our pain, call for help, we are connected more powerfully to God through our anxieties and fears, in our hunger for hope, with our problems that are overwhelming than we ever could through our strengths alone.

Thomas Merton says it this way in his prayer:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

Then he comes to that sacred space, “... *though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. In Jesus, Amen.*”

Is that not what it was for the psalmist to name and claim his suffering and then in that sacred space, what happened was to be connected more powerfully to the presence of God, to experience the steadfast love of God and then write, “Rejoice”?

The root word for ‘rejoice’ is literally ‘gala’, a celebration, and the word ‘rejoice’ in Hebrew means to be ‘excited with levity.’

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Can you imagine, this person who began with cries of 'how long, O Lord' is now excited with happiness and cheer and great joy? It's the sheer delight, starving in the middle of our nowhere and being welcomed to a table full of food, then sent home with more than you can imagine!

Psalm 63 picks up on this journey from suffering to celebration with images of food and drink: "...O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, (and I would say that 'sanctuary' in this psalm is our psalm's sacred space) beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love (the same experience as Psalm 13) is better than life, my lips will praise you. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast...

So it is that our psalmist celebrated after moving from suffering through that sacred space of the experience of God, space more than sheltered-in-space, starving souls be sheltered in the steadfast love of God, yes, that's what I pray for all of us.

John Hayes reflected on Psalm 63 in our Lenten Devotionals this past Thursday, but he speaks eloquently of what I believe happens in the sacred space of Psalm 13: *"People who experience God are not alone because they experience an unchangeable oneness with God. This experience allows trust in God and freedom from fear, worry or anxiety. They know peace. They can laugh."*

It's so hard to see now, but we will, we can rejoice! One person said it this way, *"Joy born of deep suffering is nourished by moments of celebration..."*

Celebration properly understood is the acceptance of life in a growing recognition that it is so precious.”

I like the way Sara Shenk defines celebration:

...Celebration is the honoring of that which we hold most dear. Celebration is delight in in that which tells us who we are. Celebration is taking the time to cherish each other. Celebration is returning with open arms and thankful hearts to our Maker.

Sabbath is that sacred space, and Sabbath-keeping allows us to celebrate wherever we are, however we are at this moment, whatever the day, whatever the time: To rejoice in God, with God, for God because life is so precious.

And for these peculiar days where we've given up more for Lent than we ever thought, we move through our own days of 'how long, O Lord' to prepare ourselves for the holy days ahead, ready for the celebration and praise, the rejoicing and even more in the soul-restoring joy of God's gala.

Pope Francis says it so well:

*Tonight, before falling asleep,
Think about when we will return to the street;
When we hug again, and when all the shopping together will
seem like a party.
Let's think about when the coffees will return to the bar, the
small talk, the photos close to each other.
We think about when it will be all a memory, but normalcy
will seem an unexpected and beautiful gift.
We will love everything that has so far seemed futile to us.
Every second will be precious: Swims at the sea, the sun
until late, sunsets, toasts, laughter.*

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*We will go back to laughing together.
Strength and courage,
See you soon!*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org