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Text: Psalm 147
Sermon: God Is A Verb
February 4, 2024

Psalm 147

Praise the LORD!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
He heals the broken-hearted,
and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.
Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.
His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.
Praise the LORD!

Several years ago, I was riding on a train with my family from Edinburgh to London, and on such special trips, it matters to me where I get to sit on the train. If you sit on the coast side, north sea side, you get to look out at craggy cliffs and beautiful glimpses at the placid sea, whereas if you sit on the inland side of the train, you see a lot

of bushes and brambles and an occasional sheep or pasture. I like the coastal side. Not only with the views of the coastline, but also you look out on the border town Berwick-upon-Tweed as the Tweed River flows through it and empties out into the sea. You see all the many bridges of Newcastle and passing through Durham you can see Durham Cathedral high up on a rocky outcrop overlooking the entire city and region. The same goes for York with its city wall and Minister Cathedral greeting you like a postcard through the train window. Sitting next to the coast side window really is the best part of the journey. On one of those trips, it was a clear day and off in the distance just after crossing into England along the coastline arose the island of Lindisfarne. Atop a rocky island outcropping sits Lindisfarne Monastery which was founded in 635 by Aidan who came to the region from Iona to build a new community on the other side of the British Isles.

While Lindisfarne is an island, it is linked to the mainland by a causeway which several times a day is covered by high tide. So if you are going to visit Lindisfarne you have to plan accordingly and follow the tide schedules carefully in order to not get stuck one way or another. Excited to see the Holy Island from my spot on the train, I pulled out my phone to take some pictures. And as I snapped several photos as we whisked along the railway, several birds flew by. And so in some of my photographs of Lindisfarne, one can see a bird in flight in each frame, but in different stages of flight, some with wings outstretched and others with wings tucked in, but each frame only capturing a moment and unable to actually depict the bird in flight.

I often think of that bird flying by the train near Lindisfarne when we talk about faith but also about God. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus reminds us that we never step into the same river twice, even if we are in the exact same spot, for the river we stepped in before is making its way down to Algiers Point or Venice, Louisiana or out to the Gulf of Mexico. And at the very same time, we cannot be assured that we are the same person either. We are not the same atoms and brain cells we were yesterday...we are not static but constantly hurtling onward to the person we are becoming. And that is true of God and of faith. Rabbi Joshua Heschel wrote a book a generation ago on the theology of the prophets, reflecting on passages like our scripture readings today from Isaiah and from the psalms, and Heschel reminds us that we often think of God as a subject that we are in search of or seeking or we make ourselves to be the primary agents of discovery and God is the passive, static, being that we seek or search for or fashion ourselves as the God discoverers. But Heschel's point is that scripture tells a different story. It is God that is doing the searching, the looking, the engagement, the inviting, God is the whirlwind of activity and we are often the ones running or ignoring or preferring making ourselves the center of all the action. 'Adam,' God asks at the beginning of Genesis, 'where are you?' And the answer that we find in the Exodus in the prophets in the psalms and ultimately in the coming of Jesus, is a God who will go anywhere and sacrifice everything to live in solidarity with human beings even when we prefer independence, autonomy, and to believe we are the ones searching for God. God in search of humanity...it is God who is actively in search of us, and we who are often finding ways to short circuit it or do it ourselves or think we are to be independent and

self-sufficient creatures, not dependent ones who are constantly in need of being found by God, no matter how many times we may sing ‘Amazing Grace.’

The philosopher Charles Taylor has called the modern world the world of the immanent frame, a world ruled by logic and causal explanation for everything that happens, a world cut-off from and not in need of divine intervention or activity. As a result, God is often reduced to a static being far away and not all that active or involved in the life of the world. But like Rabbi Heschel’s theology of Israel’s prophets, the God who we find depicted in Psalm 147 is a God on the move. The Lord builds up, the Lord gathers, the Lord heals the broken hearted, the Lord binds up their wounds, the Lord determines the number of stars and gives them all their names, the Lord lifts up the downtrodden and casts the wicked to the ground.’ This is far from a God dispassionately looking down on our lives from afar, or a God who sees our existence or our lives as arbitrary. Far from inactivity, the God we see through the psalmist as a flurry of verbs, casting his lot with the fullness of the universe and the smallness of humanity, gathering not the best and brightest the psalmist tells us, or Israel’s top shelf, but the Lord gathers the outcasts of Israel, the lost, the forsaken, those who can’t seem to do for themselves. God’s preferential action does not end with Israel’s outcasts but extends to the brokenhearted and those whose lives are broken and fragmented. The God who numbers the stars and dwells to the edges of the vast universe also notices the smallest form of life and cares about exalting the most downtrodden existence.

Two generations ago, Waylon Jennings recorded a song called Luckenbach, Texas, about longing for the simpler times when he and his friends were not big music stars

fueled by alcohol and amphetamines and tour buses and neon lights, but when they were sitting out in Luckenbach's oak trees around the wooden dancefloor just picking on their guitars and making music with a few friends. This is just a short footnote, but I don't think Luckenbach, Texas is what it once was either, but has cashed in on its newfound celebrity status and now it is a hopping place to be for all the new people moving to the area. There is a line in the song that goes like this: 'e've been so busy keepin' up with the Jones, Four car garage and we're still building on...maybe it's time we got back to the basics of love.' Now I am not confusing either Waylon Jennings or Willie Nelson with moral exemplars in all senses of the word, but I do think they put their figure on the challenges of living in community together and that church has to be about more than 'keeping up with the Jones.' Because the problem is not the competition factor or comparing ourselves to others, the problem is that we think being the church is primarily about achievement, success, and getting religious benefits, and not also about struggle, wrestling with faith and doubt, failure, asking for support when we are at the end of our rope, and picking each other up in times of trouble. We live in a go-at-it alone world, but God is not a go-at-alone God.

Sociologists and Data Analysts have all looked at the changes in the last several decades of society and noted that fewer people join groups or participate in voluntary associations. As Robert Putnam put it, we bowl alone, but we also do religion or politics or leisure alone as well. Similar studies are noting rising rates of loneliness across many spectrums of society, as much as 40% nationally, and a spike in suicide rates over a similar period. Autonomy, being able to do more for ourselves and not need others as

much, does not lead to greater amounts of happiness, meaningfulness in our lives, or fulfillment. That includes health outcomes as Robert Hall has quipped, 'It is better for our health to eat twinkies with friends than broccoli by ourselves.'

What we see in the God of the prophets, the God of the psalms and the God of Jesus Christ, is a God who is not only a verb, but a God who acts with a freedom that pursues us and thrusts us into dependent relationships, A God who actively puts people in our lives that we cannot do without, and a God who helps us see the limits of our own powers, and a God who creates opportunities for growth in our own failures. It's all counter-intuitive, but this God is actively working and swimming against the stream so that we never become so self-sufficient that we don't need to ask for help, actively forfeiting what we think is power by giving it up and putting his life in our hands, a God who redefines what we mean by freedom by drawing us out of isolation and into endeavors that build community, cultivate relationships, and care for the good of the whole. May the God who is a verb keep searching until we become this kind of free.