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Psalm 20

Getting Ready for a Fresh New Start

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Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 20 Evangelical Lutheran Worship

May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble, the name of the God of Jacob defend you; send you help from the sanctuary and strengthen you out of Zion; may the Lord remember all your offerings, and accept your burnt sacrifice; grant you your heart’s desire and prosper all your plans. We will shout for joy at your victory and unfurl our banners in the name of our God; may the Lord grant all your requests. Now I know that the Lord gives victory to the anointed one; God will answer out of holy heaven, gaining victory with a strong right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we rely on the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall down, but we will arise and stand upright. O Lord, give victory to the king and answer us when we call.

Friday we went shopping for school supplies. Now, we have a small stack of notebooks that were left over from last year, but according to my children you can’t use last year’s notebooks. You have to start fresh and to start fresh, you have to put the past behind you. The school year always feels like a new beginning for me.  More than half the year is gone and I can’t remember the resolutions that I made in January, so I can make new ones! It is an opportunity to have a fresh new start. But before I can begin I need to get ready. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.  Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14). I have to acknowledge the past, but leave it in the past so that I can move forward.

We aren’t defined by our past, but it is part of our story. Our past happened but it doesn’t define our future because of Christ Jesus’ forgiveness and sanctifying grace that transforms us more and more into Christ’s image.  Thank God for that! Getting ready for a fresh start feels to me like the beginning of a lifelong love letter between us and God. It is the Apostle Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”  New beginnings are love letters from God to us reminding us again and again that we can start over.

I love the scripture reading for today.  The translation is from the Evangelical Lutheran Worship book and I love the way that the translation puts Psalm 20:4. May the Lord grant you your heart’s desire and prosper all your plans. This is a Royal psalm, because it explicitly mentions the king.  But this psalm is more about God than it is about the king. In fact, the primary actor in this psalm is God. God continues to save the people. God continues to save us. We appeal to God and God is there because God is God. We trust God because we remember who God is and what God has done. And our memory of how God has saved us, our memory of how God has filled us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, that memory leads us to hope.

The amazing thing about getting ready for a fresh new start is that it is happening right now. Right now, may God grant you your heart’s desire and prosper all your plans. There is this present tense to becoming, it is happening right now.  It reminds me of that great line in the movie classic, “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off”: Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” To make a fresh start we have to move forward with intentionality.  We have to make the choice to have a new beginning each and every day. It reminds me of relationships, we have to wake up and choose to be kind, we have to choose that relationship every day.

This week I spent a few days with my sister at a spa to get recharged for the school year.  We each read three books, one book a day!  One of the books that my sister read is called “Small Great Things” by Jodi Picoult.  In the book, a Caucasian family stops an African American nurse from treating their child solely because of her race. While the child is being treated, a Caucasian nurse has to step away and she asks the African American nurse to watch the baby, and while she is watching her, the baby dies.  The nurse is put on trial and her lawyer shares this metaphor.  She says, “I feel like I’ve been standing underneath an open window, just as a baby gets tossed out. I grab the baby, right, because who wouldn’t? But then another baby gets tossed out, so I pass the baby to someone else, and I make the catch. This keeps happening. And before you know it there are a whole bunch of people who are getting really good at passing along babies, just like the people who are good at catching them, but no one ever asks who is throwing the babies out the window in the first place.”

That’s how life can feel sometimes. We feel like we are just dealing with the next crisis and we don’t stop and look at the big picture. We have to look at the system. We have to focus on the big picture instead of just catching whatever falls out the window at any given moment. So when we start afresh, we need to keep our focus on the whole. Starting afresh is not about minutia, although the minutia can sometimes derail us. Keep that big picture firmly in mind as we start this new day.

A friend was sharing with me about how she learned to hang-glide and I found it fascinating. When you learn how to hang-glide you are introduced to the equipment, and then they talk to you about the mechanics of the jump and they tell you that when you land you will be aiming for a target. I was completely perplexed by this. Why do you need a target when you are jumping from the sky?  Why can’t you just land anywhere? My friend shared with me that you fly towards what you are looking at. Beginning hang-gliders start looking around and they are mesmerized by a beautiful tree and then they smack right into that tree.  You go where you are looking, so it is important to have a target. So the first time my friend went hang-gliding, they put a target right in the middle of a huge field and each hang-glider landed right on that target. A goal helps us to focus. When you make a fresh start you also need a target. That target or goal helps us land where we want to land.

But just as our psalm today shows us, this psalm isn’t about us, this psalm is about God. Our fresh starts and our moving forward with intentionality and goals, it isn’t about us, it is about God. Thy kingdom God, thy will be done.

Howard Thurman was a Baptist minister, a theologian, and a civil rights activist who worked for non-violence and started a multicultural church in 1944. He was a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thurman’s theology of radical nonviolence greatly influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. Thurman wrote more than 20 books, and I love his prayers.  Here is one of them: “Lord, open unto me: Open unto me - light for my darkness. Open unto me - courage for my fear. Open unto me - hope for my despair. Open unto me - peace for my turmoil. Open unto me - joy for my sorrow. Open unto me - strength for my weakness. Open unto me - wisdom for my confession. Open unto me - forgiveness for my sins. Open unto me - love for my hate. Lord, Lord, open unto me! Amen.”

As we get ready for a fresh new start, may we remember that God is with us and may God grant us our heart’s desire and prosper all our plans. Thanks be to God, Amen.