THE FISSURE OF HOPE

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The Sunday After the Ascension
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"Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud."(Psalm 27:7)

A young woman recently told some friends how she had escorted her college roommate to the airport to return home to another part of the world. The two were close friends. At the airport, they knew that they would not see each other for many years, if ever again. Later, the two friends wrote to each other, but the intensity of the friendship became more and more a memory and less and less a reality.

The Psalmist was in a somewhat similar situation when he said, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud." He had grown accustomed to a vibrant liturgical life in the temple, surrounded by the familiar faces of those who worshipped with him. Yet now, somehow, he finds himself separated from that liturgical life and his friends. He is isolated. We can imagine that the life of the temple became more and more a memory for him, and less and less a reality.

But that wasn't all. Not only was he separated from the religious community, which so enlivened his life, but he also found himself under a number of pressures. He tells how "false witnesses" have risen up against him. These false witnesses, he says, "breathe out violence" against him. More than that, he has been abandoned by his family. "My mother and my father have forsaken me," he says. His isolation was marked by distress.

Which is an experience, I surmise, that many of us know in one form or another. We may not be geographically separated from the religious community in the temple, but some of us have drifted away from it anyway. Frequently I hear how the religious experience of childhood was authentic and real, but that that experience has become more of a memory than a reality.

Today the rigors of academic discipline seem to affect us the way geographical separation affected the Psalmist. We talked about this problem this past week at our Church Council meeting. (Somehow we were able to wisk through old business and new business. I must confess I was amazed. I sometimes wonder whether when the Kingdom of Heaven comes the Lord is going to ask for the reading of the minutes. If I were to write the scenario for the Kingdom of Heaven, I don't think I'd make it like a business meeting. Anyway, the Church Council hurried through the business of the night.) Inspired perhaps by our surroundings at M.I.T., we considered in particular the scientist as a man of faith.

Six days and sometimes seven he labors and sometimes agonizes so as to accept nothing but that which can be empirically measured, -- and then measured again. His whole life has to be attuned to this kind of discipline, for nature will not easily disclose her secrets. Six or seven days he labors. Then for one hour or so on Sunday the scientist as man of faith enters into a radically different kind of world, where empirical measurement does not even seem to play a

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But wait a minute. Wait. We stand with the Psalmist. And he doesn't say, the world is going to Hell therefore be converted. No, his strategy is much more modest. He ends his prayer with these words: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord." This is a much more fragile message than the message of sudden conversion. This is gentle. Wait for the Lord. Wait. The Psalmist calls for a little fissure in the circle of hopelessness, not a sudden dissolution of that circle. We might paraphrase his words by saying, keep yourself open for a transcendent dimension of life.

But the Psalmist is saying more than that, too. For if he has nothing else in his isolation, like the woman writing to her college roommate, he has his memory. And with that memory he has the collective memory of his religious tradition. That tradition apprehended the transcendent dimension of life as having a face. Transcendence is personal. "Thy face, Lord, do I seek," says the Psalmist. "Hide not thy face from me." It was a face, also, that radiated powerful and reliable love; as the Psalmist recounts: "For [the Lord] will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble."

So here is the Psalmist's strategy. In his isolation, he opens up a fissure in the circle of hopelessness. He looks to a transcendent dimension of life. And, by entering into the memory of his religious tradition, he projects a personal face on that Transcendence. And I think we can rightly use the word "project" here. For the Psalmist is still at a distance from God.

The Christian tradition takes up that experience, and incorporates it into its confession of faith and into its Church year. We confess that Our Lord ascended into heaven. Between Easter and Pentecost we go through the season of the Ascension. In this confession and in this worship we underline what I think is an abiding aspect of Christian existence. The Ascension means that we can and do open up a fissure in our circle of hopelessness, however small or large our particular circle may be. We open up a fissure, and we look to a transcendent dimension. If nothing else, we go through the motions of the Liturgy from time to time. And that is saying, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud."

More than that, with varying degrees of intensity, we enter into the memory of our fathers, and we project a face on that transcendent dimension, a face that radiates powerful and reliable love. Ultimate reality then has the face of Christ. Which means that, the circle of our life to the contrary notwithstanding, we have hope now.

If, then, you were to write an inscription over the gate to the Christian life, what would you write? How about this: "Find hope anew, all ye who enter here."

significant role. So a distance develops between work and worship.

We also stand with the Psalmist in other respects, We, too, know the pressures and distress that life can bring. False witnesses breathing out violence afflicted the Psalmist. We ourselves, or our friends with whom we empathize, have had the unbelievable experience of being cursed and abused when we have stood hand in hand with a black man. Then there's the Psalmist's experience of being forsaken by father and mother. That is not uncommon in our day, as many can testify. No parents are perfect. No children are perfect. Yet it seems that somehow today imperfection has fed on imperfection with increasing tension and hostility. So in one way or another many stand where the Psalmist stands, isolated more or less from the religious community, and pressed and distressed by the exigencies of life.

Where do we go from here? We might begin by considering the remark of Claudio in "Measure for Measure:"

> The miserable have no other medicine
> But only hope. (III, i, 2)

That can be taken in more than one sense. A number of existentialist philosophers would read it in the sense of "vain hope." The miserable have no other medicine, but only vain hope. Which is to say that the miserable have no medicine, that misery is the abiding condition of human life.

Once you have decided that, you will probably move in one of two directions, resignation or rebellion. Either you just accept things as they are, surrendering to a headless fate. Or, with a man like Camus, you throw yourself absurdly against the mammoth rock of life and you call that kind of existence freedom. Lately, I must say, we have seen the development of a kind of compromise between resignation and rebellion. It's called the "be-in." You have enough gusto to emerge from your isolation, but not quite enough to rebell. You just want to be, and be together.

I think we have to consider these alternatives. They are not self-evidently perverse or destructive. Yet perhaps the Harvard Crimson was on to something when it published a picture of last Sunday's be-in on the Charles under the caption, "Be-In and Nothingngess." Perhaps that was more than a reference to a famous book. Perhaps that was the recognition that professed hopelessness still remains hopelessness. No hope is no hope is no hope. One doesn't easily come out of that circle. Dante even went so far as to call that nothingness Hell. Written on the gates of Hell he saw these words: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

Now there was a time when a sermon could come to a point such as this and the preacher could suddenly shift gears and ask: be converted to God. The miserable have no other medicine, but only hope in God. But if I know you at all, and if I know myself, I know that there is no sure exit for us. I don't think that you and I can easily jump from the rocky boat of pressed and distressed isolation into some solid ship of conversion. That is the measure of our emptiness and the emptiness of our world.