

Sermon Series *When All Hell Breaks Loose* August 9, 2015

*August Memory Verse: Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9*

I take refuge in You, Lord. Please never let me be put to shame. Rescue me by Your righteousness! Listen closely to me! Deliver me quickly; be a rock that protects me; be a strong fortress that saves me! You are definitely my rock and my fortress. Guide me and lead me for the sake of Your good name! Get me out of this net that's been set for me because You are my protective fortress. I entrust my spirit into Your hands; You, Lord, God of faithfulness - You have saved me. I hate those who embrace what is completely worthless. I myself trust the Lord. I rejoice and celebrate in Your faithful love because You saw my suffering - You were intimately acquainted with my deep distress. You didn't hand me over to the enemy, but set my feet in wide-open spaces. Have mercy on me, Lord, because I'm depressed. My vision fails because of my grief, as do my spirit and my body. My life is consumed with sadness; my years are consumed with groaning. Strength fails me because of my suffering; my bones dry up. I'm a joke to all my enemies, still worse to my neighbors. I scare my friends, and whoever sees me in the street runs away! I am forgotten, like I'm dead, completely out of mind; I am like a piece of pottery, destroyed. Yes, I've heard all the gossiping, terror all around; so many gang up together against me, they plan to take my life! But me? I trust You, Lord! I affirm, "You are my God." My future is in Your hands. Psalm 31: 1-9

Our August Memory Verse is on page 3 of the bulletin. Please say it with me, including where to find it when you need it. *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9*

Last month's murders in our extended community - the murder-suicide of two bright, young college students in Walnut Creek, and the rape and murder of an 8 year old girl by a 15 year old boy in Santa Cruz, left many of us (maybe all of us) horrified and heartbroken and praying for help, and for some kind of understanding. When all hell breaks loose, and I'm heartsick and at a loss to understand, and I'm afraid, I turn to the psalms... because all the human condition, including our experience with God, is recorded there. Thousands of years ago the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun." The psalms reflect and record our common human experience... everything humanity feels and faces... it's all there in the psalms, in a conversation or a debate with God.

Psalm 31 is a lament, and a lament psalm includes elements of faith, despair, bitterness, and hope. Psalms of lament can be raging, whiny, gruesome and grisly, yet they end on a note of hope and faith and confidence in God. A psalm of lament holds nothing back from God; bitterness and anger pour out of the soul-wound of the psalmist until he or she is exhausted by grief and fear... and then begins to remember God's love and mercy, and God's blessings. Confidence in God returns, and praise flows, and hope and healing begin to blossom.

When I was a seminarian the president of the seminary was exposed in a sex scandal that rocked the student body. Rage and anger and sadness were all expressed; and one of my classmates, a Korean student, invited the student body to lament with

him. I didn't know that word "lament" as a theological word before. So the students lamented; expressing bitterness, disappointment, anger, rage, and tears. And then we began to express a kind of humility, realizing how human, how fragile and vulnerable we all are, as we cried out to God for help, for mercy and redemption, for ourselves, for our community, and for everyone involved. And then we began to praise God as we remembered all of God's love and kindness and undeserved mercy in our lives. And then hope and comfort came about. Sometimes, when all hell breaks loose, a lament is called for.

Psalm 31 is one of my favorite psalms because of the reminder that when all hell breaks loose we are held in God's hands. We sang "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" not as a bouncy children's song but as a kind of lament: with heartbreak and fear and yet with hope and confidence in God. When it seems in our lives, and in the world around us, that there is no hope, nothing to hold onto, or believe in, and hell has had its way with us.... Psalm 31 reminds us, and reassures us, that we are held. We are held in God's hands. On the cross, Jesus whispered this prayer from verse 5 of Psalm 31: "Into Your hands I commit My Spirit." I think the most sacred thing I do when I'm with someone grieving, is to simply hold their hand.

People talk about emotional resilience as if it is something new... but the psalms teach us about resilience, and how to regain our balance, and our faith and trust in God, when all hell breaks loose. I have an acronym for *spiritual* resilience (because I remember things better if they come with a song ["My Bologna Has a First Name"]) or if they have an acronym [WWJD?]

When you and I stand at the intersection of faith and despair (over recent events in our community and in the events in our own lives that cause grief, and disappointment, and fear) our souls long for *spiritual* resilience. We need to be reminded that we are held in God's hands. This acronym for spiritual resilience is HIPS. You've got hips and I've got hips and that's 4 hips. Four words: History, intimacy, people, and surrender.

"H" is for History. What's our history as the people of God? Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we read that the people of God are willful and stubborn and that their collective memory of God's kindness and goodness about "that" [hold up thumb and forefinger close together] long. And we read that God loved them, God longed for them, God used the prophets to reach them and reason with them. And still the people turned away from God and pursued their own pleasure. And God continued to be faithful; God continued to pursue the people with love.

Our baptismal liturgy says these beautiful words: "In the fullness of time God sent Jesus." Out of love for us, God came to be one of us, in Jesus. Jesus was and is the unstoppable, unwavering love of God. Even on the cross Jesus expressed love and compassion for us. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing." We learn about our history as God's people as we read and study and listen to scripture.

What's the church's history of God? We confess, and we teach our children, that God's love for us is unconditional and unending (but it's not cheap; it's costly.) God's love is what we try to model for each other... love that loves - not for what it gets - but for the sake of love. 1John 4:19 tells us that we love... because God first loved us. We are loved and loveable; we have value, because God has first loved us.

What's your own history and experience with God? Can you think of a time in your life when it seemed that all hell broke loose, and in looking back you're able to see God's hands holding you, guiding you, giving you hope, and solace? History is one of the ways we experience spiritual resilience. We remember the Father's love for all creation; we celebrate Jesus' redemptive love for us; and we submit to the Holy Spirit's love and guidance in our lives... and in our own history we see that we are held in God's hands.

"I" is for Intimacy. In scripture to "know" God is an act of intimacy... jokes are told about people who know each other "in a biblical sense." To know God is to be fully exposed, with nothing between us, and God's love and kindness. Intimacy with God is more than a feeling, which is good, because we can't sustain it. Intimacy with God is experienced in worship, in prayer, and praising God; in acts of service, in kindness and compassion, and acts of justice; in singing, in silence, in listening for the still, small voice of God; in sharing our faith, in [hold up bible] God's Word. The word intimate means detailed knowledge and a deep understanding of someone. So intimacy with God is detailed knowledge, and deep understanding, of God. To be intimate with God is to seek out, to be mindful, and study God, and God's ways, and God's people. Intimacy with God is not just knowledge and understanding; it's experiences of God. Intimacy with God is a living and growing thing throughout our lives.

H-I-P. "P" is for People, God's people. We are all learners and we're all teachers (whether we mean to be or not.) I love to ask adults who their favorite Sunday school teachers were; who were the adults at church who loved and mentored them in faith, and showed them the tenderness and love of God. We never forget those people, those saints of God who've mentored and modeled the life of faith for us.

There are so many reasons to be part of the Body of Christ, and one of them is to be with people, who believe for us, and whose faith carries us, when all hell breaks loose, and fear and grief and disappointment have their way with us, and our faith has gone missing. Paul admonished the young church in Galatia to "carry each other's burdens." The people of God help us carry hellacious burdens; they pray for us, and show their love in practical ways, and they ask and encourage (and should we need it they demand) that we be our best selves, the people God created us to be, the Body of Christ. I can't imagine not being part of a church... no matter how imperfect we are... this is someplace and we are some people who will love you through anything; who will hold your hand, and remind you (and believe with you and for you) that you are held in God's hands.

Finally "S" is for Surrender. My image of surrendering ourselves to God (as we see at the end of the psalms of lament) is of an exhausted toddler who has thrown an enormous hissy fit, and worn himself out, and has come to rest on his mother's lap, sobbing and hiccupping, while she is pats his back and murmurs words of love to him. To surrender to God is to let go of imagining that we have control; imagining that we can orchestrate our lives, or the lives of people we love, or people we work with; and of giving ourselves... our will, and our needs, over to the care of the Lord.

My young friend Becky lost her brother to leukemia when he was not quite 21. She told our pastor how angry, how furious and disappointed, she was in God. The pastor told her, "It's okay. It's okay to be mad at God. God is strong enough to take it." And I would add to that, to read the psalms... all the records of people who expressed

to God heartbreak, loneliness, fury, and terror. The psalms teach us that whatever our experience is (even if all hell breaks loose) we can surrender ourselves to God, because God holds us in His hands.

Surrender. Rest in God's care. It sounds counterintuitive to lay back and rest, because when all hell breaks loose shouldn't we go on hyper-alert? Shouldn't we guard the doors and arm ourselves? That's certainly what the evil one would have us believe. In 1Peter we read, "Throw all your anxiety onto Jesus, because He cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, [the fear-monger] is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." To surrender is to let go of our illusions that we can save ourselves; it is to let go of fear and anxiety... and take the hands Jesus holds out to us.

Spiritual resilience: H-I-P-S. History, Intimacy, People, and Surrender. Is this a magic formula? Of course it's not. It's an acronym for spiritual disciplines, which help us draw closer to God. When our family and friends and coworkers know that all hell has broken loose in our lives, and they see from us, that we are practicing our faith - letting God hold us in His hands - with the help of HIPS: history, intimacy, people, and surrender, it can help them, and comfort them, when faith and heartbreak are at war - when all hell breaks loose - in their lives.

I have to read this again, and this time as you hear it I invite you to close your eyes, and you might open your hands to receive these words as a gift. (These verses of Psalm 31 are from the Revised Standard Version.) "In You, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in Your righteousness deliver me. Incline Your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. [And yet....] I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand." Thank You, God, that our times are in Your hands. Amen.