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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B11
3 Easter (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
Sunday 18 April 2021

Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

Joyful, Disbelieving, Wonderful: Touching God in the Psalms

“Many are saying, ‘Oh, that we might see better times!’ Lift up your countenance upon us, O Lord” (Ps. 4:6).

How can the biblical Book of Psalms draw us closer to God?

1. What a time... what a time for us to hear Jesus say, “touch me and see” (Lk. 24). So many of my friends have not touched another person for months. Our vast universe of touch has shrunk to a tiny island containing only one or two other persons. Never before did I fully appreciate the ritual of shaking hands in church, or the power of physical connection.

A global crisis of intimacy continues to unfold all around us. This is the third week of the seven week Easter Season (it’s one week longer than Lent). During this time we consider how Jesus appears to his friends after his death and the unexpected mixture of their responses to him. Standing together on the threshold of great changes this is a time to wonder at the strangeness of resurrection, and of anything truly new and alive.

It is also the season when we explore the possibility of a deeper intimacy with God. After his death when Jesus encounters his friends they respond in a wide variety of ways. Even after she sees angels, when Jesus appears to his friend Mary Magdalene she confuses him for the gardener (Jn. 20). Thomas sees and believes (Jn. 20) but the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus also fail to recognize him.

Today’s Gospel from the Book of Luke comes immediately after his friends share what they saw on the road to Emmaus. When the whole group also sees Jesus they feel “startled and terrified.” They think Jesus is a ghost. Even after he explains, after he tells them to touch him, after he shows them the wounds on his hands and feet – that still is not enough. In the crucial next sentence Luke explains, “... in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” And so Jesus seeks to prove his physical reality by sharing a meal with them.

My friend Matt Boulton points out that this story vividly describes how doubt is naturally a part of faith. He makes the point that when it comes to the resurrection perhaps the goal for a follower of Jesus is not, “a settled, solemn “belief.” Instead the last story in Luke’s gospel suggests that our response should be a “blend of joy, disbelief, and wondering,” that this is the truly authentic experience a miracle.¹

Rather than regarding faith as striving to believe the unbelievable, perhaps the true faith means allowing ourselves to be astonished. Matt points out that this spirit of joy, disbelief and wonder may be important for cultivating a kind of humility that allows us to really put ourselves in God’s hands. Wonder leaves us more open for experiencing what God wants for us rather than confidently assuming we always know what God is up to.

Matt says that the more orthodox approach to faith would be to say (with a twinkle in our eyes), "I am astounded by the physical resurrection," rather than to say (with flat solemnity), "I am convinced by it." He thinks this is the difference between a mere belief and a living, growing faith. For me it is also the difference between regarding religion as a relationship with God rather than a set of facts about our existence.

2. So if the point of resurrection and the Easter season is intimacy with God, what practically speaking should we do? How can we touch God? The Psalms provide a powerful way for us to feel God's presence. We hear the Psalms so often that we have become deaf to them. But of everything in the Bible the Psalms offer the chance for us to know God in a far deeper way.

Why do the Psalms matter? For thousands of years they have been regarded as a kind of New Torah, that is they have been treated like the five books of Moses that describe the relationship between Israel and God. The Psalms are quoted one hundred times in the New Testament. Every New Testament writer refers to them with only two minor exceptions.²

In fact, if you are reading the New Testament and do not recognize that a psalm is being referred to, you are likely to miss the passage's meaning. When Mary responds to the angel's announcement that she is going to have a child (Lk. 1:46-55), when the soldiers divide Jesus' clothing at his death (Lk. 22:18), when the disciples choose a replacement for Judas (Acts 1), when the religious leaders condemn Jesus, etc. – these actions refer to specific psalms.

In the gospels of Mark (Mk. 15:34) and Matthew (Mt. 27:46), on the cross when Jesus says, "My God my God why have you forsaken me" he is quoting Psalm 22. In Luke on the cross Jesus says, "Father in to your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46) he is quoting Psalm 31:5.

Jesus, his mother Mary, Peter and Paul all knew and loved the Psalms. The Psalms preserve the intensity of feeling and the experience of really speaking to and hearing from God. They provide a kind of spiritual language that makes it possible for us to navigate the deepest places in our hearts.

What are the Psalms? Scholars believe that the Psalms are songs written for the Temple in Jerusalem over a very long time starting perhaps even from 800 BCE (and then formed into a whole at the beginning of the Second Temple period in 516 BCE). There are 150 Psalms that are divided into 5 books (like the 5 Books of Moses). Books are marked off from each other by doxologies, songs of praise or blessing at the end of the preceding book (like "Blessed be the Lord for evermore! Amen, I say, Amen." (Ps. 144:16)).³

The last five psalms begin with the word "Hallelujah!" Hallelu is the command to praise and Ja is short for God's name, Yahweh. The first Psalm says that those who delight in the Lord and take refuge in the law are blessed. The second Psalm refers to a future messianic king who will bring justice to the nations of earth.

There are so many treasures in the Psalms that I almost do not know where to begin. We associate Psalm 51 with penitence, the painful universal process of turning away from sin. Psalm 104 tells the story of God creating the world. Psalm 119 is an alphabet song. Sections of lines begin in order on each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The verses express the gift and wonder of God's law.

Psalms are a form of poetry. English language poems might often rhyme. Hebrew poems use parallelism or symmetry. One phrase is repeated in a different way to build emphasis. For instance Psalm 27:1 goes like this: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? / the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid."

Perhaps the most important thing for you to remember is that roughly speaking there are two kinds of Psalms. There are laments that come from a place of pain, confusion and anger about what is going wrong in the world. We know this inner voice that comes from the darkest places of our life, from "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23), begging God to do something to help us.

Psalms of praise are about what is good, the beautiful things that we sometimes fail to notice until we begin to give thanks. Just as the Psalms of lament are about the social world, the psalms of praise draw our attention to the vastness and the intricate beauty of nature.

In the beginning of the book of, psalms of lament predominate. But by the last parts there are so many more psalms of praise. This shift shows us a truth about prayer. When we learn about God and what God wants for humanity, we cannot help but feel overwhelmed by the terrors and injustices of the world. Laments remind us to go to God not just with our good feelings but with our whole selves. The pain is an essential element of our life. But faith in God is forward looking. The Psalms of praise remind us to see the bigger picture, that this is the time God has given us, that this life is a gift from God.

Today I'm asking you to do what Mary, Peter, Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did. What Jesus did. Memorize Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want." Or Psalm 100, "Be joyful in the Lord all you lands." Or Psalm 51, 119, 104 or 4. Sit in quiet until the words are deep in you. Go over them in your mind in the morning. Put these ancient words into the deepest part of your consciousness so that during moments of suffering or elation you may respond like the child of God you truly are.

After saying a psalm to yourself in the early morning, after committing a line to memory, you will find these words recurring to you throughout the day, in the way that they must have to Jesus.

We are joyful, disbelieving, still wondering. We stand at the threshold taking in the strangeness of what is truly new and alive, as people who are astounded by the resurrection. As you return to the world of touch there will be joys and struggles that will be made better by a deeper, more conscious connection to God. Listen. In the deepest reaches of yourself hear God calling, saying "touch me and see."

¹ Matthew Boulton, "Touch: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3," *SALT*, 12 April 2021.

"Like [last week](#), this is a perfect time to name, affirm, and explore the role of doubt and disbelief in the life of faith. Should a disciple's goal be a settled, solemn "belief"? Luke's story suggests otherwise. A blend of joy, disbelief, and wondering would seem much closer to the astonishment a miracle is supposed to engender — and after all, such a state of joy / disbelief / wonder may well keep our hearts and minds humble and open to whatever the Spirit may do next. Viewed from this angle, it may be more orthodox, not less, to say (with a twinkle in our eyes), "I am astounded by the physical resurrection!" rather than (with flat solemnity) "I am convinced of it." Herein lies a glimpse of the difference between mere "belief" and a living, growing faith. These ancient stories, to which we rightly return again and again, aim to astonish us, to leave us "taken aback," to call into question our assumptions about what may or may not be "possible" and "impossible," and so to invite us into an open-minded, open-hearted posture of disbelief, wonder, and joy."

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/4/10/faith-and-doubt-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-3>

² D. Sanford, "Seeing the Psalms across the New Testament," Accordance 27 January 2017.

<https://www.accordancebible.com/Psalms-New-Testament/>

³ In sermons and in prayer I use the Psalter found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.