Spots of Time

St. Boniface Episcopal Church
Sarasota, FL
Ps 27

My own spiritual journey can be summarized, in part, by two snippets of poetry. The first is from Alexander Pope. ". . . some to church repair/ Not for the doctrine but the music there." And that's why I went. I had no use for religion, but I do like singing Gregorian chant. It was the first music I learned to read. They didn't teach us "secular notation" until we were almost in junior high, but I was singing Gregorian chant in kindergarten. And now I had happened upon a church where they sang Gregorian every Sunday. I decided to go for a few weeks, to indulge myself awhile in good music and sentimental nostalgia. Of course, this was before recordings of chant made it onto top-40 lists. Otherwise, I suspect, I'd have bought a CD and stayed home.

On the second or third Sunday, a verse came to life and grabbed me by the throat.

> You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face."
> Your face, Lord, will I seek.

Those lines did me in. I sat silent in my pew. My heart was pounding so hard that I thought I would choke. A God who speaks in my heart, a God who wants to be seen face to face, made no sense to me at all.

I had never imagined a God who was anything more than what Shelley describes: "remote, serene, and indifferent." Graduate school had convinced me that something like "God" is a necessary postulate of any morally adequate epistemology. But life in the real world, after graduation, had also convinced me that the quality of one's fundamental epistemology does not make much of a difference on a day-to-day basis. I no longer gave much thought either to "God" or to philosophy. We have three kids. They needed braces on their teeth. The new gutters dripped on the front steps. I had real things to worry about. Nonetheless, I do have a PhD. And so I was quite sure that philosophic postulates do not speak in anyone's heart and say, "seek my face." Postulates do not love anyone. This voice in my heart was quite unnerving.

The whole of Psalm 27 is quite unnerving, if you look at it closely enough. The psalm makes incredible assertions. Because he puts his trust in the Lord, the poet explains, he no longer fears his adversaries, his foes, the evildoers who slander him. Jewish history would seem to discredit that trust, whether in ancient times or in our own. In verse 7, the poet rejoices that God "shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling." Instead I saw Jews hiding in attics to escape the Nazis. What good is a God who does not keep his friends safe?

But if you read carefully, you will see that what the poet celebrates here is not physical safety but rather freedom from fear. "Though an army encamp against me," he says, "yet my heart shall not be afraid." In a poetic way, in fact, he equates his own heart with "the house of the Lord." The temple where he finds refuge is not a thick-walled synagogue with a trap door to a secret attic. The refuge is in his own heart, where God's voice and God's face are waiting for him. God's intimate presence is comfort.

What we have here, I suggest, is what Luke calls a "narrow door," a difficult and subtle paradox or mystery at the heart of religious faith. Luke's word for "door" in chapter thirteen of his Gospel is the Greek word *thuras,* which has three meanings. First, *thuras* simply means "door." Second, *thuras* also means "the opening in a cave-tomb." In Luke's resurrection narratives, for instance, the women find that the stone has been rolled away from the

"thuras." Third, the word means "an opportunity, a thing made possible," rather like the French word "entrée." Psalm 27, verse 11 is also a narrow door, in the sense that it's a mystery we have to "get through" in some way.

> You speak in my heart and say, "seek my face"
> Your face, Lord, will I seek.

The paradox is this: how does seeking the face of the Lord help us when armies are encamped against us? When the company announces lay-offs? When the doctor calls with bad news? When friends betray us?

The first thing to notice, I suppose, is that neither believing in God nor refusing to believe in God will cause the army to decamp. Neither belief nor disbelief will save your

job or keep your kids safe. I was unchurched for twenty years, from my late teens to my late thirties. Those two decades had their share of success and their share of catastrophe. And so have the years since. Things I work for still fail to work out. Things I hope for still fail to come through. My life is still exactly as it was before, which is to say exactly like everyone else's life.

Life is hard for all of us. Neither my belief nor my disbelief have made any difference in the measure of trouble in my life. My faith has not fixed the problems I face; it has not changed the world. The armies are still encamped against all of us, by golly, one way or another.

As I muddled along for those twenty years, however, I did notice something. I did notice that suffering makes some people bitter and hostile and remote. But other people, people who have suffered just as much, are not bitter. They are not chronically angry, unhappy, and suspicious. Some deeply suffering people have a quiet confidence, a deep serenity, that has nothing to do with optimism that their lives will get easier. And these folks always seemed to have both some kind of unpretentious religious faith and the time or energy for a kind word to someone else in trouble.

For twenty years, I noticed such people. I wondered whether their faith somehow protected them from bitterness and despair. "Though my mother and father forsake me," the psalmist assures us, "the Lord will sustain me." Some people walk around in their lives visibly sustained. Visibly. I envied them, especially when I heard bitterness creeping into my own voice. My "adequate epistemology" did not offer me the kind of strength and peace of mind that I saw in these people.

I noticed Mary Beth, for instance, who was just a little older than I am now: her older son was applying to colleges, her younger son was very seriously and chronically ill. And then her husband lost his job. She was scared and angry. They had a mortgage to pay; they had medical bills; they had a bright kid who deserved a chance at college.

But I could see something in her eyes that reminded me of the line from Exodus, that God will be a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Mary Beth had something like a pillar inside of her. It got her through those months with her humanity intact. Her

husband got a new job, this time in Atlanta. We hugged and cried, and she moved away.

I watched her go, and I wondered about her, and I wondered some more. Finally I went to church myself, no doubt looking for something more than I was willing to admit to myself. And after just a couple of weeks, there was Psalm 27, a narrow door quite precisely designed to show someone like me what God had to offer and what God might demand.

What does it mean, then, to try to find the face and the voice of the Lord? Well, we have to remember that the phrase is a metaphor. We are not looking for a nose and eyebrows. We are looking for a feeling of God's presence as vivid *as if* face-to-face. William Wordsworth calls these moments "spots of time." He spent decades puzzling over these experiences before he finally decided that these little moments are glimpses of what believers call "God."

But Wordsworth never saw eyebrows. And neither have I. Neither did the psalmist, I bet. Christian tradition has a bad habit of reading its own poetry as if it were computer manuals or directions on the back of some box. Sacred poetry is not directions for "some assembly required." If you try to make sense of your faith as if Scripture were directions for assembly, nothing will fit together convincingly. Nothing at all.

What Wordsworth saw, what I have seen and you have seen and everyone has seen, is merely this. There are moments when life makes sense. There are moments when we feel that the world is a good place, despite all the pain and all the injustice that we see all around us. And we know that we too are part of that goodness, that we are loved and deserving of love, despite any evidence to the contrary. These moments can happen when a baby smiles or when a rose blooms. It can happen while you are hiking in the mountains or listening to a concerto.

Traditionally, such moments come in settings of great natural beauty or else at times of particular emotional intensity. It happened to me once in the Rocky Mountains, as it happened to Wordsworth in the mountains in England. But it also happens in the middle of absolutely ordinary days. It happened to me once as I was watching a squirrel on a city street, as it happened to Keats one day, as he was watching a sparrow on his

driveway. Or it happened to a friend of mine while he was riding the subway to work. If the glory of God can be manifest in the Chicago subway in July, the glory of God can show up anywhere at all.

But such moments are always brief. That's why Wordsworth called them "spots of time." They are brief little flickers disrupting our ordinary sense of reality. We write them off to being in a "good mood," or maybe we attribute them to brain endorphins. Or maybe we don't bother to explain them at all. We just enjoy them and let them go.

But Wordsworth, like most other poets and storytellers, and like the poets of Scripture, was not willing to let them go. Western literature is brimming with accounts of moments like these. We let the moments pass us by because they contradict the empirical evidence of memory and of history. We think we have conclusive evidence that the world is not a good place at all, that life is as Thomas Hobbes described it: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." But if you join hands, so to speak, with the long tradition of thinkers who have given serious credit to these momentary flickers, then you are well on your way to what Christians call "the peace beyond human understanding."

I like the way this peace is described in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." It is a peace that can begin with something as simple as recognizing how much you enjoy a long hot shower in the morning, or maybe fifteen minutes alone with a cup of coffee and the newspaper.

Maybe the rest of the day will be a disaster, but a shower or a cup of coffee can be a very real blessing. And blessings, once recognized and accepted *as* blessings, tend to multiply, to grow in significance and intensity. Life itself can begin to be a blessing. The spots of time start to spread out until all of the world begins to be what Gerard Manley Hopkins described. "The world," he said, "is charged with the grandeur of God."

William Wordsworth explains how this works better than I ever could. Although I had taught his poetry for years, it wasn't until after my encounter with Psalm 27 that I really understood what he was getting at. In a very early poem, Wordsworth tries to explain

that he has found something that can protect our essential humanity from all the evil and all the suffering that life can impose upon us. He is not yet to the point of calling this something "God," but he describes what he has found in delicate and accurate religious language. We see a transcendent power in the physical world, he argues. And yet, he argues, we also feel an intimate and affirming presence in own hearts. It is as if God "dwells" both in the natural landscape and in our hearts. That which made the mountains also made us. The beauty of the mountains and the sustaining love of God are one thing, experienced in two ways.

If we dare to connect these two experiences, if we dare to connect God's transcendent power with God's intimate presence, then we have gotten ourselves to someplace entirely new. The spectacular glory of the mountains offers sudden evidence that God is powerful enough to sustain us; the way that beauty wraps itself around God's presence in our hearts convinces us that God is loving enough to expend God's power to protect our hearts. And even if we see more of city subways than of mountain ranges, that still means that our lives do make sense after all.

The glory of God, wherever it shows up, moves our hearts both to awe and to loving courage. We will survive with our humanity intact despite all that is painful and chaotic in the world around us. And that is exactly what the psalm says: "Though an army shall encamp against me,/ yet my heart shall not be afraid."

Listen here to what Wordsworth says; don't be confused that he uses feminine pronouns for this nurturant and sustaining God:

> . . . I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.
> . . . she can so inform
> The mind that is within us, so impress

With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings.

What a promise. The dreary intercourse of daily life--like the gates of hell--shall ne'er prevail against us. What a thought. Most of us don't face armies, after all. We face the endless, petty, daily grind of life in a world that says there is no God, that God--should something like God exist--would not matter anyway. The world says that God is just brain endorphins; the world depends more upon Prozac than upon grace.

The world thinks that believers are a bit, well, *immature*. The world is offended that our God doesn't fix things, that our God is not a magician. But when we say we are redeemed, we don't mean we are fixed. We don't mean that the world is fixed, that the army encamped against us has been made to disappear. No. We mean that we have a new way of seeing, a new way of judging. We have learned to "deem" or to regard or consider both the world and ourselves in a new way.

We have learned to begin to imagine that life itself can be a blessing, a gift to be celebrated and not a problem to be solved. We have learned that no matter how harsh the winter of our desolation, come Easter there can be new life. There can be unexpected, exuberant flowers where we thought nothing would ever grow again. We have learned that our God is not "remote, serene, and indifferent." The awesome power of our God is not the isolated, unchanging perfection of a postulate in epistemology. No. The awesome power of our God is the absolute and sustaining fidelity that the Psalms celebrate over and over again.

All who suffer can listen when the Psalm pleads "Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call/ have mercy on me and answer me." But we need to understand that God's answer takes the form of a call back to us. We need to listen to God's call: "Seek my face."

It is a narrow door, I admit. But it leads to new life, to life everlasting.