

WITH MY WHOLE HEART

Psalm 111

The film “Darkest Hour” is the story of how Winston Churchill rallied Great Britain to face the evil of Hitler’s racist Nazi expansionist empire. At the end of the movie, Churchill, portrayed by Gary Oldman, comes to address a restive House of Parliament, and with charged rhetoric, he calls the kingdom not to give up but with tenacity to resist the invading evil and save their beloved island and indeed the world from Hitler’s scourge. At the end of the speech, the parliamentary crowd has been roused to a fevered pitch and as an aside, one of the politicians who was resistant to war asks his friend, “What just happened?” His friend responds, “He just martialled the English language and sent it into war.” The movie suggests that Churchill’s words mattered for the attitude and action of the people. Lake Shore Baptist Church is a community in which words matter. Words matter and the word the biblical text puts before us today for consideration is “heart.”

I asked my Sunday School class this morning how we use the word “heart.” I am fascinated by the image on the front of our order of worship. We, of course, think of the organ in our chest that beats and sends the life-giving blood through the body. The reality of heart disease and heart health are commonly part of our conversations. We think of the heart of something as the center of it, and perhaps because the heart is so central to our lives, we have come to associate the heart with emotions. We talk about a heart-felt apology or a heartless comment. In our

language, the heart is the seat of emotions. With Ethel Merman, for those of us old enough to remember her, we burst into “You gotta have heart” or we speak of enthusiasm “with my whole heart.” So, when we see that phrase in the first verse of Psalm 111, we understand that the poet professes to thank God with enthusiasm and emotion, “with my whole heart.” But since words matter to this community, I need to say that for the Hebrews, the heart was not the seat of emotions. That seat was much lower in the body, in the bowels. That seems appropriate. So the next time you are in an emotional frenzy, you can remember that is seated in your bowels. Those earthy Hebrews made the Older Testament so spicy! And perhaps that fits our cultural moment and its attendant uncivil intensity. In the Hebrew view, the heart is the seat of wisdom or the intellect or the will. That definition suggests that the first verse of our psalm quotes the poet with the purpose of giving thanks to God with the whole of the intellect that can be mustered. My question this morning is how this poetic meditation of the heart can give us perspective so that we as persons and as a community can make our way in the world for the living of these days.

I have come to think of the book of Psalms as ancient Israel’s prayer book and hymn book that relates in the end to the greatest crisis in the history of that community, the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century before the Christian era. As a result of that defeat, the world ancient Israel had known was no more. The temple

was in rubble and the Davidic monarchy effectively ended. That means the community had no means of establishing justice, the task of the monarch, and no means of encountering atonement or forgiveness, the purview of the priests in the temple. With the fall of the temple and palace, the center had not held for them. The world they had built crumbled and was no more. The time of the Babylonian captivity with its forced migration began with this defeat and dragged on for decades. Even after the Persians conquered the Babylonians and some of the exiled community returned to the rubble of Jerusalem, the aftermath of this defeat and crisis continued to shape the life of the people. Our text this morning is set for us as readers of the book of Psalms in the book's last section, especially tied to the experience of the disturbing aftermath of defeat and exile. It was a time I would characterize with the phrase "chaos knocking at the door" or perhaps lurking at the door and windows; envision flood waters. And I would suggest in that sense that the life setting given to us for this piece of prayed poetry is analogous to the world in which we live – a world without a center, a world in which chaos lurks at the door, a world in which we often find ourselves shaking our heads and screaming, "What?!?" It is a cheery thought. And yet, it is most striking that in this last section of the book of Psalms, set in that kind of world, this and other neighboring psalms begin with "Hallelujah! I will give thanks to God with all of my heart, in the company of the worshiping congregation." That is, the praise of God endures

in the face of a chaotic world, the enthusiastic and substantial praise of God in the face of a world gone awry. What could be more fitting for our world?

But there is more. It is important to pause and note that the praise of God with the whole of each person's mind comes in the context of the worshipping community. That is, our "heart" is shaped by the community of faith. We are persons of faith but not lone persons, even when we summon the enthusiasm of "all my heart." In such heightened states of enthusiasm, we could be confused like a rabid women's basketball fan constantly, constantly screaming at the top of his loud voice to perhaps the amusement, or even consternation, of those around him. But I digress. The person of faith in Psalm 111 is vibrantly enfolded in the worshipping community of faith. And, this person's praise is not mere froth or an emotionalist happy dance but is substantial thanksgiving for the mighty acts of God. The psalm rehearses these in an artistic way. Psalm 111 is an alphabetic acrostic with each line beginning with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The poet gifts us with the historical memory of the mighty acts of God as enduring and full of honor and majesty. And notice that the psalm speaks both of "delighting" in God's works and studying them. The poetry encourages worshipers to be dazzled by the memory of God's gracious gifts for abundant life, and to reflect. This psalm ties the praise of God with the reflection of the heart, the seat of wisdom. The book of Psalms is, in one sense, a massive reflection on the

pressing problem of suffering and evil in the world. In Psalm 111, that reflection is combined with powerful praise of God.

The song recounts the traditional historical divine deeds of liberation from human trafficking in Egypt and sustenance through food deserts and the gift of a place for a life and future as a community in relationship with this liberating God. These works are portrayed as gracious and merciful, as works that are faithful and just and trustworthy, by a God unlike any other, the one who actually is properly characterized with the word “awesome.” These mighty deeds of God brought these former slaves into a covenant relationship with this gracious and holy God who gave them life and the gift of guidance to live fully. It is a powerful poetic recital of divine life-giving engagement with the human community, and the words here matter – righteous, merciful, just, upright, and trustworthy, just to list a sampling. Then in a move that is not common in the Older Testament, the concluding verse of the psalm ties the praise of this liberating God with the Hebrew wisdom tradition: “Reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom.” The poet understands both the power of praise as well as reflective understanding to be gifts from the divine and gifts rightly discerned even in the face of a chaotic world. That seems right when the psalm begins with the intent to give thanks with the whole heart, the seat of wisdom.

Psalm 111 is a model for persons and for congregations of the combination of powerful emotion and intellectual reflection characteristic of the Psalms. The poem warmly invites the ongoing worship of God and reflection on God's engagement with our bizzarro-world. I hope I have been clear about the import of this life-giving poetic text; its words matter, but what I have said still seems rather abstract to me. And so I thought of another poet who saw many of ancient Israel's highlights and lowlights in the time of Babylonian captivity, the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah spoke gripping words of poetry, and he powerfully proclaimed God's message with symbolic actions. For example, in the midst of exile, in the raw grief of defeat, he made arrangements to purchase a piece of property in the area now controlled by the occupation forces, a piece of property that used to be in his family inheritance but is now behind enemy lines. This purchase and his record of it become a striking act of hope for the future. God's powerful engagement with the community, and thus the community's reflection and praise, still have a future, even in the face of chaos.

And so I return to my flawed hero Winston Churchill and his words that mattered. He ended his rousing speech with, "We will never, never, never give up." And the crowd went wild. This morning I discern that our psalm invites us to wonder in the same spirit of Oldman's Churchill but with different words. I wonder: What difference would it make for persons here and a community here,

with our whole hearts, all of our emotion and intellect, to remember again and again and again that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Even in the face of death-dealing chaos, the poetic prayers of the Psalms invite us to hear that God has given us and continues to give us whole life and because of that gift, we can live fully and in justice and mercy give that life to others and to our world. My hunch is that those words matter. Amen.