

“Happy Are Those Who Hope in God”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Psalm 146
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on November 11, 2018

Psalm 146 strikes me as a timely psalm for an election week. “Do not put your trust in princes (NRSV) or leaders (CEB). Human beings cannot save you,” the psalmist reminds us. Whether your favored candidates won or lost or whether you experienced a mixture of victories and disappointments, the psalmist reminds us that God, not human, is the maker of heaven and earth and God has not, will not, will never forget or forsake the downtrodden.

This psalm is not religious escapism as if to say what happens in the public sphere and the political realm matters not. The psalm is deeply and unapologetically grounded in the very real problems people face—hunger, oppression, captivity, displacement, being widowed, being orphaned. But the psalmist is reminding us there is nothing that takes place among human leaders that is bigger or longer-lasting than God’s redemptive work. God, the maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; God, who is faithful forever, who upholds the cause of the oppressed—that God is going nowhere, is here to stay, cannot be deterred, thwarted, or put to death by any schemes of man or follies of the human race. Yes, we can do real damage to one another, but we cannot run God off or alter God’s generous love or change God’s mind that the hungry, the prisoner, and the blind are all worthy of care. Governments may treat immigrants with cruelty or disdain, but God always and forever holds the foreigner in high regard. Praise the Lord!

The psalmist reminds us that the Lord straightens up those who are bent low. Are you bent low this morning? Is your spirit curled over, is your spine drooped with despair? Is your vulnerable, raw heart buried deep beneath the wall of your chest, protected by hunched over shoulders and rounded back, like your heart is hibernating in a cave rather than leading the way proudly?

I am remembering that woman in the synagogue who encountered Jesus—the one about whom Luke writes, “She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.” If it had been up to the human leaders, no good would have come to her that day because it was the Sabbath and no work was permitted, even healing work. But God in Christ was not bound by human law nor by human misinterpretation of God’s law, and so Jesus without hesitation broke the law, touched that woman, and she straightened right up and praised God. Our God, my friends, is not bound or limited by the rules or follies of humans. Praise the Lord!

Imagine my dear crippled, bent-over souls that God will break any boundary necessary to set you free. Imagine, my dear ones, that God is bigger than whatever present chaos that plagues you. Imagine that God is who the psalmist says God is. Imagine that this reality is realer and truer and stronger than anything that is happening in the moment. Imagine, my friends, that God is truly with us. Imagine this bent-over world can be lifted up. Just imagine! Praise the Lord!

I don't know about you, but sometimes it is hard for me to trust in this God who claims to be faithful. It is hard for me to trust when things are going wrong, either in my personal life or in the world. I find it challenging to believe that God really is good or even there at all. Just look at all the suffering!

But being a foster mom has given me a new perspective on God, because even a brief experience of mothering has deepened my appreciation for the Mother-Love of God. I know how much I love these babies I have the privilege of mothering, and I don't even quite know how to explain it to you, but maybe you know what I mean. I have so little control over what happens to these babies' futures, whether they stay with me, whether they go, whether someone will hurt them, whether their lives will be good and happy. But I know that whatever happens, and wherever they go, I will love them forever. Control is an illusion for all parents—none of us can guarantee our child's safety. As a foster parent I find that the reality of how little control I have haunts me on a daily basis, and yet there is no possible outcome that could stop me or prevent me or hinder me from loving this child with my whole entire heart. And to think that this Great Love I feel and know is infinitesimal compared to the Mother-Love of God. (Praise the Lord.)

I think at times we have misunderstood God's love to mean that God must control everything. If God really loved, God would sort everything out in our favor and protect all the children from any suffering ever. But control is not possible for any parent, even the God-Parent—not if you also want a God who honors free will and respects human choice. God's love is more like the love of a good and faithful mother who will not, will never, cannot possibly stop loving.

There is a children's book I read to Blakely, *Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You*. It says, "Make a big splash! Go out on a limb! My love will find you. My love can swim! It never gets lost, never fades, never ends . . . if you're working, or playing, or sitting with friends. You can dance 'til you're dizzy, paint 'til you're blue. There's no place, not one, that my love can't find you. And if someday you're lonely, or someday you're sad, or you strike out at baseball, or think you've been bad . . . just lift up your face, feel the wind in your hair. That's me, my sweet baby, my love is right there. In the green of the grass . . . in the smell of the sea . . . in the clouds floating by . . . at the top of a tree . . . in the sound crickets make at the end of the day . . . 'You are loved. You are loved. You are loved,' they all say. My love is so high, and so wide and so deep, it's always right there, even when you're asleep. So hold your head high and don't be afraid to march to the front of your own parade. If you're still my small babe or you're all the way grown, my promise to you is you're never alone. You are my angel, my darling, my star . . . and my love will find you, wherever you are."¹

One of my favorite authors is Clarissa Pinkola Estés. When I read her words I am wrapped and embraced in the Mother-Love of God, reminded deep in my soul that I am held, and that the Mother-Love is for everyone, all people, everywhere. There is no discrimination in the Mother-Love of God.

In one book, she writes about her experience as a teacher and counselor in the children's prison. Kids between the ages of twelve and eighteen who were locked up for theft, drugs, or for being chronic runaways. She says, "I was told many were stone-cold tough. But when I looked around,

I mostly saw broken-hearted children, just children.” Clarissa came to call them the “blackbird children,” and she loved them.

Her first attempt at cooking class was a disaster. They threw the food at one another. They called her names. She tried to pause the chaos by telling a story, for Clarissa is a powerful storyteller. It did not work. The girls were not the least bit interested or impressed with her brilliance.

She writes this:

In prison, there is no ability to seek Nature at will. No ability to stand for as long as one likes in a cool breeze pushing at one’s neck. No ability to listen for the crack of sticks in the forest. No ability to imagine images in clouds. No ability to walk further than the full length of the dining room.

Yet, also in prison, there is a wide-open secret skyway, and the skyway is constructed by each soul’s attitude—which holds that the spirit, like a beautiful bird, can fly anywhere, fully alive, seen or unseen. The spirit can never be caged. Never.

Thus, in poetry class with my blackbird girls, in quiet moments, I was about to teach about ‘the Bird of birds,’ what some call spirit, and who others call the lovely feminine Holy Spirit, that undying Espirito Santo, was often represented as a white dove—the One who can fly between bars and out windows; the One who can never be jailed.

As I did not receive the girls’ rapt attention in cooking class, now, in poetry class, they were as still as could be as I read to them from the mystic women saints . . . All these ancient women poets called out loudly, each in her own way, that in any prison only the body is behind bars and lock, yes—but the wild spirit filled with fire and the Love of Creator and all of Creation is free to go as and where it will, despite any iron bars.

I’d been told when I came to the prison that the children I’d be teaching were most often ‘low-intelligence. Didn’t alarm me. I’d heard it before. Long ago, that’s what some teachers had said about me and others from poor immigrant and refugee families. To the contrary, my blackbird girls understood mystical poetry perfectly . . .

Soon enough we were in cooking class again, and discussing rose water in Moroccan and East Indian food, and how roses are actually in the same family as apples. And that though we think ‘flower’ when we think ‘rose,’ others think ‘scent’ as in flavoring for food, a divine scent.

I told them stories about our Lady of Guadalupe, how her gown was covered in red roses; how roses were so associated with her because roses can climb anywhere, survive even stone walls, conquests, storms, destructions, leap over boundaries, seed themselves in even a tablespoon of decent-enough dirt . . .

I’d brought in books and books of pictures of wild roses growing with abandon everywhere—over fences, over roofs; nothing could keep our Our Lady’s roses [or Our Lady’s Love] contained.ⁱⁱ

Friends, the point of these images—the blackbird, the Mother, the rose—is to say God’s love is uncontainable, unstoppable by any human constraint, and the job—that is, the privilege, the challenge, the joy—of being a God-follower is to channel that same unstoppable love force within ourselves, to let it bust out into freedom, to lead with our hearts rather than keeping the heart locked safely within the chest cavity, as if the hunched over life can actually keep one safe. It cannot. Loving is never safe, not even for God. Especially for God, who is wounded and crucified again and again and again, and yet the Mother-Love persists. Yet the heart of God remains open and out, never ever locked away. Praise the Lord!

The psalmist says, “Happy are those whose help is in God, whose hope is in God,” but we are not happy because we are safe. We are happy because we are loved. We are happy because the help will come, somehow, someday because a faithful Mother never abandons her children, never listens dispassionately while her children cry, never withholds her affection, never watches a child suffer without weeping, never hears hunger pains without breast milk rising up to meet the need. When we cry out in prayer, God’s very breasts leak with nutrients—it is God’s nature to be so.

What God is saying to you, child, is that, “Wherever you are, my love will find you.” So happy are you if you trust, even the smallest bit, in God. If you hope, even a little, in God. “God: the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, God: who is faithful forever, who gives justice to people who are oppressed, and who gives bread to people who are starving! The Lord: who frees prisoners. The Lord: who makes the blind see. The Lord: who straightens up those who are bent low. The Lord: who protects immigrants, who helps orphans and widows, but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn! Praise the Lord!”

ⁱ Nancy Tillman, *Wherever You Are My Love Will Find You* (Feiwel and Friends, NY: 2010).

ⁱⁱ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Untie the Strong Woman* (Sounds True: CO), 158-159, 176-177.