

“A Candle of Hope”

7th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 97

May 16, 2010

In the darkest of nights the candle of hope still burns. It can be hard to see at times. The darkness can be so overwhelming. But even in the midst of the darkness of despair, a candle of hope, regardless of how small, can, and does dispel the darkness.

The Psalm for today speaks about this very thing, albeit in language of justice and righteous, about how the darkness gives way to the light from the candle. This vocabulary here are words of affirmation that God will establish justice with righteousness with his faithfulness. God is coming to set things right in the world overcome with injustice and wickedness. God’s Word is a candle of hope burning in the darkness of our despair.

The writer of the psalm understood that God’s presence and power was not static. The psalmist understood that God is active in our world. And the psalmist understood that this activity is seen in a personal encounter from God, an encounter that produces an effect.

God enters into our world, not only in nature, but also in history. This is seen by the changes that the presence of God creates: Enemies are destroyed, renewal takes place, despair gives way to hope, sorrow gives way to joy, and life resurrects out of death. The language of the psalmist alludes to this (*i.e. mountains melt like wax, ... all peoples see your glory, ... God guards the lives of the saints and rescues them from the hand of the wicked*).

When verse 6 declares, “The heavens declare your righteousness, O Lord,” it is saying more than just a word about God’s glory. This is a poetic way of speaking about God’s plan of salvation, its order and its contents, and could therefore be translated as “salvation.” God’s appearing produces an effect, and that effect is salvation, the restoring to wholeness, a transformation, or to use Easter language, personal resurrection.

It is clear that the outcome will be a renewal of sorts, a restoring to wholeness. But what is also evident is that this will come through God’s judgment upon the wicked. Sometimes this judgment is seen through the horrible and difficult events of life: war, suffering, and death. Sometimes this judgment comes because of injustice, faithlessness, and the continued desire to remain selfish. The outcome is certain. Sometimes it comes through moments of struggle and heartache. It is within the circumstances of our lives that God works. Those circumstances can at times make it difficult to see God’s presence much less recognize the change that God’s presence brings. But change does come. In moments of struggle, doubt, and despair a candle of hope burns in the darkness.

In darkness the light of God’s presence shines, the candle of hope is lit, and the circumstances of life change. The community of the faithful, while in the darkness, still waits for the light, the light that will embrace the past and create a new future. This transformation can be described as resurrection.

In every transformative event that people go through we can see hope coming out of despair, joy out of sorrow, and life out of death. I recently read a poem that gives witness to this process.

A Guatemalan poet named Julia Esquivel describes the hope and courage of those who resisted the death squads during the prolonged civil conflict by saying that they were "threatened with Resurrection!" She writes:

*"There is something here within us
Which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest. . .
What keeps us from sleeping
Is that they have threatened us with resurrection!

Because at each nightfall,
Though exhausted from the endless inventory of killings. . .,
Yet we continue to love life,
And do not accept their death!*

*". . . Because in this marathon of Hope,
There are always others to relieve us
In bearing the courage necessary
To arrive at the goal which lies beyond death. . .*

*"Accompany us then on this vigil
And you will know what it is to dream!
You will then know how marvelous it is
To live threatened with resurrection!*

*To dream awake,
To keep watch asleep
To live while dying
And to already know oneself resurrected."*

Such dreaming, such hope, such courage is why we can see Psalm 97 as an invitation "to reflect on the transformation wrought by God and the possibility offered us in that transformation." Such transformation leads to courageous action, to justice and righteousness, to the life that God intends, to know hope from despair, joy from sorrow, and life from death!

May we see God's candle of hope burning amid the darkness of our despair. May we all come to know ourselves as people who have been threatened with resurrection!

AMEN