

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

Faithful All Our Years Psalm 71

The 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 21/22, 2010

Next Sunday students from The College of William and Mary will be back in worship and school will be starting again, but this Sunday I want to speak to those who remember that first day of school as if it were yesterday even though it may have been 40, 50, 60 years ago.

This Sunday we listen to the 71st psalm, the song of an aged musician who has sung God's praises for many years, who gives thanks for God's faithfulness through every one of those years and who prays now in the psalm: "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me" (vs. 18).

The poet-musician of the 71st psalm reflects back on a life lived in the mercy and glory of God and at the same time looks forward to a future with God which cannot be spoken of without anxiety and perhaps some pain but is nonetheless anticipated in hope.

I realize speaking about aging may not be to everyone's taste and those of you who are not aging may wish to leave.

The 71st psalm is a psalm with gray hair. It has wrinkles and it has scars. It has seen terrible things happen; it has seen wonderful things. It has endured losses both terrible and trivial. To borrow William Blake's phrasing, it is a "Song of Experience," not a "Song of Innocence." The psalmist has been around and been beat around, and to borrow a line from Stephen Sondheim: "Good times and bum times, I've seen 'em all and, my dear, I'm still here."¹ The psalmist declares he's still here because:

You, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth. (vs. 5)

Trusting in God the psalmist has made it thus far, and the clear impression the 71st psalm gives is that the singer has trusted in God a long time, which leaves us wondering how much time the psalmist has left.

The psalmist has trusted God—since "you... took me from my mother's womb" (vs. 6), the psalmist says, a reference to a difficult birth, picturing God rescuing the infant from death at the very moment of birth. Now the psalmist prays simply, "Do not cast me off in the time of old age" (vs. 9). You gave me birth, Lord, my life belongs to you, don't forget it! You took me in your hands when I was born, don't drop me now.

¹ Stephen Sondheim, "I'm Still Here," from **Follies**.

One fabulous thing about this 71st psalm is the way that it frustrates scholars. It confounds the categories, refusing to be one thing or the other. It is not a psalm of thanksgiving; it is not a psalm of praise; it is not a psalm of petition, asking for something; it is all of this and more.

Wary of the confusions and distractions of the years, the psalmist orients himself by giving thanks. The psalmist hauls himself toward God by gratitude, unwilling to surrender to bitterness and defeat. Doubtless he has much to be bitter about and angry for and more than a few reasons to surrender to disappointments, but the psalmist announces nonetheless, “My praise is continually of you” (vs. 6). Such praise, such continual praise, is always praise in spite of weakness and aches, praise in opposition to resentment, praise that is counter to the impulse to submit to the temptations of smallness and bitterness.

Samuel Terrien translates, “As for me, I shall constantly wait in hope.” Whatever others may choose, whatever others may do: “As for me, I shall constantly wait in hope.”

Biblical scholars also get frustrated also because this 71st psalm borrows from other psalms. They want brand this psalmist as second rate for lacking originality. The fact of the matter is the psalmist is singing a new song but singing a new song by incorporating elements from old songs the singer has sung for decades. The psalm singer is a temple musician of the temple who knows the whole songbook intimately and extensively. Should we be surprised to hear elements of other psalms slipping into this 71st psalm? The singer sings to God with the words God has provided in the Scriptures. That’s the way faith works.

I met Heidi Neumark in ten years ago when I attended a conference on biblical interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, and the whole conference went to her Transfiguration Lutheran Church for dinner and bible study.

Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx is a church begun by Lutheran Puerto Rican immigrants. We don’t customarily think of Puerto Ricans as Lutherans but Lutherans sent missionaries to Puerto Rico in 1898 and many of their church members moved to Harlem and the South Bronx.

One of the older members of Transfiguration Lutheran was Alma. Heidi Neumark writes of her: “When I arrived Alma was one of the few members who still lived in the area. In her nineties, she loved to walk. She invented daily errands to get out on the streets... **Then** she was confined to bed with a missing leg, amputated because of diabetes.”

Heidi visited Alma in the hospital, then in her home after the surgery, but confined to a wheel chair, her “cradle,” she called it, Alma’s health began deteriorating rapidly.

“The next time I saw Alma,” Heidi writes, “she didn’t know where she was. In her mind she was still in the old Bronx neighborhood, but in fact she had been moved to a nursing home in Brooklyn. She sat in her wheelchair, parked in the hallway, and I found a loose chair for myself. Soon we mercifully left the confusing corridor with its odor of urine-soaked diapers and entered the limpid geography of the psalter [The book of Psalms]. Once there, Alma knew every turn and detail of the landscape. The hills rose with familiar grace. She moved unimpeded across this holy land and her mind leapt up in glorious lucidity.

“Most of the 150 Psalms seemed etched into her DNA—not just memorized but woven through the very strands of Alma’s being. *Alzaré mis ojos a los montes. De dónde*

vendrá mi Socorro? Mi Socorro viene de Jehová (I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.) Psalm 121:1-2) Together [with the psalms] we roamed the hills, free of wheelchairs, prostheses and canes, leaning on the everlasting arms.”²

The psalms intend for us not only to endure, however, but to triumph and by our very lives to bear witness to what we have seen and known and to the One in whom we have trusted.

The poet/musician of the 71st Psalm announces:

O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

So even to old age and gray hairs,

O God, do not forsake me,

until I proclaim your might

to all the generations to come (vs. 17-8).

This psalmist has been singing a long time but still has work to do and songs to sing.

If you have ever ordered anything from Amazon.com you have a friend for life. “If you liked this book you ordered last year,” they assure you, “you’ll probably like this new one too.” I buy a lot on books, so they’re eager to help. “Hello Patrick J. Willson,” their web page greets me a few years ago, “We have recommendations for you. (If you are not Patrick J. Willson, click here.)” I clicked on one of their recommendation and on the screen appeared a listing for a new commentary on the Psalms by Samuel Terrien. Samuel Terrien, a French Reformed Christian who immigrated to the United States during the Second World War and joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, when it the greatest theological faculty ever assembled in North America. In 1952 Terrien published a book on the Psalms that is by no means out of date but simply a classic. Terrien retired from Union Theological Seminary the year after I was ordained! Terrien has a new book? How old is he now?

When the book arrived I read the dust jacket: “In this monumental work, his most ambitious undertaking, the late Samuel Terrien...” Curious, I looked up **The New York Times** obituary for Terrien:

Samuel Terrien, a leading biblical scholar who was an authority on the Book of Job, died on Feb. 3 [2002] near his home in West Newton, Mass. He was 91. He became ill at the end of December, days after sending off the corrected galley proofs of his last book, [The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary].³

The book runs 971 pages, the list price is \$95.00; the freshest, brightest commentary on the psalms of the 21st century was completed by a scholar in his 91st year of life. The 71st psalm sings about this:

O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds...

until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come (vs. 17-8).

² Heidi B. Neumark, **Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx** (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 37-8.

³ Daniel J. Wakin, “Samuel Terrien, 91, Authority on the Book of Job and Others,” **The New York Times**, February 25, 2002, n.p.

Even as the psalmist remembers, “O God from my youth you have taught me,”
the great gray poet looks to the future:

You who have made me see many troubles
and calamities will revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
you will bring me up again.
You will increase my honor,
and comfort me once again (vs. 20-1).

The poet Czesław Miłosz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980 and 24 years
later until his death he still wrote poetry and taught literature at the University of
California, and attending mass daily. In a poem simply titled “Prayer” he speaks to God:

Approaching ninety, and still with a hope
That I could tell it, say it, blurt it out.

If not before People, at least before You
Who nourished me with honey and wormwood.

I am ashamed, for I must believe you protected me,
As if I had for You some particular merit....

Now you are closing down my senses, slowly,
And I am an old man lying in darkness.

Liberate me from guilt, real and imagined.
Give me certainty that I toiled for your glory. ⁴

Czesław Miłosz, was born in Lithuania, educated in Poland, transplanted to
California, moved back to Poland. Like the poet of the 71st psalm who has traveled many
miles and endured many things he still wants to sing to God: “My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praises to you” O God (vs. 23).

And for those of you whose taste does not run toward Polish poetry, we sing the
same thing in the old gospel hymn:

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.⁵
So may it be among us, every day, for many days, every day of our lives.

Patrick J. Willson
Williamsburg Presbyterian Church
Williamsburg, Virginia

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⁴ Czesław Miłosz, “Prayer,” **New and Collected Poems 1931-2001** (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001), p. 742.

⁵ Fanny Jane Crosby, “Blessed Assurance.”

