

Sermon Text for May 24, 2020 – Seventh Sunday of Easter

By Holly Miller

Psalm 22, I Peter 5:6-11

“The Balance of Power”

[Prayer of Illumination: God, we cast our anxieties on you, knowing that you care for us. Send your Spirit to open our hearts, settle our minds, and grant us discernment. May your living Word come alive in us. Amen.]

Do you feel as though you’ve been doing a balancing act for the last several months, just trying to keep everything under control? Our New Testament scripture today is from a letter written sometime during the first century by Peter, or a later disciple of Peter, to Christians who are facing a balancing act of their own. Since their conversion to Christ, the recipients of the letter are considered unwelcome and even dangerous in their own communities, facing a critical situation in which they are marginalized and abused, cut off from everyone else. The letter is addressed to believers in Asia Minor, in the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia – all of these are places within modern day Turkey – where the early church was then undergoing persecution, some of which was horrific.

In the letter Peter reminds the recipients, these new believers, of their new identity as the elect and holy people of God. As they remember God’s mighty acts, they are called to live the Christian life in specific ways: the first imperative is to live in the hope of Christ’s triumphal appearance. The second is to live a life set apart in God’s service, a holy life, in the midst of the world they are in. The third is to live in reverent fear of God rather than of the oppressive culture. The fourth is to love, care for others unselfishly; and the fifth is to long for means of spiritual nourishment to grow in one’s faith. Imagine that balancing act: living with hope in the middle of persecution. In chapter 2 of 1 Peter these new Christians are reminded: *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (2:9). Here biblical language for the nation of Israel is applied to the readers of the letter, those who were formerly Gentiles.

Let’s read now 1 Peter 5:6-11 to learn more about this balancing act...

In the Old Testament reading from Psalm 22, we heard the psalmist cry out as he was stalked by enemies, wild beasts, bulls, dogs and lions. By the end of the psalm, however, God has answered the psalmist’s cries and rescued him, *“for dominion belongs to the LORD.”* The enemy’s power is limited; the LORD’s is not. Then there is Job. Remember how, in the beginning of Job, the heavenly beings are all presenting

themselves before the LORD, and Satan includes himself in the group? Here in Job, Satan is actually “The Satan,” that’s his title and it means, “The Accuser,” “The Adversary.” He is like the prosecuting attorney before God. In Jewish tradition, Satan accuses God’s people day and night, and is literally, the “slanderer.” The Satan presents himself before the LORD and the LORD asks him, “*Where have you come from?*” What does The Satan respond? “*From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it*” (1:7). That sounds like the devil we just read about in 1 Peter: “*Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour*” (1 Pet 5:8b).

In the first century the church is suffering persecution and Peter warns the church and Christians to “*discipline yourselves, keep alert*” or “*be vigilant,*” keeping careful watch for possible dangers or difficulties. I think of a night watchman or someone on guard duty, or in the armed forces. We can probably learn a lot about being disciplined, alert and vigilant from those who with their lives protected and are protecting our country this Memorial Day. Not having served in the military, wartime or otherwise, I cannot begin to imagine what that would be like, but I would think that in combat or wartime, in particular, there is a sort of constant vigilance that must be endured.

We’ve heard of the body’s fight or flight response to stress, sort of like being on high alert. “Someone cuts you off on the highway, and you swerve to narrowly avoid a collision.” You’re walking to your car in the evening and you hear a noise in the bushes; so you start to walk faster. “In the moment before you turn on the lights in your empty house, the coat rack looks like a person standing right next to you.” Without you even telling it what to do, your body assesses what’s going on around you and determines how you most likely could survive the event.¹ A tiny area of your brain, the amygdala, sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus, which then takes over and functions like a command center preparing the body with energy to fight or flee.²

Peter tells the Christians to be disciplined, alert, vigilant because the devil is prowling around looking to devour someone. The adversary is frightening the new Christians with the roar of persecution so that they will fall away from the truth, turn away from God. The Satan is tempting believers into apostasy. In this case, Peter does not tell the Christians to flee, but to fight, to resist the devil. Remain steadfast in your faith, do not give up on it, and know that you are not alone; all around the world your sisters and brothers are facing persecution. This week Jesus’ ascension into heaven following his resurrection was celebrated. Ascension Day was Thursday, a reminder that we do not just have an adversary prowling around, making a lot of noise, but we have an advocate, Jesus Christ, sitting at the right hand of God, as did those early Christians. Something else to bear in mind...while it might appear easier to give up your Christian

beliefs in the midst of the persecution, remember the balance of power; it is all in God's favor.

Resist the devil – that's easy for Peter to say, but just exactly how does he suggest we do this? Let's go back to the beginning of this passage to see if we can find an answer. In verse 6, we read: *"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time."* This is a biblical principle, found in both the Old and New Testaments, that God exalts the humble and casts down the proud. In the Old Testament in Proverbs 3:34, we read: *"Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor."* Again in the Old Testament, Isaiah 2:17: *"The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day."* In the New Testament in what is called the Magnificat in Luke, Mary sings, *"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty"* (Luke 1:52). Later in Luke, Jesus tells a parable of humility at a wedding banquet, ending with these words: *"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"* (Luke 14:11). So, you see, from beginning to end, Scripture is filled with this principle. Indeed, the verse preceding our passage in 1 Peter is this: *"For God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* (1 Peter 5:5).

So what is it about humility and humbling ourselves that God favors? Are we simply submitting to God instead of the devil? Here, believers are to humble themselves *"under the mighty hand of God, so that in due time he may exalt you."* There is a promise of exaltation attached. If we go to verse 7 those same believers are given a second imperative or command. The first was *"humble yourselves;"* the second, *"cast all your anxiety on him."* Why? *"Because he cares for you."* It is interesting that in this sentence, both the word "anxiety" and the verb "cares" come from the same root in Greek. *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."* This humbling oneself is not a negative act of self-denial, but a positive one of active dependence on God for help. God promises to exalt us in due time and he cares for us, a total contrast with the roaring adversary who seeks to devour us.

This humbling is a good humbling that, as we place ourselves under God's mighty hand for protection and security and care and love, we exalt God. Are you finding that you have just a little more anxiety right now as we live into this new, unprecedented pandemic experience? You are not alone. Are you feeling your body exhausted from too much continuous fight or flight response? Why not humble yourself under the mighty hand of God? Why not cast all your anxiety upon God, knowing that God wants only the best for you. It is under God's mighty hand we can accomplish the commands that follow: to be disciplined, keep alert, resist the devil's efforts to take away our faith.

Then verse 10 holds even more promises for us, when we have endured the suffering “*for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.*” There are so many good things in this verse. First, think about this. We exalt God by humbling ourselves and glorifying God in all that we do. Earlier Peter told the believers they were “*a chosen race...called ...out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” Here Peter tells the believers that they have been called by God to his eternal glory. The humbling of the believer leads to the sharing in God’s eternal glory. The promises for our remaining faithful in the midst of persecution and suffering are that “*in due time*” we will be restored, supported, strengthened and established by God. These are wonderful promises!

We have witnessed the contrast Peter draws up here between God and the Satan, the One who loves us and the one who seeks to tear us apart, the One who feeds us and the one who feeds upon us. But there is yet something more going on here and it has to do with pride and power. The Christian believer is taught to humble himself, but who is the most prideful character you can think of – Satan, right? The two verses right in the middle of this passage give us the supreme example of the proud one, the one who refuses to humble himself to God, your adversary the devil. The big cat is making a show with all of its roaring and prowling about. It’s a last ditch effort because Satan knows he will lose and will gladly take all the power you choose to give him; however, there is no *balance* of power. Know that the power of Satan is limited, because in the end, he must still answer to God. And to our God “*be the power forever and ever. Amen.*”

¹<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-happens-to-your-body-during-the-fight-or-flight-response/>

²<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>