

Lenten Devotional March 19, 2024

Scripture

Psalm 34

- 1 *I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*
- 2 *My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.*
- 3 *O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.*
- 4 *I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.*
- 5 *Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.*
- 6 *This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.*
- 7 *The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.*
- 8 *O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.*
- 9 *O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.*
- 10 *The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.*

- 11 *Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*
- 12 *Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?*
- 13 *Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.*
- 14 *Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.*

- 15 *The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.*
- 16 *The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.*
- 17 *When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.*
- 18 *The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

- 19 *Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.*
- 20 *He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.*
- 21 *Evil brings death to the wicked,*

and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22 *The LORD redeems the life of his servants;*
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Devotion

The Rev. Rebecca Konegen '22

It's an odd reading for Lent: an exhortation to wisdom, for finding it in seeking the Lord, and celebration for God's consistent rescue of the righteous. All of this while we anticipate observing the fact that the holiest and most righteous of any human being, God's own son Jesus, was crucified. It's hard to think of God's constant rescue of the righteous in light of what happened to Jesus.

The stanza starting in verse 11 is easy: life is to be found in right relationship with YHWH. In order to have a good life, we must seek to live in accordance with righteousness; we must do good and seek peace. The second flows from the first: life is good for the righteous because God stays near to the righteous, even when life is very difficult. And even the converse makes sense, in context: the Lord God turns away from those who do evil.

It's the verse that begins the next stanza that can cause us some difficulty: not so much the "many are the afflictions of the righteous," as anyone who has lived long enough can see that that can happen, but the claim that "the Lord rescues them from them all." One wonders, then, what rescue means, if the righteous have many afflictions and their spirits can be crushed.

But the psalmist is unembarrassed and unapologetic about the juxtaposition of a plan for the righteous to be able to have the good life with the admitted fact of many troubles and our need for rescue. And one wonders, too, what it means to have a good life, or "many days to enjoy good," if one is also so deeply crushed and troubled. It can't be simply that a life is a good one because God is alongside us, because the psalmist acknowledges that we still need rescue. So maybe this psalm is a good one for Lent simply because it requires us to acknowledge—all at once—several things that we know to be true: God is good, God is always acting on our behalf, and life can be very, very difficult.

Prayer

Holy God, we can see that life is beautiful, and at the same time that life is difficult. We thank you for the gift of your presence, and for the gift of faith that allows us to trust in your promises. We cannot see everything we want to see, but we turn again to you in trust, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.