

"To Behold and To Inquire"

a sermon

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by

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Sermon Text: Psalm 27

I want us to think today about a very simple basic biblical theme which I believe is a part of everyday life for you and me. It's from Psalm 27; the theme is "To Behold and To Inquire." The particular passage in that psalm which speaks to this theme and which I now commend to you as God's word for this hour is found in these words:

"One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the
Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple. Amen."

I am sure you will let me, as a Presbyterian, refer to that other John this morning, John Calvin, who said that the Psalms are "a mirror of the soul." Do you ever see yourself in a psalm? Do the experiences, the struggles, the faith, the celebrations, the affirmations, of those who put these hymns together and sang them both privately and corporately reflect any of your own spiritual pilgrimage? They do for me and I believe they do for you.

You and I never really know in any service of worship around the world this morning, what people have brought to this service. What have you and I brought - the things that give us cause for joy and celebration and the things which give us also reason for meditation, reflection, analysis and at times, even despair. Therefore, we need to listen to this music, to resonate with some of the message of it and to find a way to move into the problems of reentry tomorrow and in all the tomorrows.

Psalm 27 has at least two sections to it and I side with the Old Testament scholars today who believe that there are three basic paragraphs in it. They seem quite disparate at the first reading. The first is the great affirmation of faith and trust.

The Lord is my light and my
salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my
life;
of whom shall I be afraid?"

At the end, there is a paragraph with a fervent prayer for guidance:

"Teach me thy way, O Lord;
and lead me on a level path
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take
courage;
yea, wait for the Lord!"

But here, in the middle, there is a passage which seems, at first reading, to be pretty ordinary. What is so unique, what is so fresh? I believe it is in the fact that the psalmist asked of God, when he had just one little request, to be in His presence forever in the temple to do two specific things: to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple.

Surely we have problems with asking God for anything, do we not? The whole business of intercessory prayer is fraught with problems for those of us who use it as an instrument to get our way, to indulge in some self-centered pettiness, to seek for something which is just for us and which has little to do with God's ultimate glory or will for us.

If you could just ask God for one thing this morning here in Duke Chapel, where you are at this moment in your life, what would it be? Would it be something in that long list which a 4-year old offers to some department-store Santa Claus, pillowed and bewhiskered and hearing it all with great boredom, I am sure? Would it be some legitimate personal concern for healing or for hope or for direction or guidance? If it is that, we need to ask ourselves what is so wrong with that if it's done in this atmosphere of trust and commitment. Or is it something absurd: one of those things which we include in a desperate prayer sometimes which, if we are honest, could not possibly interest God?

But what about that long list of things also which would be legitimate this morning? To pray that God would hear the cry for justice in our time. 80-85% of the people on this planet are crying out in agony for simple justice. Or a cry for peace in a time when great thunder clouds of nuclear destruction hang over us? Do we pray that we know how to use the opportunity of the living of these days, to have wisdom and courage for it? Or to seek some new quality in life for everybody - for young people, the elderly, the retired persons, women, minority groups in our time? Or a simple prayer for survival on this planet? All of these things could be written into your own personal psalm.

Think about the two basic things in this Psalm 27: dwelling in the presence of God forever, and the symbolism of being in the temple, first of all to behold the beauty of the Lord. The psalmist was articulating for us quite clearly the great hope that above everything else we might see and know the living God. He does not come and recite to God all the horrors of that time, although there is a lot about the enemies of the psalmist here in this passage and sometimes, the way we do in a bullfight in Spain, we almost get sympathetic with the enemies because of the vigor with which they are attacked and the calling down of the judgment of God upon them. He doesn't do that. He says, "Let me see you. Let me know you." He comes to symbolize that strong persistent hunger to know God.

Psalm 27 has a seventh verse:

"Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face.'
My heart says to thee,
'Thy face, Lord, do I seek.'
Hide not thy face from me."

Do you pray like that? What an appropriate way to begin the conversation with God in every service of worship where there might be some spasm of new life contradicting the verdict of ecclesiastical morticians that the church is really dead and all but buried. Whatever there is, worshippers come to seek to know God, to ask, "Is there any word from the Lord for me today?" Karl Barth was quite right when he said that the subconscious question which every worshipper in the living church asks is: "Is it really true about God, that he is like what we see in Jesus Christ?"

For in our time, even with you and me, thoughtful devoted searching people perhaps, God has his own identity crisis. He can be regarded as some stern judge meeting out all kinds of harsh punishment; or some resident policeman watching us to catch us; or some absentee landlord collecting from us and ignoring our own needs. Even Jesus Christ has his identity crisis. He can be thought of as some jolly green giant, a hero of some kind; or, a guerilla at the barricades with a machine gun in these revolutionary times.

How then we need to push on, to get Him in focus, to see and to hear and to know this God. For God has given us again and again the assurance that He could make himself known, His glory will be proclaimed. John Locklan, professor of theology at Basil, says that there is a great Czech theological tradition, the tradition out of which he came, which maintains that God's glory will be proclaimed on the earth. If the Bishops don't do it, the clergy will; if the clergy don't do it, the laity will; if the laity will not do it, men and women and little children, those even outside the church will do it. If they are silent, even the stones of the earth will cry out: "Glory be to God."

God has initiated this conversation with you and me. He has broken the silence. Otherwise, we are terribly alone. Could there be anything worse than being shunned by God and the whole earth is silent as far as the speaking with God is concerned? In Psalm 28:

"To thee, O Lord, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if thou be silent to me,
I become like those who go down
to the Pit."

It is hell to cope with the silence of God. Martin Luther was right when he prayed: "Punish me, punish me, O Lord, but be not silent to me," when God is come to say: "I am not silent. I am speaking. Listen!"

The New Testament reflects this great initiation of the conversation with us. The God who said, "Let there be light!" has shined in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ Jesus. "The word was made flesh" - bone, blood, sinews, flesh - "and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the Father." That was written with great astonishment. It should be read with that. How wonderful to know God and to know the glory of God. "The whole earth is filled with His glory," they said in great awe and amazement.

How does this knowledge of God come for you? I am not sure whether it comes for you like a great flash of lightning in the middle of the night. There's a flash of lightning and you see everything in sharp focus. Or does the knowledge of God come usually like the slow dawning of the day on a grey, drizzly day when the light comes gradually? At least, for me, it has come like that, seldom in a great flash of lightning, everything perfect, everything sharply in focus. But the more you see Jesus Christ who said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," the more you begin to see the revelation of God in him as if to say, "All you need to know about Me really you can see in him," the more then we know the glory and the wonder of God.

All over the world today, under the most adverse of circumstances, God would make himself known and He would respond to this request here in this place this morning: "I would dwell with you to behold the beauty of the Lord." What is that beauty? It is the flawless character of God's nature and His will and His purpose. It's not physical beauty obviously, He's not a physical being. But God himself, in all of that perfection of wisdom and strength and integrity and his great love, which surpasses knowledge, for the whole world.

Recently, at a conference on China to which some twenty persons came from our denomination, we heard the son of a missionary who had been an educator in Peking talk about his recent visit to China. He and some other American visitors heard that, for the first time since the Gang of Four had been toppled

from authority, a public service of worship was being held in an old church. When they arrived, there were only a few minutes before the start of the service. They were greatly stirred by the opening hymn which was sung in Chinese, but with words familiar to them:

"Holy, holy holy! Lord God Almighty!

Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee."

God had been speaking and people had been responding again and again.

What of this last Sunday in June, this beginning of the decade of the 80s, this fateful decade in the world's history? God would make Himself known to us. Let us seek Him. Seek Him with hope and faith and love.

But the other part of this passage is also tremendously important, perhaps even more important than the first. We have come together to inquire in His temple. To see and to know is to lead all of us into a great yearning to understand.

So many of the inquiries of the Bible begin with the simple word "Why?" "Why have you forsaken me?" "Why are you silent toward me?" And to make inquiry is a very important duty for every one of us. To do theology is to inquire of God concerning the meaning of God for life. To know about God is just one thing, but what does it mean? The questions which we have for God, if we are a common part of common humanity, are always like flanks of marching soldiers going by with fixed bayonets glistening in the sun. They come wave on wave before the living God. Like Job, some of us may have a controversy with the Lord today. Don't be ashamed of that. Ask him about it. Like the apostle, Paul, once we ask "Who are you Lord?", we are driven to ask, "What will you have me to do?" Like thoughtful women of every age, peopling the pages of the scriptures from Deborah and Miriam to Lydia and Priscilla and all the others in the New Testament, we come with inquiries about what it means to be a human being in this culture and in this society. Even Jesus picked up the words of the Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Thoughtful people are asking today about the shaking of the foundations. If the foundations are destroyed, what do the righteous do? One wise commentator says they do what the righteous always do: go on being righteous, seeking the justice and the righteousness and the truth of God. You have your own list of questions I am sure, but what about this shaking world? Everything seems to be trembling as though a great earthquake was shaking us economically, politically, religiously. We're quite keenly aware of that. Who is responsible - we or someone else?

One very devout lady, an officer of one of our Columbia seminary groups, told us the other day of a grandmother who invited her six-year old grandson to spend a week with her in California. On Wednesday night, she was greatly frightened when she awoke and discovered that the house was trembling. An earthquake was shaking the house. In her fright, she cried out to her grandson, "Billy! Billy!" He replied, "I didn't do it, grandmother. I didn't do it!" We can deny it all we want to, but we are a part of the shaking of the world are we not and perhaps we ought to be.

In that great passage in the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews, God speaks clearly. The author, speaking in that dramatic letter, says that God is shaking the world again. The things which cannot be shaken will remain. Be thankful for a kingdom which cannot be shaken and worship God with reverence and awe. How tremendous it is to believe that some things remain in a shaking world. This kingdom of God, says the letter, remains. The kingdom of God's justice and truth and love and hope and faith. The word of God abides forever. God Himself is sovereign Lord forever. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. Faith, hope and love are still stronger than hate and malice and meanness. Justice is stronger than injustice.

It is a great thing to come to God and ask him: Is this all I am ever going to be? Is this all we are ever going to have? Isn't there something more than the monotony of my business or my profession or the pain of being a parent? Is this all there is ever going to be? God comes to say there is something more. There is indeed. How long until justice rolls down like a great rushing river? How long will 10,000 people starve to death in the moments we're speaking today?

I have come today to inquire of the Lord. Let there be great conversation with God between you and the God who initiates that conversation.

I believe, like John of Patmos, in the book of Revelation, that all those clashing symbols, trying to say to the people of God that they're battered and beaten, but not yet finished, he says, "I hear the voice of a great multitude." What were they saying, "Glory be to Caesar?" - not at all. If he listened, he could have heard the death rattle in the throat of the Roman Empire. The sounds of the breaking of the rocks by the prisoners in Patmos? No! "I heard the voice of a great multitude cry, 'Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigns!'" How great a thing it is to listen to God, to know Him and to listen to Him. Why not make this at the top of any list you may have? Whatever the legitimate concerns may be as you deal with God ask Him, "Let me dwell in Your house, in Your presence so that I may behold You, Your purposes, Your character, the wonder and glory of God, but above all, that I may inquire in Your temple."

In a few moments, when we walk out of this magnificent sanctuary and reenter normal life, with all of the problems of reentry, maybe there can be, like a returning astronaut, some new attitude which makes for successful reentry for survival.

There is a Russian novel, The First Circle. In it, the central characters are two young Russians who fall in love with each other. One is a 21-year old member of the Marxist party with a great political future and getting the best of education. The other is a 19-year old. They were very much in love, but there was a peculiar thing. Yakanov could not see Agniya on Sunday mornings, she always made excuses. He pushed her so hard that she finally told him that she went to church on Sundays. She couldn't have shocked him more than if she'd confessed to a hundred infidelities. They began to debate this a great deal. Finally, she said that perhaps if he went with her to church he'd understand what it meant to her. He did but, returning from the service, he was still pushing and challenging her about this. Finally she said, "Let me put it this way, Yakanov. I believe deeply when the bells in that steeple are rung no more and the anthems of the choir are sung no more and that Gospel word is proclaimed no more, we will slip into a deeper barbarism than we have ever known. I believe that and what is more I believe that you do too."

Why not then, on the basis of knowing God and listening to God and being in all this conversation, why not ring some steeple bells for faith and for justice and for love in our time? - all the things which God would be concerned about. Why not sing some songs of faith and hope and love and truth? Why not, above everything else, declare good news to the world? The Lord God omnipotent reigns. He is still the Lord of all the earth and we can be a part of that great stream of new life which cascades out of the temple of God in the imagery of the ancient prophet and everything it touches will live.

So let it be. So may it be. Could we ask for anything more than that? Shall we settle for anything less than that?

In the name of the Father, the Son and
the Holy Spirit. Amen.