

Sometimes a light surprises

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Psalm 27

Psalm 27 is all mixed up about God. It begins with a bright confidence that with God's help we can stand up to any enemy. "The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear?" It offers a request: "One thing I ask of the Lord:" let me live in your house and behold your beauty.

So far so good. But a few verses later, the psalm takes a turn. Suddenly the writer is a bit less confident. Previously, it was "God will hide me;" "God will conceal me;" "God will set me high on a rock." But now instead of certainty in God's constant presence, the psalmist needs reassurance. "Hear me, Lord, when I cry, and answer me!" "Do not hide your face from me!" "Do not turn me away in your anger!" "Do not cast me off, do not forsake me!"

Is this the same writer? Is this the same God??

The psalm exhibits a structure described by Walter Brueggemann. It follows a pattern of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. We see the new orientation in the final two verses: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!"

What we have here is a movement from "God is here!" to "God, come here!" to "Ok, I'll wait."

Frankly, I like the original orientation better! That is the God I grew up with: a stronghold that protects me, no matter what. It took a long time, but that image of God slowly eroded, just as it does in Psalm 27. "God-as-constant-protector" doesn't hold up well when faced with reality. Experience will inform us at some point that what we knew of God can't stack up anymore. Events slowly pressed in at the margins of my belief. A pet died. People at school had a faith different from mine. Family members experienced serious illness. Our family moved and I lost friends.

When I took a class in seminary studying the psalms, my professor Perry Yoder asserted that if our image of God does not match up with the reality of our experience, then our image of God is in error. I would certainly add that our interpretation of reality might be a bit off, but I think Perry was right. If my image of God does not make room for tragedy, for sorrow, for failure, for disappointment, for death or even for a perceived absence of God, then my image of God has failed. What image can I paint in its place? Where do I see God?

I already tipped my hand at one place during children's time — the house of God, or the people of God. The capacity of the Church to be the hands and feet of Christ can be the fullest revelation of God's continuing work in the world. A church where people are accepted despite differences; where children are loved and respected; where a dying woman is surrounded by care and comfort: this is an image of God.

It disturbs me, though, that while humans have this great capacity to reveal God, we also have the ability to destroy God's image. Why does God allow us in our imperfection to even attempt to reveal God's perfection? I have to keep pondering that.

It shows us something of the vulnerability of God. God is willing to sacrifice the security of divine revelation to the ineptitude of human revelation. In order to recognize the delight and surprise of God's self-revelation we have to be able to "wait for the Lord; be strong, and let our hearts take courage." If we assume that we can be constantly aware of God, then we need not look for God. If we assume that God constantly speaks, then we need not listen for God. If we assume that God is a constant source of strength and support, we need not be strong.

But if we learn instead that God is our light, then we can wait through the darkness for the blaze of morning. If we learn that God chooses people as a dwelling place, then we can choose to dwell in the house of the Lord. If we learn to recognize the work of God in people around us, then we can choose to reveal God to others through our own actions.

As a song-leader, I've learned to look for the movement of the Spirit in the congregation's song. There are little unexpected moments when everything seems to fall into place and a congregation is suddenly fully unified in voice and in purpose. To quote a hymn by William Cowper,

Sometimes a light surprises
the child of God who sings.
It is the Lord who rises
with healing in his wings.
When comforts are declining
he grants my soul again
a season of clear shining,
to cheer it after rain.¹

That stanza becomes even more profound upon learning that Cowper suffered a lifetime of severe depression. Those flashes of light must have been surprising indeed. I find that as a song-leader, I can rarely plan for them to

¹ William Cowper, 1779, revised for *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, hymn number 603.

happen — I can only make room. Sometimes I even have to get out of the way. In that union of voices I hear the gathered congregation becoming one body, one in purpose and one in spirit — and that is the body of Christ.

The psalmist sings, “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” There are millions of other flashes of surprising light in the world — signs of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. They come, bidden and unbidden. They can be subtle and they can be stunning. They can be dismissed as mere coincidence, or they can be accepted as good gifts of God.

These signs are what God intended the world to be in the first place, and signs of what the world will become. I think of encouraging words that I’ve heard when discouraged. I think of hearing a particular hymn at just the right time to lift my spirits.

I think of people healed from illness, both by the work of doctors and by means beyond my comprehension. These are crumbs — tiny tastes of a coming feast. These are glimpses of a new world. These are tiny, fragile shoots of green springing up in a burnt and blackened field. These are our signs that God is working in us and in creation to restore all things into fullness of life. These are signs of what the world is meant to be.