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Proper 27B; Psalm 146

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My sophomore English teacher at Northwestern High School in Rock Hill, South Carolina was iconic, a great teacher who still had her students memorize and perform poems during class. Let's call her Ms. Wilson. Ms. Wilson had a couple of distinctive mannerisms and catchphrases. Most memorably, when a student asked, "Do we have to?," the perennial favorite questions of students across America for decades, other than, of course, "Can I go to the bathroom," Mrs. Wilson would, without fail, reply, "The only things you **have** to do are die and pay taxes!" My husband Jeff was in her class the very next school year. He and I still like to joke that she must have mulled over her mantra during the summer, because, in his year, she began saying, "the only thing you have to do is DIE." She was telling us, as high school students felt that we had very little choice in anything, that we had actually had quite a lot of choice in many things, though the consequences were such that the freedom to do or not do was not much freedom at all. Mrs. Wilson was, in her own unique way, teaching her students about what we can and cannot expect to happen without fail in this life.

Mrs. Wilson is not the first person to talk about what we can and cannot count on to happen in this earthly life. Psalm 146, today's appointed psalm, is one of the very last psalms in the rather long and incredibly varied book, a book which covers the whole gamut of human emotions—joy, revenge, lament, gratitude, hatred, and more. Psalm 146 starts with praise. "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise God as long as I live. I will sing God's praise while I have my being." Then the psalm shifts, changing its subject to humans: "Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *for there is no help in them. When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *and in that day their thoughts perish" (v. 3-4). The psalmist says all humans, especially rulers but not just rulers, all humans are fickle because we are finite. Interestingly, the psalmist says nothing, **NOTHING** at all about what kind of ruler or leader this person is or is not. This could be your favorite person, the one you look up to most, whether currently alive, or dead, the one whom you would invite to dinner in that icebreaker game people like to play; this could also be the person with whom you vehemently disagree, the person you wouldn't put your trust in if they were the very last person on earth—and everyone in between. Humans, regardless of word, deed, or

action, are finite, and when we are gone, our thoughts and earthly projects go with us well, some more quickly than others, but still. This is not about whether or not people are trustworthy or reliable. That's a whole other sermon, probably on another text. This is more about where we anchor ourselves and where we look to for hope. The psalmist says placing our highest hopes in a fellow human does not work because then we are putting our hopes in someone, who through no fault of their own, is not built to last.

This boundedness is highly unfortunate, to put it mildly, because the only thing humans crave more than novelty is stability, safety, security. We want to know how to orient ourselves, where to find our true north, particularly when things go sideways, whether that is a discouraging or inconclusive test result, an election outcome, or just barely having the bandwidth to get through the day before collapsing into bed. Where can we root ourselves?

Psalms 146 claims we can place our hope in God. The majority of the psalm focuses on why that is. God, according to the psalmist, keeps promises, gives justice and food, sets free, opens the eyes, lifts up, loves, watches over or care for, upholds or sustains folks. These are all active, present tense verbs. I am simply fascinated that the psalmist does not choose to draw on the wonderfully rich tradition, relationship, and covenant that undergirds this text. There is no mention of Abraham or Isaac, Jacob or Joseph; nothing about crossing the Red Sea; no mention of wandering in the desert, the manna from heaven, the giving of the law, the covenant with David, or any other of the many, many MANY flagship events called upon. The psalmist looks around and finds things going right with the world and attributes them to God. God is keeping, promises, giving, setting free, opening the eyes, lifting up, loving, watching over, and upholding in the present, according to the psalmist. This is truly staggering, really, choosing to use the present tense instead of the past.

And the present was not all cupcakes and glitter during the psalmist's time. The entire Old Testament, all of the Tanakh, is shaped by the Babylonian Exile, in which the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem, God's holy city, and flattened the temple. Leaders went into exile. It is hard to articulate what a ginormous crisis in every way, shape, and form, spiritually, emotionally, physically, geographically. This is trauma in every single way you can think of. I don't think I can overstate how terrible and life changing it was. Though the exile was most likely over by the time of this psalm, and some of the descendents of the people in exile had returned, with a much smaller, less glorious temple, the exile wasn't over. We now

know that trauma can be passed down through generations, and if the exile wasn't traumatic, then I don't know what is. And yet somehow, this psalmist, through the grace of God, found a way to believe, a way to hope, a way to praise to pass down stories of what God has done and IS DOING so that others– that's us, y'all– might believe and find God in our own lives and times.

We are often loath to make that God our anchor because God seems so ineffable. We also might wonder what good it does. Because we have eyes. We have ears. We are all too aware of the world. The 20th century and the start of the 21st have been no crystal stair for most people.

God's promise is not one of no troubles. It's just not. It never was, it never has been, and it never will be. Uncertainty is the state of most of the world most of the time for nearly all the people. Times of certainty and stability are a historical anomaly and also often apply only to certain segments of the population. When we view prosperity and stability as absolute signs of God's grace and favor, we are expecting the wrong thing from God. Both the Bible and history tell us that the people of God have had to deal with messiness from other humans, and from systems, and from ourselves, for as long as there have been people.

The psalmist could have ticked off all the crappy things; we could too. When you leave here today, I invite you to try and see the present-tense, active verbs of God happening right now? They are there. I promise you that they are. God uplifts us the music of our choirs as a balm for your soul. God gives us nature to refresh us, so bundle up and go outside for fresh air for awhile. God sustains the orphan and the widow through neighbors and parishioners packing over 10,000 meals here last Saturday. God cares for the brokenhearted when someone asks you how you are and they really want to know and they actually listen to your answer. Let this psalm, and the witness of those who wrote it, let this psalm reassure you that God **can** be relied upon. I know many of you are tired from our relentless healthcare system, from some of the 'isms that pervade too many nooks and crannies everywhere we turn. I get it. But the system's gonna system, y'all. The yuck is gonna yuck. And I will misplace my hope, and my hope will crack, but I refuse to let my own hope be broken.

This might mean using time that could be spent making money or building our careers or cleaning our houses or exercising or developing our future athletic careers, to do something that is seemingly productive, like rest, or pray, or volunteer, or come here to be

recharged and to encourage one another. It might mean donating to groups in whose mission you believe and who helps folks you are concerned about. These are ways to rebuild and fortify our hope. If the ancient Israelites, who had been through the wringer very, very recently could, we can too. And with hope, more becomes possible.

In some ways, my sophomore English teacher Mrs. Wilson was wrong. Dying is not all we have to do. Christians believe that Jesus was somehow resurrected, so that even death, in some ways, is also weirdly unreliable. And participation in the Christian life is not really about a ticket to heaven but rather an invitation to shape our own lives in the here and now. Like the psalmist, strive to look around and find things that are going right, actions that seem more aligned with God's will. To do otherwise is to be a prisoner of the day to day crap. So as verse – of the hymn we just sang said: “When hope and courage falter, your still small voice be heard; with faith that none can alter, your servants undergird.”

To close, it feels fitting to let Elie Wiesel get the last word, since I'm drawing on a text we share with our Jewish siblings in the faith:

One must wager on the future. I believe it is possible, in spite of everything, to believe... in God in a world where there has been an eclipse of God's face. Above all, we must not give in to cynicism. To save the life of a single child, no effort is too much. To make a tired old man smile is to perform an essential task. To defeat injustice and misfortune, if only for one instant, for a single victim, is to invent a new reason to hope.

Have the nerve– the gall– the faith to place hope in God. *Amen.*