

Easter C3
 April 10, 2016
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
Joy Comes in the Morning
 David Noble

First Reading

Acts 9:1-20

⁹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Second Reading

Psalms 30

¹I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

²O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.

³O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

⁴Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."

⁷By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

⁸To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication:

⁹"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?"

¹⁰Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

1.

"Weeping may linger for the night," it says.

There's been a lot of weeping lately. And it seems less like it's lingering and more like it's taking up residence. We can't count the number of makeshift memorials that have sprung up across this country and around the world over the last year or two- flowers, candles, signs placed at street corners where some tragedy has taken place, and people holding each other tightly, sobbing into each other's necks, or staring, singing, praying. It feels sometimes like it's becoming the new normal. For a few weeks this winter there was a major calamity every week.

We may act as though we are becoming desensitized to it. People say they won't let the violence and death and destruction worry them or change their habits - but it's taking a toll on us.

I was at the airport the other day, around midnight at JFK, picking up friends who were coming to visit. The terminal was busy, packed with people waiting for passengers, and packed with passengers wheeling around those luggage carts with half a dozen huge suitcases and bags piled on top of each other. I've never given those carts another thought, but now they make me nervous. It made me remember all those photos of Brussels and hidden bombs in bags blowing up in the terminal.

Over the last year I've stood here at worship too many times to recognize or announce or pray about a catastrophe that has taken lives, broken hearts, tightened our guts with dread and uncertainty.

And then we started to lose our friends, some of them lifelong friends, here at the church. Five deaths in the last three months. Planning memorial services has become a regular habit for me - calling families, sharing memories, wiping tears, choosing Bible verses and favorite hymns. And for us as a congregation this month, attending these services will be almost a weekly habit. Choir rehearsals have been including time for preparing memorial service anthems and saying prayers for beloved choir members whose voices still ring in our ears.

Last week it all came to a head for me when Bob Chamberlin died. I've only known Bob for two years but we spent a lot of time together at the hospital and nursing home last year when he was hurting. We told stories and laughed and prayed. I got to know and love his favorite "antics," and he got better, only to suffer a relapse of an old cancer he had had years ago. On the morning he died I went to the house and visited with his family. We cried, we prayed, and I went back to work. I know better than that. I wasn't right all day. My head wasn't in my work and while my eyes weren't weeping, my heart was. There's been a lot of night lately.

2.

The author of Psalm 30 knew all about that.

'My foes threatened to rejoice over me,' the Psalm says. Human foes? Illness and despair? No one knows. But whatever or whoever these foes were, death seemed to be approaching, the grave was in sight, life was vulnerable. And there was more. In a previous time God was not immediately available. I cried out to you back then, God, but I could not find you, the psalm says.

The situation was a little different for Saul, when suddenly the resurrected Jesus appeared to him and he fell down, blinded, stunned, afraid for his life. He was a proud man, an authority in his community, he was certain that God was on his side, yet God had knocked him upside the head and he was vulnerable, maybe for the first time in his life. The Christians he was hunting down were now leading him by the hand through the streets of Damascus to their church. What will they do to him? Where is God? It is night in the life of the great and powerful Saul.

3.

Saul was in a desperate situation, alone and at the mercy of his enemy. And so was the writer of Psalm 30 who tells us his difficulties— crying out to God on more than one occasion, and God's silence when he wanted something, the threats of foes, Sheol, the Pit. And each time, the psalm says, each time when the darkness fell and weeping was heard, God's power and faithfulness did rescue the psalmist. "You drew me up," the psalm says, as if drawing someone up out of a deep well that could not otherwise be escaped. And, "you healed me," "you restored me," "you have turned sorrow into dancing," "you have clothed me with joy."

Over and over, the psalm says, God responded with power and faithfulness when the life of the psalmist was threatened.

In fact, God doesn't just find a way to respond, God wants to be called upon.

"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall glorify me," Psalm 50 says.

"I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me," God says to the forgetful Israelites in Isaiah, chapter 65.

And Psalm 91 says, "When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them."

And as sure as the dawn comes after the night, weeping will be followed by joy.

Thank you God, Psalm 30 says, thanks to your holy name, thank you forever! First difficulty, then rescue, and finally thanks. Over and over this pattern repeats. Difficulty, rescue, thanks....

The difficulty is shared with the congregation. The weeping and worrying, the darkness and despair is not a private thing, but it is shared with all who will hear. And when it is shared, everyone remembers together how God has rescued in the past. If Psalm 30 is any sort of guidance, it takes two things to overcome darkness and weeping- it takes God and it takes each other.

We see that also in the story of Saul. God has arranged a congregation to take Saul in- to pray with him, to teach him, to heal him. It took years for Saul to become the Apostle Paul we know today- Jesus didn't just appear to him and, voila!, he was an apostle. Saul spent a long time with a congregation that had the courage to listen to his difficulties, to hear his story, and then share with him their trust in God that had also developed over years.

To arrive at the joy in the morning deal we need God and we need each other.

4.

I have told you today about the darkness I have experienced in recent days. I have shared my concerns, my troubles with you. You may have these troubles too. The point is, when someone does this kind of sharing we remember as a community that God has been faithful and has saved us before. As I tell you about my own weeping I begin to remember how God has held me close on other difficult occasions. I remember I have been rescued in the past. I recall how weeping has turned into joy. That gives me hope now. And I know that God has rescued you on past occasions, because you've told me, and that gives me hope.

God has been faithful to us—a treasure we can share here in worship and wherever we are together.

What a gift!- to hear each other's concerns, and to give each other strength. To wait with each other through the darkness and celebrate the joy that comes in the morning.

In youth group on Sunday nights we share our highs and lows- the good and the bad from the week before. We listen and then we encourage. And then we pray, remembering what God has done for us and trusting God will do it again. We've started doing the same at Session meetings.

The two things come together- weeping in the darkness and celebrating the dawn in the morning. Share your concerns. Listen to each other. Remember God's promises and God's rescue from the past.

Then we can join the psalm, saying,

O God, you have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.