June 6, 2021

LIVING LIKE LLAMAS

Psalm 95

INTRODUCTION

The past year has been one of upheaval, uncertainty and change. There is talk that the pandemic has changed many things permanently, but the fact is that we don’t know what those permanent changes, if any, will be. However, one thing I do know for a fact is that life will change. That is a given because life is change. That constant variation creates uncertainty. It makes it hard to be at peace and to rest.

Many years ago our family spent a month one summer in Florida. While we were there we went down to the Florida Keys for a few days. We planned to take a snorkel trip out to Molasses Reef off Key Largo. However, our plans were thwarted by a swell that was kicked up by a hurricane down in the southern Caribbean. The swell was running 8 to 9 feet and the snorkel companies said it was too rough for the tours. We could, however, go out on a glass bottom boat and see the reef that way. So we did that. It probably was not the best decision we’ve ever made. It didn’t take long before many of the people on the boat were seasick, but that was just the prelude. When we got to the reef they just stopped the boat over it so we could see it. But that meant we were standing there looking down through the bottom of the boat. As it rose up and down on the swell the reef appeared to descend away from us, then rise up toward us. Up and down, up and down, over and over again. The motion didn’t seem to bother Carissa, but Laurie and I both were feeling pretty queasy, and poor Toby looked green. People started feeding the fish all over the boat, if you know what I mean. I thought of that experience because all of the upheaval live brings along can start to have that kind of effect on us. It can make us feel queasy, even sick.

As of this Sunday I have been a pastor for 42 years. That has been my life’s work. But how much longer will that continue? One thing is clear, it won’t be forever. That introduces uncertainty into my life, and uncertainty is a recipe for lack of peace. Yet Jesus promised us we will be able to live in peace in the middle of the change and uncertainty and the trouble of this world. Psalm 95 speaks to how we can have peace and rest whatever is happening in our world.

EXPOSITION

PREMISE: GOD WANTS US TO ENTER HIS REST

1. I want to do something a bit unusual here and begin at the end of this Psalm. Verse 11 says, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’” This Psalm has to do with entering God’s rest. The last part of the Psalm gives as a negative example a group of people who never entered God’s rest because of the choices they made.
2. I will look at their example more in a bit, but understand that the people the Psalmist referred to was the generation of Israelis who escaped slavery in Egypt, but then refused to trust God when he told them to enter the land of Canaan. As a result, they never entered into the land God had promised them. They missed out on the rest he wanted them to have.
3. The rest he referred to did not mean just taking it easy and relaxing. Entering into the land would not have guaranteed a life of just sitting around the pool sipping lemonade all day. They were going to have to work. But it meant they would be home. They could stop wandering. They would be secure and safe. The rest God had for them was peace at the core of their being.
4. This did not have to do with their activity level. It was something on the inside more than anything. It was to be at peace and secure in one’s heart. This was something God wanted for his people then, and he wants it for his people now.
5. In that well known passage in Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” This is what Jesus promised. Coming to him we will get rest for our souls.
6. There are a lot of things that can make us weary and burden us. All those things that can stress us out are burdening us, and there are plenty of them in this world. Heading the list is feeling like we don’t measure up. We try our best, but we fear it’s not good enough, and that weighs on us. Right along with that are all the things that we can’t control in this world that feel like threats in some way.
7. I recently found my rest disturbed by information I got from my health insurance company. They have told me that I can be billed $1,400 as a result of the rabies shots I received. This happened 4 years ago, and at the time I was informed that my costs had been covered. I have insurance that is supposed to cover all costs so that this doesn’t happen, but now they claim I’m going to have to pay. Why now 4 years later? I’m really irritated by this, and I’m not at rest. I was shocked when I saw the total cost of the rabies shots. It was $26,000!
8. God wants my soul to be at rest no matter what is happening. That’s true whether I am dealing with a potentially expensive irritation like that, or something of far greater importance that disrupts my life. Not only does God want me to live in his rest, I want that. We all do. And this Psalm charts a course for how to have that.

SHOUT TO THE LORD

1. In the uncertainty and difficulty of this world this Psalm says the place we need to start is to “come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.” The first verb, “sing for joy,” meant giving a ringing cry. The second one was the Hebrew word *rua*. It kind of sounds like what the Marines say, “Hoo-ah.” It comes from the diaphragm, and it is *loud*. This is about giving loud, enthusiastic, joyful praise to God. If we want to experience rest, if we want to have peace in our hearts no matter what happens, it starts with being so confident in God, so in awe of him, so thankful to him, that we shout his praise because we just can’t contain ourselves.
2. The Psalmist goes on to tell us to come before God with thanksgiving and to extol him with joyful songs and music. This tells us to praise God loudly, joyfully with music and even shouting. It doesn’t say we should do this when we feel like it because things have really gone our way. It is unqualified. In Psalm 34 David wrote we should extol the Lord at all times. He wrote that at one of the lowest points of his life. Paul said we should rejoice always and give thanks to the Lord always.
3. A crucial step in finding rest for our souls is actively, vocally expressing praise and thanks to God. Why is this important?
4. Praising and thanking God honors him. This is particularly true when we are in tough circumstances or are facing uncertainty. It says we don’t just love and thank God because he makes life easy for us. It expresses faith in him. It says God is worthy of our devotion and our praise even when life is difficult or painful. It says we believe God is there seeking our good even when the future is unknown or even bleak and dark. So that honors God, which is what all of life is about.
5. Expressing praise for God also calls us back to what our lives are to be about. 1 Peter 2:9 says we are to declare the praise of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. This is what we exist to do! Praising him reminds us that this is the point of our lives.
6. The great thing about that is that this is a purpose for life that we can pursue and carry out in every circumstance, good or bad. It gives us a perspective on life and a motivation and meaning. I mentioned a couple of weeks back that I had an unexpected bout with vertigo for a couple of days recently. One of the interesting things we’ve all noticed about the past year plus is that many of us have been in excellent health. Because we’ve been wearing masks, washing our hands, social distancing, we haven’t gotten any colds, flus or any other virus. But then came this vertigo thing. A couple of weeks after that I got a cold. I hadn’t had one in a couple of years. There is a bit of tendency to think after being healthy for more than a year, then getting those two things back to back, “Hey, Lord, what’s the deal?” But praising God reminds us that this is really the point of life. Maybe God has brought these things into my life to give me the chance to show that I trust and praise God even I don’t feel good. I thank him no matter what may be happening. People may not notice, but I assure you that is noticed in the spiritual realm.
7. It is in fact praise when life is hardest that has the greatest impact. Bernhard Anderson wrote a book on the Psalms and called it *Out of The Depths*, because so much of the praise in the Psalms comes from places of pain and hardship. What impresses us most about Job is that at the lowest point of his life when he was suffering immense loss, he said, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Praising God enthusiastically, openly, loudly, actually reorients us. It properly orients us to God and focuses us on him. When that happens we gain a much clearer and better perspective on life and its events, good and bad. It enables us to think correctly and in a healthy way about our lives.
8. Finally praising God reminds us of who he is. It bolsters our faith. When we sing about God’s faithfulness and love for us, we think, “Oh yes, that’s right. God does love me. He sent his Son to die for me. He was faithful to rescue me and has been faithful ever since.” That steadies our hearts. When we sing of God’s greatness and sovereignty we calm down, remembering that our lives are in his hands.
9. You probably have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German pastor who was sent to a Nazi concentration camp because he refused to follow Hitler. He was ultimately executed by the Nazis. He spent a great deal of time in that camp studying the Psalms and praising God. The effect was big. A friend who was with him in that camp right up to the end said of him, “He always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.” This is what praising God can do for us.
10. Today I thank God that though this last year plus has been difficult and confusing, he has been with us through all of it. I thank God that today I mark 42 years of being a pastor. I haven’t survived because I am so good at it or because I’m so strong, but because God has been faithful. There have been many times when I didn’t think I would last even a few more months. I thank God for the past 11 years at a time when some people thought Laurie and I were finished, he has given us a ministry that we have enjoyed more than any other in our lives. I thank God for you, for friends who have stood with us. Recently Laurie and I watched a show on television that involved some people showing incredible loyalty and faithfulness to a friend. It struck us that God has given us some friends who are like that. I thank God and praise him because though the future is unclear and uncertain, God is with us, and will be with us. And he is the one shaping that future.
11. I want to praise God for the fact that we have made it through the past 15 months of difficulty. There has not been a season like this in our lives. At times it has been scary, as we wondered how bad it was going to get. We have been concerned at times about the possibility that the pandemic would plunge the world into an economic meltdown that would bring misery to all of us. There have been times of grievous loss, as some have friends and family who have succumbed to the corona virus. But right now we thank God that it appears the worst is over. Things are getting better and there is genuine hope that this disease, while not eliminated, is at least coming under control and our economy has survived. This is a big reason to praise God and give him thanks.

That leads to the next point.

REMEMBER WHO GOD IS

1. The Psalmist tells us that the Lord is the great God, the King above all gods. Verse 4, “in his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.” The Challenger Deep in the Marianas Trench of the Pacific Ocean is 36,000 feet deep. Mount Everest is 29,000 feet high. The depth of the Marianas Trench and the height of Everest are in the hand of God. David said in Psalm 139 that there is no place one can go and find that God is not there. Our God is vast and powerful beyond our understanding.
2. There is an old joke about the time the Pope was to come to New York and address the UN General Assembly. There was such bad weather at JFK airport that his flight was first delayed, then diverted to Newark. This put him way behind schedule. In his limo driving from Newark into Manhattan he could see that he was late. He asked the chauffeur driving the limo to speed it up as much as possible. The driver said, “I’m going as fast as I can. I’ve had too many speeding tickets, and if I get another one they’re going to take away my license.” The Pope thought about this for a moment, then instructed him to pull over and stop. He did, then the Pope told him to switch places with him. Now behind the wheel the pontiff broke all speed limits and raced into the city, weaving in and out of traffic with reckless abandon. A couple of police officers saw this, and one said, “I’ve had it with these limo riding big shots thinking they are above the law. I’m going to take care of this guy but good.” He pulled the speeder over and told his partner that he was going to deal with it and write up this guy for everything. He went to the limo and began speaking to the driver, but he wasn’t there very long. When he came back he looked shaken. His buddy said, “It looked like you didn’t even write one ticket. How come?” He shook his head and said, “I couldn’t. He’s too big.” “You mean, it was the Mayor?” “No, bigger than that.” “It was the Governor?” “No, this guy was bigger than him.” With a gasp his partner said, “You mean it was the President?” He shook his head and said no. Now his partner was puzzled. “I don’t understand. Who’s bigger than the President?” The first cop said, “Well, actually, I don’t really know. All I know is the Pope is his chauffeur!”
3. God is bigger than whoever that cop imagined might be in the car. When the people of Israel were trying to get out of Egypt they found themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was coming on and there was no possible avenue of escape. There was no human solution to that circumstance. But there was a divine solution to it. In Matthew 19:26 Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.” An ancient childless couple having a baby, receiving food and water in an arid desert where none existed, defeating a massive army with only 300 men, stopping a storm with a word, walking on water, rising from the dead. None of these were too hard for God, for nothing is impossible with God.
4. We need to see God as he is. He is the God who foretold events hundreds of years in advance, who used people’s rebellion and disobedience to him to accomplish exactly what he wanted, who knows the end from the beginning. This is our God, and we need to always keep in the front of our minds how big he is.
5. We need to remember that the technical name for the place where worshipers sit in a church building is the nave. Is that because all the lay people are considered knaves? No, that’s a different word. The word “nave” has roots that you might recognize. The root gave rise to a nation’s fighting force at sea, which we call a navy. That’s because the root of the Latin word means “boat.” Why would you call the place where we sit during a worship service the “boat”? Because it depicts us sitting in the boat with the disciples of Jesus, with the storm howling around us threatening to destroy us. We are there with no hope of saving ourselves from its fury. What do we need to do in the middle of that ferocious and potentially fatal storm? What we most need to do is to see Jesus and know who he is. He is not threatened by the storm. His presence with us assures us that we are not threatened by it either. We just need to see who he really is and know that he is with us.
6. What will the future bring for each of us individually and for us as a body of believers? We don’t know. We can’t know, beyond the fact that it will bring change in various ways, some of which we won’t like. We are not able to control all that might happen in the future. But what brings rest for our souls is knowing that Jesus is in the boat with us.

KEEP BELIEVING IN OUR GOD

1. As I mentioned earlier verses 8-11 refer to the people of Israel. It says they hardened their hearts. These were the people who saw a series of plagues sent on Egypt by God. They were warned by God that the last plague would be the one where death would visit every home that did not have the blood of a lamb on its doorpost. That grievous event was the final straw for Pharaoh, who finally relented and let them leave. But then they found themselves pinned against the sea with no means of escape. They saw God do the unimaginable, when he parted the water of the sea so they could walk through it and escape.
2. You’d think having gone through that they would never doubt again. But you’d think wrong. On the other side of the sea they found themselves in the desert of Sinai, a desolate and arid place. As you would expect there were no water sources there. They ran out of water and a place called Meribah and Massah. Of course they trusted that the God who had worked so many miracles to save them would pull off another one in some totally unexpected way, right? Wrong. They accused Moses of leading them out into that desert to die. He brought them there to kill them! That was outrageous. If he wanted them dead all he had to do on the beach of the Red Sea was…nothing. Just let the Egyptian army come and kill them all. Obviously it made no sense, but all they could see was they had no water. They were going to die.
3. God miraculously provided water for them out of a rock, not exactly your usual water source in the desert. Then they ran out of food, and once again they complained and accused God of leading them out there to die. God provided food that just showed up on the ground every morning. All they had to do was pick it up. This, apparently, was the first form of Door Dash. Food delivered right to your door. After all of that when God got them to the border of the land he promised to them, he assured them that he was going to make sure they got it, all they had to do was go in and take it. But they did not believe God could do that! The people who lived there were too big for God to defeat. Going into that land and taking on those Canaanites would mean death for all of them. Despite all that they had seen God do, they didn’t believe he could or would keep his promise. So they never entered the land, never entered his “rest.”
4. They had seen more than enough to believe God. They should have eagerly attacked the promised land saying, “I don’t know how God’s going to do this, but I know he will do it, because he said so. And we’ve seen him do the impossible on many occasions.” But they didn’t believe.
5. If we want to enter into his rest, we will have to keep believing that whatever the obstacles, whatever the scary things we face, God is with us and will get us through it. If we believe that we can truly rest, and if we stop believing it, we will never experience real rest.
6. Toby and Anna recently took all 3 of their little girls to Disneyland, rejoicing in the fact that it is open once again. They stayed much longer than I thought they would that day. It reminded me of the days when our kids were young. Every summer we would make a family pilgrimage to the Tragic Kingdom. It was almost always a one day event, so we had to make the most of it. We would get up early in the morning and drive to Anaheim so we could get into the park just after it opened. We would stay all day, surviving the heat, the crowds, the lines. Of course, we made it last as long as possible. We had to stay to see the fireworks show. Usually it wasn’t long before the park closed when we finally left. It took a while to get out to our car and drive out of the parking lot so it was almost always near or even after midnight by the time we were on the freeway headed home. Everyone in the family was exhausted. I remember so many times driving down Interstate 5 in the dark, and everyone in the car but me was asleep. They trusted me. So they let me handle driving the car and because of their confidence in me, their faith in me to get us home safely, they were able to sleep. If we keep our faith in God and his ability to drive the car of our lives safely, we too can hand it over to him, let him drive, and rest in total peace.

CONCLUSION

I’d like you think about a couple of animals with me for just a moment. One is the African Impala. These graceful, agile animals can jump 10 feet in the air and bound as much as 30 feet forward in a single leap. Yet they can be kept in a zoo enclosure bounded by a wall over which they could leap with ease. The reason for that is that they will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will land.

By contrast, think about the llama. I read once about a woman named Lexy Fowler who is a sheep rancher. Like so many others, she was plagued by coyotes who would prey on her sheep. She tried everything to keep the coyotes from killing her sheep. She’s tried electric fences, odor sprays, “scare coyotes,” even putting radios playing loudly near the sheep in the field, but still the coyotes would kill her sheep in large numbers. The solution she hit upon was llamas. She put some llamas out in the field with her sheep. She said, “Llamas don’t appear to be afraid of anything. When they see something, they put their head up and walk straight toward it. That appears to be aggressive behavior as far as the coyote is concerned and they don’t want anything to do with it.”

The natural tendency for most of us is to be like impalas. We want to see where our feet are going to land. The lesson of the ancient people of Israel is God wants us to be more like llamas. Don’t be afraid, if you see something in the murk of the coming future, put your head up and walk straight toward it. You have reason to be courageous and not fear, for your God is with you. So what we need to do is to praise God, especially at times where we are struggling, confused, hurting, shout praise to him. Let that praise remind us of who he is. Keep in the fore front of your mind the greatness and majesty and love of God. Then keep believing, and keep moving forward, even though you may not know where you’ll land.