

"My Steps Have Held Fast to Your Paths"

Scripture Passages: 1) **Matthew 14:13-21**
2) **Genesis 32:22-31**
3) **Psalm 17**

Phantom Terrace: When Deb and I were at the monastery we hiked three days. One day our journey took us over two high mountain passes. The approach to the second pass has been named the "Phantom Terrace".

For about an 1/8 of a mile maybe a little longer the trail is cut through a steep cliff. As you climb, on your right is a sheer rock face going up. On your left is a sheer rock face going straight down probably 500 feet or so. The trail is very narrow. It is not a section of trail that you want to mess around on. It is not a section of trail that you want to attempt in bad weather.

We had a friend who traveled that same route a few years ago. When she got to the "Phantom Terrace" she looked at the trail and did not think she could attempt it. She stood staring at it for quite some time before she decided to attempt to make it across. She put her back against the rock wall and she slowly inched her way up the "Phantom Terrace."

When Deb and I arrived at the "Phantom Terrace" I said to her, "We are very fortunate there is no snow or this would be impassable." It would have been brutal if we had to turn around and retrace our steps.

Neither Deb nor I were frozen in terror like our friend, but we were very aware that one misstep and it would be our last step. All of the way across the "Phantom Terrace" we were keenly aware that we wanted to stay on that path. We did not want our feet to slip. Listen as the Psalmist expresses a similar concern.

Read Psalm 17

A Glimpse into a Moment in Life: Two weeks ago as we wrapped up our study of John's Revelation we talked about the importance of being present to the moment, because this moment, this moment right now is where we meet God. Each moment of our lives gives us the opportunity to meet God, if we are open to God's presence with us.

To help us reflect on that truth each Psalm serves as a window into a moment in someone's life. In the case of Psalm 17, the window looks into a moment in King David's life. We don't know exactly what was going on, but as we read we get a glimpse into a particular moment on David's journey. That is one of the great gifts of the Psalms. They give us glimpses into specific moments along a person's spiritual journey. Those glimpses, if we are open to it, can help us reflect on the specific moments of our own journey.

So what is going on right now between you and God? Are you feeling close to God? Are you feeling distant from God? Are you mad at God? Are you filled with an incredible gratefulness toward God? Are you ambivalent about your relationship with God? Are you overflowing with joy because of your deep love for God? What is going on right now in this moment between you and God?

As you ponder that, how does David's prayer connect to your own relationship with God in this very moment?

Attacked: David talks here of being attacked. He talks of enemies which surround him. He talks of enemies who track him down. He feels like an animal being hunted by a lion ready to

tear him to pieces. He asks, he pleads, he prays for God to deliver him.

We see here David's awareness, that he, even as a king, does not have the power to protect himself from the dangers of the journey. David needs God to surround him with protection from all that life throws at him.

His Faith Attacked: The Psalms are poetic prayers. They are filled with metaphorical images. David is probably not literally talking about an experience where a lion was hunting him down. What we realize as we look at the beginning of the Psalm is that David's faith is being attacked.

As the Psalm begins David expresses to God his deep faith. He goes as far as to challenge God to test his faith, so that he can prove its strength. He expresses that God will find no wickedness in him and that he does not use language to defile God or others. He says he does not use his words for violence. He even says that he has held fast to the narrow path of God. He says that his feet have not slipped.

David's statements on first reading seem bold at best and conceited at worst. Immediately following these statements, however, he asks for God's protection. Even though David felt strong in his faith, he knew his vulnerability. He knew that his own strength was not enough to overcome all the powers that seek to undermine our faith. David realized that if he relied on himself his faith would erode in the blink of an eye. David realized he needed to rely on God to protect his faith. So he prayed Psalm 17.

Our Faith Attacked: Do you think about your faith being under attack? Do we think about our faith life together as a congregation being under attack?

I am guessing that most of probably don't. We do not pray to God to protect us from the lion that is seeking to tear us into little pieces. Did you pray such a prayer this morning before coming to worship?

That reality points to just how dangerous the attack on our faith is. The attack is so subtle that we have a difficult time even recognizing its existence. And yet our faith is under attack from all sides all the time. We are in a battle. We are in a cosmic wrestling match just like Jacob. The question is will we choose to hold on to God and know the blessing that comes from that choice or will we let go and take the route of least resistance? If we choose to hang onto God we will be changed forever. We will never walk the same again. We will be new people with a new name. Jacob refused to give in. David refused to trust in his own power. How about us?

Busyness: It seems to me that one of the primary ways that our faith life is under attack is from busyness. I think busyness is one of the primary ways that we slip off the path. This is such a challenging struggle because we are primarily busy with good things. Most mornings we don't get up and say to ourselves: "Well what shall I do today? Should I go work at the pantry or should I go rob a bank?" Those are not the kinds of decisions we are struggling with. Mostly we are struggling with how to spend our time when every day there is a smorgasbord of great opportunities and also just mundane opportunities. Our struggle is in the midst of this smorgasbord of opportunity do we spend time developing our relationship with God, so that we truly stay on the path?

This struggle is highlighted in the book the elders and deacons are studying right now. The book is a book about evangelism, about carrying out "The Great Commission", something that few mainline churches are doing even though it is Jesus' final charge to us. One pastor that the author interviewed in the process said, "Well, you know I've been doing this ministry for 24 years now. We've strategized and prioritized and done mission statements that have kicked around the backs of closets. We've never prayed together except to say, 'God, bless this fight.' We've tried everything else; we might as well try prayer. What have we got to lose?"

That pastor's comments rip my soul apart, and yet how often is that us. How often do we choose to fill our lives so full, that there is literally no time to spend with God? I am sure that pastor did all kinds of good work for 24 years, but he never prayed. He never took time to be with God; the result, a church sliding toward death. How can we build a faith life if we don't spend time with the One with whom our faith lies? In the smorgasbord of life do we cling to God? In the smorgasbord of life do we ask God for protection? Have we allowed our lives to become so full, even so full doing church stuff, that there is no room for God?

God Feeds: We began this service reading the passage where Jesus fed five thousand people. That passage began with Jesus going off by himself to pray. In the midst of his busy life, Jesus knew that he needed to rely on God so that he had the power to go out and bring healing and food to the world.

Conclusion: When David prayed Psalm 17 he was at a spot on his spiritual journey where he was walking squarely on God's path. But he realized that at any moment he could slip off. David realized the precarious nature of all of our lives. He realized how easy it is for us to lose our way, to fill our lives with so much "good work" that we lose out on the "good life" with God. David had the wisdom to pray for protection. I pray the same wisdom for us. Amen.