

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Gospel Year A

PRAYER AND PRAISE

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Bruce K. Modahl

1In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame;

deliver me in your righteousness.

2Incline your ear to me;

make haste to de- liver me.

3Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold;

for the sake of your name, lead me and guide me.

4Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, for you are my tow- er of strength.

5Into your hands I com- mend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O LORD, God of truth.

15My times are in your hand;

rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.

16Let your face shine up- on your servant;

save me in your steadfast love."



DIAGNOSIS: Prayer

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Enemies Abound

Psalm 31 offers prayer and praise for deliverance from enemies. The psalmist is shamed, trapped in a net and in need of rescue and redemption. The psalmist is persecuted and in the hand of enemies.

Psalms are written to encompass a variety of circumstances. The context in which this psalm is read is the stoning of Stephen in the first reading and a well-known funeral text for the Gospel reading. COVID-19 is the overarching context as these words are heard most likely in an online worship service. Enemies abound.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Enemy Within

The psalmist asserts trust in God, God's power, and God's loving intent for him. Yet the power of these enemies is imminent and dreadful. He is caught in that place we all find ourselves, yearning to trust in God, insisting God is more powerful, but the power of the enemy is at hand; we are vulnerable and afraid.

The psalmist takes a misstep common to us. In verse 6 (vv. 17-19, 23), he presumes on his own righteousness as the basis for his hope in God's rescue. This is not to overlook the perfidy of the enemies surrounding him. However, calling upon his own righteousness reveals an enemy within.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Far from God

The psalmist longs for God's face to shine upon him (v. 16). He finds himself far from God as he prays down upon his enemies all the things he fears for himself. He fears being put to shame by his enemies but prays, "Let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt. The Lord repays the one who acts haughtily" (vv. 17-18, 23). The psalmist fears annihilation at the hand of his enemies and prays for their annihilation at the hand of God.

PROGNOSIS: Praise

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Draws Near to Us

The shame the psalmist suffers, everything he fears for himself, and all the evil he prays upon his enemies, God will not let stand. All these things, God in Christ Jesus took upon himself. We could read vv. 9-13 as a summary of Jesus' passion. He was shamed. He went down to Sheol, far from God's sight. He

experienced God's silence at the time of his affliction. And then he rose from the dead. Risen from the shame of the grave, he does not seek to get even with those who plotted against him and crucified him. He rather invites them into the fellowship of the Resurrected One.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faith Within

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was caught in that place we all find ourselves, yearning to trust in God when faced with the imminent and overwhelming power of the enemy. He gave witness to his faith in a poem set as the hymn "By Gracious Power" in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #626. Stanzas 3 and 5 voice his praise of God and his witness to us.

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling
out of so good and so beloved a hand.

By gracious pow'rs so faithfully protected,
So quietly, so wonderfully near,
we live each day in hope, with you beside us,
and go with you through ev'ry coming year

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Community of Saints



Living each day in hope. Going with God through ev'ry coming year. What does that look like at this awkward and dangerous time?

It looks in part like what the community of saintly sinners, the church, is doing in response to the isolation COVID-19 imposes on us. The high school youth from one congregation I know, accompanied by their parents, is standing in for the older adult volunteers at a neighborhood food pantry. The neighborhood was food insecure before the pandemic. The need for food assistance has grown threefold.

Fear grows in isolation. The church has deployed old technology in telephone calls to every member and mail, especially to those who don't have access to or facility with the internet. Sunday School, youth groups, Bible study, and exercise groups have

migrated online. Pastors record children's messages to be viewed at home.

One congregation I know engages the congregation in worship with the pastors, musicians, lectors, and soloists in their own homes, as are members of the congregation. Some knowledgeable person is at the switch moving almost seamlessly from one worship leader to another. We all unmute ourselves for the passing of the peace, naming those in need of prayer, and The Lord's Prayer. At various times we switch to gallery view and scroll from one screen to another to view all those worshipping in their own homes, at least those willing to turn on the video. At these times we catch sight of friends and family.

As the 1967 Buffalo Springfield song puts it, "Something's happening here": All three congregations we follow online report large numbers of logins for worship services, numbers far exceeding congregational attendance. In days to come those with the insight will analyze the data. It is possible we will find new ways to engage people in worship and prayer and draw them into the community where we hear and celebrate the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.