

## **Finding your Inner Winner**

The whole world is waiting. It's eleven weeks and counting until the 2010 Winter Olympics begin in Vancouver and Whistler. The whole world is waiting to see who will win Olympic gold. In Advent season, we too are waiting, but we're waiting for something far more precious than gold. What you see on the screen are logos representing the many Christian churches and organizations that have come together as an organization called "More than Gold." Each of these groups is anxiously waiting for the chance to provide a witness to the Gospel of Christ at the Olympic games. Think of the people from all over the world, not only athletes, but media, trainers and sports fans who will be converging on Vancouver for the games. Thousands and thousands will fill a stadium and wait for the moment a runner will enter the stadium bearing the torch that's making it's way across our country even as we speak. Waiting. For a simple flame to appear.

But while the nations wait for the moment when a few elite athletes will be able stand on the podium to receive the praise of all the world as winners, the Gospel offers to every single person more than gold – a true eternal victory. And so while the world watches the Olympic flame, we light the Advent candle with great joy because it represents our chance to get in touch with our "inner winner." Psalm 25 helps us do that – get in touch with that part of us that can stand in the place of victory with God, but this too is a torch relay - the flame must pass through many hands, travel many miles. The adult journey is really....

## **The ascent of the Soul**

The psalm begins with these words: "In you, LORD my God, I put my trust."  
Please join me in this brief responsive reading (I'll be the priest):

Priest: The Lord be with you.

**People: And also with you.**

Priest: Lift up your hearts.

**People: We lift them to the Lord.**

Priest: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**People: It is right to give thanks and praise.**

These words, based on Psalm 25, are one of the earliest records we have of what the early Christians did in worship. They come from a 3<sup>rd</sup> century source; the writer's name is Hippolytus; and they open up a window into the earliest Christian worship when the people of faith were called to set aside their earthly situations and fix their thoughts on God. Lift up your hearts!

The advent candles also go back a long way within church history – to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In Northern countries of Europe, candles lit the long winter nights. Candles were initially used in the pagan worship of the Sun during the dark days of winter to invite the Sun to return once again in power and warmth. But the Church gave the candles a new meaning. The candles provide light just as Jesus Christ is the light of the world. And since the 8<sup>th</sup> century advent candles have been used by Christians to encourage each other in the dark days of winter to "lift up their hearts." They ask God to bring a light into the long cold and sometimes depressing nights of Winter.

There can be many reasons why that may be difficult for us to lift our hearts to

God – many potential hindrances to the ascent of our souls; but the advent candles remind us to pray – lift up our hearts – so we are fully prepared to receive the Lord Jesus at his birth at Christmas, and also to ready ourselves for his coming again at the end of time. There is a threefold quality to Advent: looking back into the past and waiting for the future. But also a present day waiting for what God will do and this involves a . . .

### **Primal Trust**

“I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.”

The psychologist Erik Erikson determined that the first stage in human development is what he calls “basic trust.” This is the most elemental confidence that a baby has in its mother – trusting the reliability of the mother even when the mother is not visibly present. It is out of that basic confidence that the baby has in the mother, that, according to Erikson, the baby begins to have basic confidence in the world and all creatures. This primal trust is the only alternative to a terrible anxiety that regards the world as untrustworthy.

And it is similar as we develop our relationship with God. Israel testified that to be fully human, we must begin with a basic trust that God is reliable, present, strong, concerned, engaged in seeking our welfare *even if God is not visible* and the circumstance seem to point in a different direction. For example . . .

### **Falling into enemy hands**

Verse 3: “No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.”

To fall into the hands of one’s enemies is everyone’s worse nightmare. What could be worse than suddenly finding yourself under the control of someone who doesn’t care one bit what happens to you. Doesn’t care if you are hurt, or in fear. Doesn’t care if you lose your dignity, or even your life. That’s what makes confinement and torture such a devastating experience.

Perhaps you heard of Amanda Lindhout who was freed the other day after 15 months in the hands of gunmen in Somalia and held for ransom under “extremely oppressive” conditions that included torture and beatings. Speaking from a hotel room hours after being freed, she told CTV News she had had some “pretty dark moments.” She was kept alone in rooms with no light and little food and moved frequently between houses throughout Somalia.

“My day was sitting on a corner on the floor in a room 24 hours a day for the last 15 months,” she said.

“There were times that I was beaten, that I was tortured. It was an extremely, extremely difficult situation.”

How did she cope with this?

“I would just try to escape in my mind to a sunny place, usually Vancouver, in my mind. I’d imagine running around in Stanley Park.”

We may never literally be in the hands of an enemy. But later in the psalm this psalmist will list a number of intangible enemies: loneliness, affliction, distress, sin, hatred. And these are things each one of us may face every day. But in all these things, having our primal trust in God, we are able to go about . . .

## **Make a wish list**

According to Erikson, (and this makes sense to me), we human beings are ultimately confronted with only two options in facing our world: trust and fear. (And we all experience a combination of trust and fear all the time) But the person celebrated by Israel in this psalm is one who has deeply invested in trust. But their trust in God is not some vague shapeless hope, but one rooted in the concrete actions of God in history. For the psalmist, what they have heard and experienced of God tells them that this world is ruled by God and is, after all, a safe and reliable place to be. ( Brueggemann OT Theology pp 467,8)

At this time of year, most of us make at least a mental list of the gifts we would like to receive. Whether we will receive those things or not is a different story. And we know that all that stuff on our list isn't really what the season is about. But in a way it is. Advent is really all about making a wish list: recognizing and confessing to God that our present state, both within our hearts and within our living circumstances, is indeed a situation waiting and longing for a breakthrough into a whole new state of being. And we trust God to bring that about.

But Advent isn't *just* about repentance and listing all the things we would like to see turned around. It is *also* about expressing our present confidence that the Messiah *will* come and deliver us. We look back to the coming of the Messiah in Bethlehem *and* forward to his coming again at the end of history. But we also look to the cross *for today* because the cross is at the heart of what God is doing in our world and in our lives.

If all that God required of us as human beings was good ethical living, then any number of messengers would have been sufficient to communicate that to us. But we needed something much more. We needed personal transformation – something that can only be describe as a second birth. So in Jesus Christ, God became a human being to redeem and rescue his creation. And our response to that incarnation must be to . . .

## **Make our way on the journey.**

Verse 4,5: “*Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*”

Implied here is the psalmist's daily practice of a deep engagement with the Scriptures, for where else could they be shown and guided? And we, too, are called to be engaged in that biblical journey.

But where are we on that journey today? Actually during *Advent*, we are not quite at the “Christmas Story” just yet. That will come at it's proper time. In Advent, as we open the *Old Testament*, we can see how powerfully the character of Israel's God was truly embodied in Jesus Christ. It's only as we learn from the *Old Testament* the “ways” of the LORD, the *truth* about who he is, that we are drawn like a liquid through the neck of a funnel into the swirling vortex of Old Testament fulfillment in the birth of Christ and can truly say, “joy to the world, the LORD has come. . . .”

For no one can come to the manger in Bethlehem expecting anything from God unless they come there with a knowledge of . . .

## Who God IS

Verse 6 “Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.”

We can recognize in this language that the psalmist is pointing back to a story found in Ex 34. After the incident of the Gold calf, when Moses had smashed the tablets with the commandments on them, Moses goes back up the mountain with new tablets, and when Moses got to the top of the mountain, God proclaimed who he is:

**[Read Ex 34:6-10]**

God uses a cluster of terms to describe himself including *hesed* – usually translated *everlasting love*. And "faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6), and "covenant" (Exodus 34:10).

It's also essential that he says he will "pardon their guilt" (Exodus 34:7, 9). Exodus 34 tells how God forgave Israel for making the golden calf. The golden calf incident was essentially the original sin for the people of Israel. But God forgave them. Israel remembered above all that God was "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The psalmist calls on God to show that kind of character.

The daring appeal is made for God to live up to his name. This is who God is. This is the One who comes to us in the Bethlehem manger to die on the Calvary cross. He is the God of the second chance, the God of mercy and love, which is all so important given we all have . . .

## Things we would rather forget

Verse 7: “Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

Along the way there are a lot of inadvertent errors that are the results of youthful inexperience. But there are also the more adult transgressions – the deliberate and premeditated. We should have known better. If there was a pill you could take that would cause selective amnesia so you could forget things in the past that are painful or shameful or embarrassing, would you take it? Would this be a good idea?

I would propose to you that it is *not*. But nor is it what the psalmist is asking God for. Because we *remember* in order to make better choices in the future. Memories can be the path to success, or scars that disable us. We can for a season repress a painful memory only to have it re-emerge at an even more difficult time. But memory is nevertheless an important way we structure our minds in order to know how we should now live.

So in Advent, with it's backward remembering and forward waiting we can find our way into

## Guilt-free living

Verse 10: “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

We have a basic human need to no longer be burdened with the accumulation of past failures. And to be free of that, we need only to ask God on the basis of divine love and goodness, “remember me”. Remember *me*. Not my *past*, not what I have said or done. Just *me*. For I am waiting and remembering.

In the light of Christ and the radical change he has made in our lives, through our movement from darkness towards the light, from death into life – we don't remember the former life in order to beat ourselves up with it's memory, because it no longer determines who we are. Instead, we focus on the change God has brought to our lives.

Paul reminded the previously pagan Ephesians, "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. *But* now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been *brought near* by the blood of Christ." Eph 2:12,13)

Past memory can be hard, if not impossible to erase. But our ADVENT journey is about coming to the knowledge that the only event that defines us *now* is the death and resurrection of Christ. Yes, the old reality must still be faced but the newness of life in Christ is the driving force in our lives today. And that is what it means to find our "inner winner".