

Pastoral Perspective on Psalm 34

An old story about temptation—I have never identified its original source—involves a boy and a girl, dressed up for church in their Sunday best. All spiffy in their clean, pressed, tucked, and tidy clothing, the children were propped up to sit outside on the back porch stairs for just a moment. They were instructed not to move from the steps until their mother returned. The children sat and waited. Then the little boy moved and the little girl did not. Who was wicked? Who was righteous?

Human beings often operate with a mind-set that differentiates between people who are ill behaved and therefore evil, on one hand, and those who are well behaved and therefore good, on the other. When we think in terms of righteousness, we really have in mind the terms of self-righteousness—the habit of judging others according to our own terms and determining that some are better than others. For example, the meritocracy of college admissions and the state of the penal system in our country both reflect how shallowly we assess and how poorly we value each other as human beings in American society.

The terms we use to label the "good" and the "bad" in our world are quite different from the terms of righteousness and wickedness identified in [Psalm 34](#). The righteous are those who seek the Lord and fear God, who do good, speak truthfully, and seek peace. The wicked are those who do evil, hate the righteous, and cut themselves off from God. It is not our selves, our merits, or the other's demerits that are central to our identity, but God—God's care, God's purposes, and God's presence. Furthermore, the presence of God outlined in the final third of [Psalm 34](#) is far more tender than any human self-righteousness we might extend to one another.

Here, in the poetry of the Psalms, God takes on human form in its most nurturing capacities. God's eyes gaze upon the righteous; God's ears are open to their cry. The face of the Lord, God's presence, shuns evil and spares our memories its mark. Hearing the righteous cry, God delivers them from their troubles. Those whose spirits are crushed, and the brokenhearted—for these God cares and tends. God keeps every bone of our bodies safe and ransoms the life of each servant. God hears, rescues, saves, and delivers. God's nurture is tender, loving care of our bodies as much as of our minds and souls. God's presence uplifts our spirits.

Such an image of God gives preachers a word to share in times of calamity and misfortune. In the wake of a tsunami halfway around the world or a disastrous hurricane on distant shores, where human will and human capacities to respond and provide care fail or reach their limits, God's will and God's capacities extend. God's steadfast mercy endures.

Such an image also provides Christians with a way of being in the presence of those who suffer, who are sad, who feel pain, face disease, or need care. To see and hear one another, especially when we cry out; to approach and be near to those who are broken in mind and soul; to lift up, to love, and to encourage those with crushed spirits; to tend to the bodies that need our care—all of this is the work to which God calls us.

[Psalm 34](#) presents an intimate portrait of God's goodness, care, and justice experienced on a very personal level. This is a level at which God's people can extend care to one another, but it is not a level at which we may assume that everyone has experienced a relationship with God. On one hand, someone in recovery from addiction might identify so closely with this hymn of personal thanksgiving that its words and its spirit of grateful redemption might as well be their very own. On the other hand, a newcomer to the church who grapples with the evening news of genocide, civil wars, widespread disease, and political corruption might distrust the psalmist entirely, seeing no evidence that God keeps safe all our bones. As with any personal thanksgiving, [Psalm 34](#) will neither articulate the experience of everyone nor satisfy the observations of all people who seek God. Some pastoral imagination, or even evangelical sensitivity, may open the pastor's heart and the people's ears to hear God's call, feel God's presence, and see God's purposes, just as we are seen and heard by God.

Whether rejoicing in a moment of thanksgiving for deliverance or grappling with God in the midst of human suffering and injustice, any listener will recognize that the psalmist speaks plain truths. The righteous do cry; the good have many troubles; people do evil and its memory is hard to bear; we are captives in need of ransom. Even those near to God are brokenhearted and have crushed spirits, and yet they trust and believe anyway. The challenge is to discern the face and form of God caring for us and place our trust there, where the righteous will be safe. Where we can see the face of God, the wicked cannot be present, because God has turned his face from them.

When the mother of two small children turns away for even a moment, we can expect anything. On the face of it, we might name the little boy in the opening story as wicked and the girl righteous—until we discover that he resisted temptation sixteen different ways before moving from the steps while she never faced temptation for even an instant. Where God shows God's face, we can expect everything. The God revealed in Christ gave himself so that we might be righteous, neither on our own merit nor because we are worthy, but for God's tender mercy's sake. Bones broken, crying out, spirit gone, slain by evil, God's servants are yet ransomed by God and delivered from all their troubles. With ears, eyes, face, and every bone restored, the Spirit of righteousness is born.

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Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).