

LESSONS IN LIVING

Onward Through the Fog!

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:105-112 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

When I was in college – the University of Texas, about two blocks from my house was a place called “Oat Willie’s” (Laughter) All of the old Hippies are laughing. Oat Willie’s was a place where Hippies went and they had all the Hippie types of things. On the door of it, they had a guy – a very big Oat Willie. I don’t remember the hat, but he had a sunken chest, I remember big boxer briefs, and hiking boots, and beneath it, it said, “onward through the fog.” Now Oat Willie’s was a Head Shop, which meant that a lot of the fog was self induced, (laughter) but that phrase caught on. And, if you’ve been in Austin very long, you’ll hear it. At the Texas Legislature, when they’re talking about something that’s just lost in the chaos, you’ll hear even very conservative Legislators say “Well, onward through the fog.” It’s just a part of the Austin experience if you’re here long enough.

Today we are going to look at a passage from Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is a very long Psalm, and it has a form like the alphabet. You can’t see it in English, but in Hebrew, it goes through A,B,C, etc. So if you were reading or hearing it, you’d have a sense that it is poetry. Scripture is poetry. In this country, that is demeaned. If it’s not scientific, we consider it to be fake. So the truths of scripture are things that are also demeaned for that reason. We are sinking, as a culture, into a fog that’s getting thicker and thicker. The Wikileaks release of the 91,000 documents that say what we all knew, but we didn’t want to think about – that we’re all being lied to on a constant basis about the war. What happens when you run across something like that, is that you just want to go numb. It’s something that is so horrifying and so traumatizing, that very often, we just try to go numb. And there’s a type of religion that’s meant for that – where you come, and for an hour, you can just forget about your life and reality, and you can just put the pain aside. But the kind of religion that’s being talked about today comes from a much deeper place. It was written at a time like this. Scripture is always written for a time like this – when things are kind of coming to an end and you can’t see around the corner. That’s when people turn to the spiritual. Any other time, we don’t have time for it.

Our wonderful, beautiful country has, step by step, gotten really lost. We almost don’t deserve the name “America” anymore. I think we should call ourselves “Sparta, the Sequel” at this point. But scripture should call us back to something really deep within us – something that we’re not going to find from the culture, not even from sectarian religion. It cannot go there. It’s not deep enough. When this passage talks about “The Word of God,” I have to tell you it’s not talking about the Bible. I have to tell you that because in traditional religion, that is what it has sunk to. “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet.” Okay, people think “okay, I’m supposed to turn to the Bible.” Why do we know for sure that the Psalmist wasn’t talking about the Bible? (Congregation answers) Very good! Because the Bible wasn’t written yet. See, lots of people haven’t fallen asleep in religion. Religion can either wake us up or strengthen the trance. Now we kind of have to choose which of those it’s going to be. These passages can be really scary sometimes – can be really uncomfortable at times, but they can

also be the very thing we need to find guidance at a time like this – when no other bearing seems to work.

The question I want to ask – and it is definitely a question – it's more important than any answers I'm going to be giving. It's a question I want you to take into your soul. What is it that you are using to navigate through life? What are you using to navigate through life, and is it going to work in the fog that we're heading into? Because if it isn't, this is the perfect time to change. It will be painful, it might be distressing, but you have a community around you. It will not get any easier as we go into it. The best time to re-orient around your ultimate values, and about what you really care about in life, is right now, today, to commit yourself to deepen into what you know is true.

But that leads you to different sources of wisdom than the traditions. What you're really getting to is what the traditions were talking about when they were originally spoken. It's really hard, when you take up the Bible, there's so much religion packed into it now, that you can't even hear what the scriptures are saying. We project onto that text the religion that has happened in the last two or three thousand years. We think that when the psalmist said "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet," that what he meant was that in 2500 years, you'll have this Bible, and that will help you get along until the Presbyterians arrive. It's talking about life, and its talking about the wisdom that's embedded in nature, embedded in you, and scripture awakens that in you. Scripture does not give that to you. There's a sense in which scripture is not the word of God. It's a witness to the Word of God. Remember how John starts?... "In the beginning was the Word." Now the "beginning" was before the Bible, right? So, what we're talking about is deeper than that, and more universal than that. But scripture is like a toe-hold, it's a reference point. It reminds us of that. It awakens us.

When you are going towards wisdom as opposed to just dogma, it's a very different game and you learn from different types of wisdom. One of the things that hit me when I was young, I think it was Aesop that said it... "if you want to know how to dig a hole, don't talk to an eagle, talk to a mole." If you want to talk about the nitty-gritty of life, you don't talk to an ascended master. They don't understand what it feels like from the inside. You don't talk to an angel. They've got wings. They get into trouble, they flutter away. It's going to have to come from inside you. It'll have to be organic. But you can't see as far with that kind of wisdom. I think the greatest wisdom teachers we're going to be able to find, (about going into the fog) first of all, are third-world people – people that we call "third-world" - people who already know what it is to be a human being without wealth or property. We're going to have to learn that, aren't we? They can teach us that... how to be a decent human being when you don't control everything. We've kind of forgotten that. But the second thing – and it's what I want to focus on today, is the disability community. There's wisdom there that we're going to need. If you're going through the jungle, and it's broad daylight, you want whoever has the best vision. That's who should be leading. If it's midnight – no moon, no stars, that person is useless. Only somebody who has gotten used to not being able to see is going to be a good guide under those circumstances. If the situation is something where we can get control of it, the athlete, or the really competent physical person may be the best leader. But when the ground dissolves underneath our feet, we need somebody who knows what it's like to not be able to walk. So the kinds of wisdom that people from the disability community have to give us, I think, will be vital.

One of the people I want to lift up today is Jill Bolte Taylor. Some of you, I see, have run across her stuff. She was a brain scientist who had a stroke. Now think about that – somebody who studied things from the outside has a stroke and is going to try to connect those two. That is the wisdom we need. Science can describe the world from the outside in... poetry and art can describe it from the inside out, but how do you bring those two things together? There's not an art like that if you don't

have religion, if you don't have something outside of that situation to bring those things together. So she has written a book called "The Stroke of Insight." And she's got a list of ten wisdom sayings trying to help somebody in that situation. I'm going to lift up four of them in this particular sermon, but I've got the web address if you want the rest of them.

1. After a stroke, challenge my brain systems immediately.
2. Love me for who I am now.
3. Help me define my priorities for energy use.
4. Focus on my ability, not my disability.

I want to suggest that's the kind of wisdom we're going to need as we move into this uncertain future where the capacities that made us strong in an earlier system aren't going to work for us. There are people who have found happiness and wisdom without being in control of everything, and they are the ones who need to be our leaders and to teach us.

That idea to "challenge the brain right away," does that sound like the religion you were taught as a child? Did the religion you were taught as a child fire up your brain and everything about you where you loved with all of your heart, mind and strength, or was it a trance? Was it a bunch of information you were supposed to memorize about people from someplace else and some other time?

The psalmist is talking about our lives and talking about humanity. But we have to choose between those two religions: the comfortable religion where we can come and just kind of forget that we're in a world of hurt, or the kind of religion that encourages us to orient in a way that will lead us into whatever the future holds. Because even if the political and economic systems turn around, you're going to get old. If you're lucky, you will get old. You will lose physical capacity. You will lose the glibness of knowing what the next word is going to be. We all go through those straits, so this wisdom is something that is helpful now, I think, it will be helpful in terms of dealing with whatever is going to happen politically, but it is something personally that we need.

There is a type of religion that doesn't illumine your life. When I was a kid I wanted religious experiences so bad. I wanted visions, I wanted voices, I wanted all of that stuff. And that kind of experience is kind of like poking yourself in the eye and you see the lights and stars, and you say "Wow! That's great." You can do that. There is a religion that does that. But what I want now is not visions, I want vision. I don't want a spiritual experience that is separate. I want to more deeply experience you and me, and life and this world. Religion can do that for us.

Whenever I'm getting ready to do a sermon, there is a question I always ask: "Will this help us be more loving?" To me, that's the litmus every time. It's not worth your time. It's not worth you getting dressed and coming here if somehow, and in some way, this insight will not help you be more loving. Because that is ultimately what it's all about. To be able to love with all of our mind – which is to think for ourselves...to love with all of our heart – which is to love who and how our heart says...and to love with all of our strength – which means to make our own decisions. A religion that teaches you what to think or what to do is a lie. It robs you from the very orientation that you need to get through life. There's no way to calculate the pain that's taken place from the religion that removes your central orienting mechanism and supplies it instead with beliefs or rules.

So the first thing it's saying is "stimulate my thinking system." Religion should do that. Your spiritual life should do that. Even if you don't see the results of it right away, something that stimulates you, that awakens you, ultimately, will be a treasure for you.

Then it says, "Help me to measure out my energy," and I'm reframing that because I can't remember the specific words. Human consciousness, even, is more like a lightning bug than it is like a lighthouse. You come and go. You don't have all the energy in the world. If you could make the world better, you would, but you can't. You've got a life, you've got kids, you've got a house, you've got a body. All of those things keep you from being the pure light that you might want to be. And what the passage is saying...what I love about that image of the lantern...have you ever walked through the darkness with a lantern? You can't see very far. It's only illuminating enough for you to take the next step. That's what organic wisdom will be like for you. See, inorganic wisdom will be like being teleported up to the moon and looking down and getting a picture of the whole of life and the meaning of life. But you don't have a meaningful life. The only way to have a meaningful life is to be embedded in it, and to do that you have to be willing to live in the middle with unfinished puzzles day after day after day.

If an ant went to a psychologist...(See, I told you it was going to be weird. Don't turn on me now.) The ant goes to the psychologist and wants to find itself. Now, what's real apparent with ants that we forget about ourselves sometime, if the ant fits in the colony, the ant has a gift to give the colony. If the ant tries to figure out who it is apart from the colony, it's just going to get crazy. Scripture does not tell you what to do. It reminds you that you are a gift to humankind. Your emotions – the wiring in your brain is social. You are a social animal and people don't have to tell you what to do if you remember that you are a gift to the rest of us. Scripture takes you to that place. That's what it illumines – your path. You remember your path..."Oh, yeah!" When I take what I love and give it as a gift to you, I've found my way. I'm still going to have to grope, I'm still going to have to guess, I'll still be wrong, I'll wake up in alleys that don't make any sense, but I'll find my way back again. When you make your own mistakes, you'll learn from them and you'll reorient. When you make somebody else's mistakes, there's no way. If you copy me...or Billy Graham...or Dalai Lama, or anybody you choose on the Planet, and you copy them, when you make mistakes, you won't even know it. You'll think other people are stupid – they don't understand you. Come back to your own skin. Hold the little lantern that you have and realize what a gift that is.

Another thing that's said – and it brings two thoughts together: one is, "focus on my ability, not my disability," and the other is "love me as I am now." Those are two ways of saying it. When we treat ourselves as a problem that we're trying to solve, or someone else does that, we miss the whole point of the journey. We get so frustrated with ourselves. I've always said if there was a helmet with which you could hear what people are saying to themselves when they get frustrated, we would all get sick to our stomachs, because we're so mean to ourselves. So the symbol that is given in religion is of a God who doesn't count your mistakes. That's what grace means. In the original version of Christianity, it was the Devil who was counting your mistakes, and God was counting what you did right. The church reversed that...kind of interesting, isn't it? The Devil represented judgment. The Devil represented accusation and God represented grace – full acceptance, like a parent who is watching you in the concert, and you make a mistake and they don't care. You got three of the notes right and that's what they're proud of. See, years ago, I stopped thinking, "okay, what if I make a mistake?" I'm going to make mistakes. You don't stop listening to the sermon because I'm going to make a mistake every week – most weeks like 3,4,10...who's counting? (laughter) What freedom you give me! Can you give that to yourself, I think, is what it is saying.

I don't know where we are headed as a people, but it doesn't look real good right now. The question I want you to leave with – not the answer, but the question is “what are you using to navigate through life, and will it work in that fog?” If not, this is the best time to turn, to change. And the teachers from whom we can learn are from other places: third world communities, who found their humanity in the midst of oppression, and people from the disability community who know what it's like to move through a starless blackness, who know what it's like to not be able to get your footing, and yet, still be a human being. It's from the disability community, I believe, that we'll understand this saying from the psalmist: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” It might even help us understand Oat Willie: “Onward through the fog!”

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