

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
First Sunday in Lent  
Sunday, February 21, 2021**

**“In You I Trust”  
Psalm 25:1-10**

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“To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust” (vv. 1-2).

In my article for the most recent newsletter, I noted that each Sunday I’ve been including two elements of worship to be offered in unison: the Call to Worship in Unison and the Psalm in Unison. Even though we cannot, at this time, gather together for worship, we can still join voices together in worship—even at a distance. And, as an exercise to prepare for Lent, I invited you to participate in a simple devotional exercise that focused on the Psalm in Unison for today: I created a schedule to reflect on the verses of Psalm 25:1-10, so that—as we reach this day, the First Sunday in Lent—you will have reflected and prayed over the Psalm in Unison for twenty days, concluding last night.

I expect that you found this exercise edifying and encouraging—and also somewhat challenging. We live in a time when *skimming* texts is a highly valued skill: faced with thousands of emails and documents, we’ve learned to skim for highlights and key points. And that makes slowing down an unaccustomed challenge: you may have thought to yourself, as you read the first verse, “I’m supposed to reflect on this *for two days*?” But I hope this exercise in slowing down your reading was not only difficult also but illuminating: we must learn to slow down if we wish to read Scripture in the hope and expectation that God will encounter us there. As the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Sometimes we may linger for days over a single word” (DBWE 14:933).

As you perhaps noticed in your reflections, there are different ways to enter into and explore this psalm—but I think an especially fruitful entry into this psalm is the beginning of verse 2: “O my God, in you I trust.” I think, in a way, that declaration of faith may be like a tent pole on which the entire psalm—with all its petitions and affirmations—depends, as this psalm expresses trust in God in difficult times. So, I’d like to take some time to explore the psalmist’s trust in God.

To start, it’s important to recognize that this trust in God did not come easy. We may be tend to exaggerate our own struggles, as if our problems are the most complex ever known—which can lead to our kneejerk reaction to dismiss this trust as if it came effortlessly to the psalmist. We hear the psalmist’s deep trust in God, and think: “Well,

that's easy for you to say"—except, *it wasn't*. It was never easy for the psalmist to say. I'm reminded of the late theologian and minister, Colin Gunton, who wrote this: biblical writers "had a confidence in God's upholding of the order of things—often a very hard-won confidence—that we should take seriously, if only because they lived in a more threatening world than ours, with few of the devices with which we more or less successfully stave off starvation and death by heat or cold. Because it was in some ways more difficult for them than it is for us to believe in providence, we should listen very carefully to their reasons for believing what they did."

And indeed, this particular psalm comes from a place of violence, danger, and fear. The Lectionary appoints only the first ten verses for today—which is the portion that I invited you to reflect on and pray—but *later* in the psalm we hear of the psalmist facing terrifying threats:

"Relieve the troubles of my heart,  
and bring me out of my distress.  
Consider how many are my foes,  
and with what violent hatred they hate me.  
O guard my life, and deliver me;  
do not let me be put to shame,  
for I take refuge in you" (vv. 17, 19-20).

This trust in God does not come easily to the psalmist: it's amid dangers, including threats of violence, that the psalmist places trust in God. As one scholar writes, this "psalm is a prayer that says, 'In the midst of all the troubles of life [...] I place my hope in you, and you alone, O God'" (Mays).

So how does this trust shape the psalmist—and the psalmist's prayer? This trust is not the end of the psalmist's journey to God, but—in an important sense—the beginning of the psalmist's journey, as this trust moves the psalmist to wisdom and faithful action. Occasionally, one encounters a version of trust in God that excuses recklessness or irresponsibility, where trust in God is invoked as justification for unwarranted risk-taking: for instance, driving needlessly through dangerous winter conditions on the grounds that the driver trusts God, or—as we've seen recently, sometimes in the news—rhetoric rejecting vaccines and masks and public health guidance on the grounds that trust in God removes the need for commonsense precautions. I think one problem with that mindset is that it treats one's trust in God as a shortcut, or a kind of substitute, for challenging reflection on wise and faithful action.

Yet what we find in our Psalm is Unison is quite different: in this psalm, trust in God is joined with a desire to be led *into* wisdom. This trust in God leads the psalmist to be open to learning and growing and seeking God's wisdom and God's way: listen to what we find soon *after* the psalmist's affirmation of trust in God:

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust; [...]  
Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long” (vv. 1-2, 4-5).

This sort of trust does not sanction needless recklessness, or treat trust in God like it replaces the challenges of discerning wise action; instead, the psalmist embraces trust in God as the beginning of a journey toward deeper wisdom and faithfulness.

And that’s a pattern throughout our Psalm is Unison: the psalmist’s trust in God is the beginning of the psalmist’s life in faithfulness to God. I think, in the case of this psalm, it’s significant that the declaration of trust *begins* the psalm—

“To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust” (vv. 1-2)—  
and only then does the psalmist offer the supplications and affirmations that shape the rest of the psalm.

It’s only *after* placing trust in God that the psalmist calls for God’s help against the enemies threatening violence:

“O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous” (vv. 2-3).

It’s only *after* placing trust in God that the psalmist seeks “instruction in the Lord’s way” (Miller):

“O my God, in you I trust; [...]  
Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long” (vv. 2, 4-5).

It’s only *after* placing trust in God that the psalmist prays for forgiveness:

“O my God, in you I trust; [...]  
Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD,  
and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!” (vv. 2, 6-7).

And, wonderfully, it's only *after* placing trust in God that the psalmist celebrates God's faithfulness and goodness amid difficult circumstances:

"O my God, in you I trust; [...]"

Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees" (vv. 2, 8-10).

Do you see how this takes shape—how trust in God shapes the faithfulness of the psalmist, even amid danger and difficulty? Trust is not the end of the journey with God, but the beginning! This trust does not come easily, and it's no excuse for recklessness... However, what this trust *is*—how it works in the life of the faithful—is that trust in God enables us to meet the God we've already trusted. It's a kind of paradox of the faith, that—in order to learn who God is and how God loves—we must first place our trust in God.

It's one reason I think the church was wise to appoint this psalm for the First Sunday in Lent, a season that ought always to be a kind of journey to that deeper faithfulness that comes from deeper trust in God. As we reflect, in the memory of the church, on the journey of Christ to the cross, we see the one who was perfectly faithful—and we seek, in our own ways, to be reshaped in accordance with the faithfulness of Christ. And so today, this psalm comes to us as an invitation to seek more faithful patterns of life by placing our deepest trust in God, even—and especially—amid struggles and setbacks. One United Methodist pastor puts it this way: "This period of preparation for Holy Week and Easter is a time to seek to learn God's ways and God's paths. To read the psalmist's troubles is helpful to the contemporary church. The psalmist sought to learn of God's ways, not in a time of comfort, but in the midst of difficulties. [...] Use of this psalm in Lent encourages trust in God and the willingness to learn from God, even in times of trouble. [...] Surrounded by grief, rage, and fear, we can trust in a God of steadfast love and mercy" (Aaron).

The psalmist trusted God, and so prayed for God's rescue; the psalmist trusted God, and so prayed to know God's ways; the psalmist trusted God, and so prayed to God for forgiveness; the psalmist trusted God, and so celebrated God's goodness. In this season of Lent, may we so deeply trust God that we may seek God's help and guidance and forgiveness, as we too—together with the psalmist—share in these words to the God who has been worthy of our trust:

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust" (vv. 1-2). Amen.