

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers close in against me to devour my flesh,
they, my foes and my enemies, will stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear.
Though war rise up against me, my trust will not be shaken.
One thing I ask of the LORD; one thing I seek;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life; to gaze upon
the beauty of the LORD and to seek God in the temple.
For in the day of trouble God will give me shelter,
hide me in the hidden places of the sanctuary, and raise me high upon a rock.
Even now my head is lifted up above my enemies who surround me.
Therefore I will offer sacrifice in the sanctuary, sacrifices of rejoicing; I will sing
and make music to the LORD.

Hear my voice, O LORD, when I call;
have mercy on me and answer me.
My heart speaks your message— “Seek my face.”
Your face, O LORD, I will seek.
Hide not your face from me, turn not away from your servant in anger.
Cast me not away—you have been my helper; forsake me not, O God of my
salvation.
Though my father and my mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me in.
Teach me your way, O LORD;
lead me on a level path, because of my oppressors.
Subject me not to the will of my foes,
for they rise up against me, false witnesses breathing violence.

This I believe—that I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living!
Wait for the LORD and be strong.
Take heart and wait for the LORD!

Powerful words from the writer of this psalm. At one moment, assured in faith, at
the next shaken by fear and doubt.

God is here!

Where is God?

God will take care of me!

God has forsaken me...

Do you know what that's like? At one moment, certain God is at hand, and in the next wondering if indeed God has ever been with you, even a day in your life? One day, so certain of God's presence you can feel it, like a companion walking beside you, and yet on another day, rattled by a feeling of loneliness that is the emptiest you have ever been?

It's a tension we can feel in all times of our lives, but it's a tension that can become especially real for us in times of challenge—whether to our physical health, or that of those we love, whether in times of grief, whether in times of spiritual or emotional struggle. The words of the psalmist speak to that tension. A tension we will all likely experience at times in our lives. God is here! Where is God?

We hear the same tension expressed in the story of Abram. Abram, who just three chapters earlier, when God told him to up and leave everything for a destination unknown, up and left everything for a destination unknown, without question, without the blink of an eye, without pause. In our reading today, though we see Abram blink. For Abram, God's promise of a reward is beginning to ring hollow, as he has no heir to share it with. The promises of chapter 12—of a great nation and of blessings and a name that is great—seem to be a false hope at this point. Abram's name will not amount to much if it dies with he and Sarai.

So this time, when God's promises again come to him, this time he has a question. Just a small question, just a little point. What about children, God? But God assures him

again not to worry. He will have children, and his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. And the narrator tells us then, that Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. But the word believed there could just as well be translated “trusted.” Abram trusted God and trusted God’s promise for him in his life, and for his descendants.

Abram moves from suspicion back to trust, believing that God will make good on his promise.

Likewise, in the gospel text we hear about Jerusalem, as Jesus laments that the city and it’s people so often turn away those people of God that are sent to it. On the one hand, the center point of God’s promise and the place of God’s chosen people and on the other hand, the heart of expressed distrust of God. That very tension—“God is Here! Where is God? located in a specific place and among a particular people.”

This tension is nothing new in the world—and our experience of it breaks no new ground. Where we are, many have been before. That’s part of our human experience, part of what it means to live as God’s people in a broken world.

But the truly amazing thing is that even in the midst of our distrust and unbelief, God never gives up on us. God never lets go of us. We may not feel like God is present, we may not have any sense of God’s love in our lives—but it is absolutely there.

Many of you know that I ran my own graphic design business for several years in Iowa City. I started from scratch with small jobs and customers who were friends first. But it grew and I got to do bigger, more interesting jobs for bigger businesses and organizations. And there came a time when it seemed it would be helpful to define some of those business relationship with a contract, so I asked my brother to provide me with

some language that would protect my interests, and my customers—and that became my boilerplate contract. Most of my customers had no problem with it, until I tried to get a department at the University of Iowa to use it. No, my little contract was not going to be signed by that behemoth of an organization. Their perspective was, “we don’t really care about your interests, and if that’s a problem, we’ll just find another graphic designer...”

There is a contract or covenant too, between God and Abraham. Even as God reminds Abraham that it was he who brought him into the land to possess it, Abraham, now warmed up to this questioning mode, asks God how he knows that he is to possess it. So God launches into this instruction, asking Abraham to bring a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon. So Abraham brings all of these and cuts them in half, but not the birds, and then falls into a deep sleep. And as he sleeps, in the darkness, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of animals.

We don’t know for sure what all this means, but most scholars believe that this is an ancient form of a contract. And the way it works is that the one who passes between the animals is committed to the promise, and should that one fail in the promise, their fate would be like that of the halved animals.

What’s remarkable about this story, though, is this contract, this covenant is entirely once-sided, it’s God, represented by the smoking fire pot and flaming torch who passes through the halved animals and it’s God that speaks again the promise to Abram, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

There is nothing that Abram is to do in return. It’s all on God. Once again God promises land, and this time God seals the promise with an ancient ritual.

We may waver in our trust of God. We may wonder one day where God is, while on the next be absolutely assured of his presence. We may feel God has left us or that God hides from us. But that's all us. God is always there, God has always been there and God will always be there. That's the promise and that's the image Jesus delivers in the gospel lesson... God as a mother hen, gathering her brood under her wings. God is always there, whether we can feel it or not, whether we trust it or not, whether God behaves the way we expect, or not.

So hear again the words of the psalmist: "This I believe, that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord and be strong. Take heart and wait for the Lord.

Wait for the Lord

Trust even when you don't feel like trusting.

Stay in community, because together we hold each other up, when anyone of us feels like falling. Today my faith may be your faith, just like, tomorrow your faith may be mine.

Keep on doing the practices of faith, even when they feel empty and hollow, because they will fill up again, and even if they don't right away, they'll still carry you along.

Wait for the Lord and be strong. Take heart and wait for the Lord.