

Elliott Munn
June 7, 2015

A Reflection on Psalm 27

When I was growing up, I learned to pray at church. Prayer mostly seemed like talking to God. There was the prayer of invocation, the Lord's prayer, and, of course, the prayer at the end of the children's message before I went to Sunday School. I modeled what I was taught and seized the opportunity to ask God for things that I found important. I remember testing prayer's efficacy as I prayed fervently that the New England Patriot's Quarterback Drew Bledsoe not take so many sacks. Was God a God who listened closely to my prayers and worked actively in the world to make them a reality? Or, was God a God who was distant, letting us do our own thing, but generally guiding events from her command center in the sky? Watching the late nineties Patriots, God refused to fit into the neat boxes that I had laid out for her. Sometimes the team seemed unstoppable, and at other times they were tragically bad, so it was hard to pin down what exactly the role God was playing. At minimum, I learned that the words of prayer were not magical incantations, but there seemed to be a chance God responded to my requests.

Because today's Psalm comes seemingly in two parts—verses 1-6 making one unit and verses 7-12 making the other, followed by verse 13 and 14 harkening back to the first unit—it seems as if the Psalmist, too, is trying to figure out for herself who God is. To begin the first unit, he finds God to be the light and salvation that defeats his enemies and keeps him safe. God is close at hand, hearing the Psalmist's prayer and then showing up to make things all right. If he really needs God, she is accessible in her sanctuary, whether that is the tabernacle, the temple, or the high rocky places. There's no need to fear, because this is an imminent God, who is close at hand, responding to prayers and meeting our needs.

At verse 7, the text abruptly changes from the jubilant descriptions of the imminent God to cries for help to a God that is far off, removed and aloof. All of a sudden the Psalmist is not so sure God has got his back, and he is getting desperate. God is hiding her face, not allowing the Psalmist to experience her presence, prompting the Psalmist to see God as a disinterested master, refusing to lend a hand to her servant in need. The Psalmist does not consider God powerless, after all he again calls God her salvation, but he experiences God as being the above the fray of human affairs. This hands-off, transcendent image of God may have been helpful to him in thinking of how the world came into being or how earth is governed by a set of laws, but in a time of need it falls short. When things get tough and you feel like there is no one else to turn to, as we see in this Psalm, the transcendent God leaves us needing more. When I am losing my cool and feel like "OMG, help me, because I am in serious trouble," I need a God who I feel can come to my rescue. I need the God who is my light and salvation, in whom there is nothing to fear.

So, in one psalm, we have two drastically different images of God paired together: the imminent God, who is close at hand to act on our behalf, and the transcendent God, the God who is above the fray but who can feel to us unresponsive. One can't help but wonder: did the biblical editors make a mistake? The presentation of God in this Psalm is muddled at best, and downright contradictory at worst.

I find the commentary of Reformation theologian John Calvin helpful to interpret this psalm. He described the Psalms as a mirror reflecting the true nature of all the parts of our soul. Thus, the full spectrum of our emotions can be discovered in this poetry written approximately

2500 years ago. If this is indeed true, then feeling as if God can be two different things at the same time does not come from a lack of faith, but simply arises as a natural emotion.

While sometimes we can experience both the imminent and transcendent God in something as compact as a football game (yes, we are going to win this game; oh no, help! We're losing; oh wait, we actually are going to win!). God manifests Godself in the course of a lifetime in countless ways.

I can tell you that in my journey, I have experienced God as being as close as my breath itself and other times God as far off in the distance. Right here in Brunswick, there were times when I felt as if God must have been on my side after enjoying a sunny morning on the New Meadows river, sharing one last laugh with a friend soon to pass, and meetings with my discernment team, who affirmed my gifts for ministry.

But, there were also painful times, too, when I wondered if God had abandoned me. There was that late night in the stacks when I wondered if I would learn enough Greek vocabulary to pass the test the next morning covering all 611 lines of the first book of the Iliad; there were brokenhearted moments after the crumbling of relationships; and questions of whether I was mistaken for even considering dedicating my life's vocation to serving the Church.

As many of you know these phases can last for years, can oscillate back and forth in just a few moments, or can be both at the same time. How you relate to the God who is both imminent and transcendent is what makes your journey yours. But, the relationship between these experiences of God is what allows us to see ourselves in the stories of our faith. Noah, Sarah and Abraham, Moses and Miriam, David, Ruth, Mary, and Paul felt God as both close and far away. Even Jesus, the divine incarnation in human form, called upon God as an imminent, loving father and later felt abandoned on the Cross, dying with a Psalm to an absent God on his lips, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Just like our forbearers, what allows us to move forward in hope that God will eventually bring us to God's side is faith. We are people who testify that new life can spring forth from struggle and death, because we know that God's love overcomes sin, the brokenness of our relationship with her. We have seen Christ's body rise.

It's what happened at the communion table. We experienced the God who is our hope and help in the sharing of bread and cup. It helps us make sense of the predicament of the imminent and the transcendent God, as the Psalmist does at the end of today's reading. Although, we, too, experience tests of faith, where God seems nowhere to be found, in partaking of this meal we can affirm with the Psalmist: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."