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Psalm 107:21-32

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BLIND ALLEYS

"Why does God give light to a man at his wit's end?"

-Job 3:23 (Moffatt)

It is indeed a pity -- more than that, a tragedy -- that modern Christians know so little about the Bible. The Bible is, among other things, a record of man's spiritual and psychological development over a period of 5,000 years. If we knew it better, we would know ourselves better.

In that record there appear time after time stories of good people, well-intentioned people, people very much like you and me, who, as James Moffatt puts it in his translation, are continually coming to their wit's end. You and I might put it differently. We might say that here are people who are continually finding themselves in a blind alley, or up against a stone wall. But we know what the Bible is talking about for during those 5,000 years man's situation in this respect has changed but little. He still finds that life deals him cruel blows, that it is not a bowl of cherries, and he continually comes to his wit's end. The Old Testament Book of Psalms reflects these difficulties men encounter. Then, as now, man was faced with trying to find answers to such problems as death, disease, the meaning of life, poverty and despair. The Psalmist puts it this way, "They are at their wit's end, then they cry unto the Lord."

The Christians of a day now past often referred to such people as lost. But whether we refer to them as lost, or at their wit's end, or in blind alleys, the suffering and the agony is the same. The question which rushes to the lips of all such men is, "Why?" I suppose that figuratively speaking that same question could be found on the lips of God himself. When man asks why these things happen, God may well ask, "Why do you wait until these things happen before you turn to me?" "They are at their wit's end, then they cry unto the Lord!"

There is no doubt but what this experience is common to the entire human race. We do often find ourselves in blind alleys, at our wit's end, lost. Sometimes we may hesitate to admit it, but in our hearts we know we are lost for we cannot see any way which leads to light, to health, to peace.

Daniel Boone was asked on one occasion if he had ever been lost. He replied, "No, I can't say I have ever been lost, but I was confused once for three days."

Well, regardless of whether we be lost or confused, we look for aid and assistance. We look for understanding and light. I refer you to those words which are our text this morning. They are the words of Job. Remember Job's difficulty? Much of his family had been destroyed; all his worldly goods were gone; his health was shattered. In his distress he cries out for help. Then suddenly he utters these words: "Why does God give light to a man at his wit's end?"

I submit that when we arrive at the point at which Job found himself, wit is not of much help. It can't be laughed off. We need help and these words of Job are easily misunderstood. He was not asserting that God always comes to man's aid. Rather he is questioning why, if God does come to a man's aid and assistance, he waits so long. Why does man suffer so? Why must we be at our wit's end, up a blind alley, completely lost, before God will come to us with help?

II

Now, I would like to suggest that what Job was looking for, Paul discovered early in his life. Hear his words from a letter to those early Christians in Corinth facing persecution and death:

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

May I further suggest the reason why I believe Job was crying out for answers, and why Paul was quietly certain of the answers? Was it not because Paul did not wait until he was at his wit's end before seeking God? Had the Psalmist called upon God before he was in distress, he might well have avoided his distress, or found that strength and help which would have enabled him to bear it with dignity and fortitude.

One is often asked, by young people in particular, how is it that Jesus could do so many wonderful things. How could he perform miracles; how could he have such tremendous faith; how could he lead such a good life? Sometimes the answer which is offered to young people is wholly inadequate for it is given in terms of Jesus' divinity, his complete uniqueness. Now I would be the first to argue that Jesus was unique and that God was in him, but if he was unique and different in a way no one else can achieve, if he was some kind of God or semi-god, then it would seem very difficult for a young person to try to pattern his life after the life of Christ. His answer might well be, "I am not unique and different. I am not the Son of God. When you ask me to become like Jesus Christ, you are asking of me the impossible."

Now, surely, Jesus never expected the impossible from us, and when he said to us, "Greater things than I have done, ye shall do," he was saying that we could have the same relationship to God he had, and with that relationship we could do the things he did and become the kind of person he was. If we want the secret of Jesus' power, Jesus' understanding, Jesus' complete confidence in God, then there is only one place to look for it and that is in the faith of Jesus.

But, I must repeat what I have repeated so many times, that blindness and faith are completely self-contradictory. Faith is not blind belief. It is not wishful thinking. Faith is a hypothesis based on all the evidence that is available to us. What makes the best sense? What gives to life the largest and highest meaning? What explains the most? For Jesus, it was a God of love. And it must be that for each one of us if life is to achieve its highest meaning. In the final analysis you cannot define faith. Faith is a living relationship with God. In effect, Jesus was saying, Live with God as the Ultimate Reality. Be sure that your life is in harmony with the will of God as you best understand it, and then when God becomes a dynamic Reality in your life, power will begin to flow in.

Now, if we want a religious faith and understanding that requires no discipline, no effort, then we are indeed looking for a religious life that is an escape, that is an opiate. This was the kind of religion which for a moment the disciples of Jesus sought when, on the Mount of Transfiguration, they asked that they might remain and build a temple, and not go back down where the difficulty and the suffering and the struggle were. A vital, dynamic relationship with God demands that we share the sorrow and the difficulty and the struggle of our fellow men even as God himself shares it.

Some years ago I walked into a seminary classroom and found written on the blackboard a poem which the professor had written there. I don't know what the professor said about it, but the point was obvious for this was the poem:

The parish priest of Austerlitz
Climbed into a high church steeple
To be nearer God,
So that he might hand his word down
to the people.
And in sermon script he daily wrote
What he thought was sent from heaven,
And dropped it down on the people's heads
Two times, one day in seven.
In his age God said, "Come down and die."
Said the priest from out the steeple,
"Where art thou Lord?"
And the Lord replied,
"Down here among my people."

Faith does spring out of fellowship with God, a right relationship with God, but you find God where you find people. God is concerned about his people. God is in the midst of his people. He is not a mere spectator of the universe sitting upon his heavenly throne observing. A vital relationship with Him which flowers into a rich dynamic faith demands that we enter into that relationship, not only in the sacred confines of the temple, but "down among the people." Salvation is social. We must have fellowship.

III

Now, sometimes we take too literally the words of Jesus when he tells us that faith can move mountains. He did not mean us to take him literally. Faith cannot do the impossible, but what faith does is enable us to distinguish the difference between the possible and the impossible. Many of the things that look impossible to a person who has no faith, become very possible to the person who does possess it. Faith will not do all things, but faith will enable us to do anything that God wants done.

I would like to share with you a story at which those who are completely scientifically oriented will surely lift an eyebrow. But it is a true story concerning a missionary, John Astrup. John Astrup was born in Africa and spent his whole life there trying to help the natives. For years he labored among the

people along the Tugela River trying to impress the native king with the importance of setting up a school and church for the natives. He seemed to get nowhere. One day disaster came. A terrible drought hit the land. The heat in some of the valleys frequently registered 145 degrees Fahrenheit. The fields lay dead. The natives began to starve. Finally, a delegation of natives called on John Astrup. Tall warriors sent by their chief admitted that their witch doctors had been unable to do anything to persuade the gods to send rain. Now, the chief was asking John Astrup to come to the village and implore his God for rain. John Astrup found 2,000 natives gathered together waiting for him to bring rain. He knelt down in front of them and began to pray. The 2,000 natives flung themselves down and repeated his prayer after him. When he had finished, he said good-bye and started up the mountain toward his home. After while he paused to rest and turning around, he beheld the awesome sight of dark clouds and heard the distant sound of thunder. Soon the rain began to fall, and soon John Astrup was setting up his school and his church in Zululand.

Now, I am just as rational, and just as scientifically oriented as the next man, and when you insist that this was just coincidence, I will agree that perhaps it was just coincidence. But something in the back of my mind keeps reminding me of what Archbishop Temple once said, "When I pray, coincidences happen. When I stop praying, coincidences stop happening." And there comes to me also the voice of Jesus saying, "If you have faith...nothing will be impossible to you."

I am not suggesting that if you just close your eyes and say, I believe, you will then be able to change all the things in your life you would like to change, that you will no longer run up against blind alleys, come to your wit's end, bump up against stone walls. Faith will not magically change the whole course of your life. But I do know that the most miserable lives I have ever known have been those lives which have no faith. Surely, Alcoholics Anonymous has much to tell us about this situation for through their experience they have come to the conclusion that a man cannot be saved from alcoholism unless he first develops faith in a power greater than himself. Without that, salvation is impossible. With that, nothing is impossible.

May I then just leave you with this thought; faith is not a definition. It is a peculiar relationship with God, and a relationship which comes with the practice of certain disciplines. It is effective not just because you believe in God, but because God believes in you.