

2014_12_07 Advent 2
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

Follow the Footsteps of Righteousness and You Will Find Him

Psalm 85

INI

To all who look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, the grace of God which brings salvation be yours. Amen.

Psalm 85

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm Of the Sons of Korah.

- 1 Lord, You have been favorable to Your land;
You have brought back the captivity of Jacob.
- 2 You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people;
You have covered all their sin. Selah
- 3 You have taken away all Your wrath;
You have turned from the fierceness of Your anger.
- 4 Restore us, O God of our salvation,
And cause Your anger toward us to cease.
- 5 Will You be angry with us forever?
Will You prolong Your anger to all generations?
- 6 Will You not revive us again,
That Your people may rejoice in You?
- 7 Show us Your mercy, Lord,
And grant us Your salvation.
- 8 I will hear what God the Lord will speak,
For He will speak peace
To His people and to His saints;
But let them not turn back to folly.
- 9 Surely His salvation *is* near to those who fear Him,
That glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth have met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed.
- 11 Truth shall spring out of the earth,
And righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- 12 Yes, the Lord will give *what is* good;
And our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness will go before Him,
And shall make His footsteps *our* pathway.

Seasons change, but God's saving presence endures forever. Christmas' come and go every year. But not every Christmas season is the same. He remembers that Christmas not so long ago and thinks back on it fondly. He remember his little children coming out in their pajamas, checking to see if there were any new presents under the tree; reading the names; shaking the boxes; gathering around that brightly lit tree as they look with anxious eyes, wondering what excitement those wrapped boxes under the tree will bring.

But the years pass by. Seasons change. And now Christmas brings another sort of anxiety. He was laid off from his job three months ago; that's when he started drinking again. The kids are grown. The wife has left. There is no Christmas tree. There are no presents. And now with Christmas just around the corner, he sits at the table in his apartment alone, looking with anxious eyes at the divorce papers he just received in the mail.

Not every Christmas season is the same. For some it is a time for family, a time fond fuzzy feelings. But for others, for those who are grieving, who have suffered a loss in the family, who are facing a time of affliction it can bring a different experience.

But of course, Christmas is not ultimately about warm fuzzy feelings. It is not about the presents under the tree. Its not about egg nog or jingle bells or stories about the guy in the red suit. Christmas is about God saving us. It is about righteousness which rains down on an unrighteous world; truth which springs forth from a a desert of deceit. Righteousness from heaven, truth in the earth, and together they meet in the manger. And so the Advent season that leads up to Christmas is a season that never changes. It follows the same footsteps every year. The footsteps of righteousness. The advent season is set aside – not for shopping or traveling or getting everything on your list done before vacation – but it is about finding Him. It is about following the footsteps that lead to His appearing. It is about following the footsteps that lead us to Bethlehem. It is about following the that lead us to the Last Day. It is about following the footsteps of God's righteousness and until you find His saving presence in the appearance of Christ Jesus.

Our psalm divides nicely into three parts. v.1-3 the psalmist remembers God's saving presence in the past. v.4-7 the psalmist prays for God's saving presence today. And v. 8-13 the psalmist hears and sees God's saving presence going before him. Seasons change, but God's saving presence endures forever. Simply follow the footsteps.

Follow the Footsteps of Righteousness and You Will Find Him

1. Remember His saving presence behind us (v.1-3)
2. Pray for His saving presence today (v.4-7)
3. Hear and see His saving presence going before you (v.8-13)

1. Remember His saving presence behind us (v.1-3)

Looking back we see the steps behind us. Looking back we see a hopeful situation for Israel. The people Israel had been freed from exile. Through the hand of Cyrus, king of Persia, God had redeemed His people from the hands of the Babylonians. Remember the excitement of that Advent season! The anticipation of something new. Israel had just returned from captivity. The year was 538 B.C. They had spent the last 70 years under God's judgment, taken from their homeland and held prisoners in Babylon. But God saving presence endured. Although the seasons had changed, God's saving presence would win out. His footsteps went before them, leading them back to their homeland where the first thing they did was to undertake the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Ezra 3 records the event. The foundation of the Temple was restored. Priests and Levites, Trumpets and cymbals, praise and thanksgiving sounding forth. And the psalmist takes a moment to meditate on God's saving presence.

- 1 *Lord, You have been favorable to Your land;
 You have brought back the captivity of Jacob.*
- 2 *You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people;
 You have covered all their sin.* *Selah*
- 3 *You have taken away all Your wrath;
 You have turned from the fierceness of Your anger.*

Have you ever wondered what that word "Selah" means. It appears floating out in the margins of the psalm as if an editing mistake was made. Scholars suggest that the word "Selah" is a musical notation. As the congregation would be singing or chanting the psalm, "Selah" signaled to the music director a pause. The congregation would take a moment to mediate on the words of the psalm while a musical interlude was played. It was a moment for music and meditation. We need to take such moments. Moments to remember the past; to meditate on how God's righteous footsteps have brought you back from captivity. How God has changed your status from outcast and exile to redeemed and righteous. Take a moment in your life for music and meditation. And remember the footsteps which have gone behind you.

2. Pray for His saving presence today (v.4-7)

But the years pass on. The seasons change. It wasn't long before the seasons changed for Israel. It wasn't long before the excitement of the new Temple project wore off; things stalled. The rebuilding of temple had stalled. The initial excitement wore off. And even though they would eventually finish the temple, there would be no real time of peace. War and unrest, economic struggles, health and safety concerns, the afflictions of foreign rulers would plague Israel for the next 400 years. These afflictions seem to last forever, leaving the people for dead.

And so the people came to the Jordan river in need resurrection. They came to John the Baptist, calling on the name of the Lord, calling on the Lord to remember his "mercy" – which in the Hebrew, includes the idea of an unchanging love. They come confessing their sins and praying for God's saving presence today.

- 4 *Restore us, O God of our salvation,
 And cause Your anger toward us to cease.*
- 5 *Will You be angry with us forever?
 Will You prolong Your anger to all generations?*
- 6 *Will You not revive us again,
 That Your people may rejoice in You?*
- 7 *Show us Your mercy, Lord,
 And grant us Your salvation.*

So the seasons change for us too. The seasons change and the excitement wears off. Christmas come and go, but they are not all the same. There are seasons when things stall for us; when we become stagnant. We remember the glory days, the days when things were better. But now those days are gone. Anxiety sets in. Afflictions set in – divorce, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, a drinking problem, a sickness, someone hurts you – and it is a seasons which sometimes seems to last forever, it leaves us for dead. Even though we've been redeemed, baptized, we still fall into stagnancy and sin. We fall into a season of hopelessness where we forget about the Lord, where we give up on Him, we have no time for him, and everything stalls.

So we come to Jordan river in need resurrection. We return here, where the baptismal font lay front and center. Because we know it is a time to be upfront about this. There is nothing hidden from God. And in order to find Him, we must follow the footsteps of righteousness. Only in those steps which are honest and right will we find His appearing. Only in confessing our sins and holding nothing back from Him who knows all do we find His righteous steps. "4 Restore us, O God of our salvation, And cause Your anger toward us to cease." In this repentance that He has worked in us, we enter a season that never changes. The footsteps of God's righteousness have led us to

the Jordan river, to the font where the water is flows for us and to the table where the blood is poured out for us. And here we find His saving presence today. This is how we face those changing seasons: praying for His saving presence today.

3. Hear and see His saving presence going before you (v.8-13)

And the seasons move on; things change; and a voice goes before us. A voice cries out in the wilderness – “Prepare the way of the LORD!” John the baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. And he did so by preaching, by calling to repentance, and by baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. All the land of Judea and Jerusalem had come. They were following the footsteps of the LORD, for the LORD had come. His saving presence had come to earth, to Bethlehem, to Judea and John had come to prepare His way. And so we find Him, remembering His saving presence in the past; praying for His saving presence today; the way is prepared and the steps of righteousness have led us to Him. And the way we see Him is by hearing Him.

- 8 *I will hear what God the Lord will speak,
For He will speak peace
To His people and to His saints;
But let them not turn back to folly.*
- 9 *Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him,
That glory may dwell in our land.*
- 10 *Mercy and truth have met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed.*
- 11 *Truth shall spring out of the earth,
And righteousness shall look down from heaven.*
- 12 *Yes, the Lord will give what is good;
And our land will yield its increase.*
- 13 *Righteousness will go before Him,
And shall make His footsteps our pathway.*

Can you see it? Righteousness which rains down on an unrighteous world. Truth springs forth from a a desert laden with lies. The saving eyes of the LORD are looking down from heaven upon a world filled with unrighteousness and He showers us; all things that are right and just in the eyes of the LORD begin to rain down upon us. And beneath, truth is beginning to sprout forth. From an earth, dry with deceit, comes something reliable, something trustworthy, something that will never fail us. Righteousness from above and truth from below and they meet in the manger.

Follow the footsteps and you will find Him. Just listen. Hear the voice that cries in the wilderness. Hear the voice that calls you to repent; hear the voice that baptizes you for the forgiveness of sins; hear the voice that says: "Comfort! Comfort My People!" It is in hearing the word of God that we find Him. These are the footsteps that lead to His appearing. The righteous footsteps of God Himself walk through these pages as they march to Bethlehem, to the cross, to the resurrection, and to the Last Day. In the word we hear and see His saving presence go before us.

The years pass by. Seasons change. And now Christmas brings another sort of anxiety. With Christmas just around the corner, he sits at the table in his apartment alone; He looks with anxious eyes at the divorce papers he just received in the mail.

It reminds us that the peace of Christmas will never be found in this unrighteous world and these unrighteous lives we live. But Christmas is not about warm fuzzy feelings or the righteous things we accomplish in our lives. Christmas is about God saving us. This is a season which never changes; where footsteps have led God's children to the behold the everlasting gift He is giving us. Righteousness above, truth in the earth, and they meet in the manger. A strange and uncomfortable Christmas. Not warm fuzzies; but rather itchy straw, strips of cloth; Yes, this is what Christmas is about; following the footsteps of righteousness until we find him. And this is where a husband finds him; this is where a husband finds forgiveness; finds his Savior appearing this Christmas. Amen.