

Oh Yes He Did

Psalm 130
John 6:41-51

“More than those who watch for the morning. More than those who watch for the morning.” The poet who wrote Psalm 130 gave this line such poignancy by repeating it. It refers to the guard who had the last watch of the night, which in Jewish custom lasted about four hours. Four long hours, at a time of night when a crafty opponent might very well try to attack. John Patterson, at the time a private in the Army, served two tours of duty in Iraq. Three of his platoon mates had been killed by a roadside improvised explosive device a few days earlier when he drew the “Dog's Watch”, last of the night. Telling the story some ten years later, he recalled feeling “an intense mix of dread and exhaustion. No offense, but I don't think anybody who hasn't pulled guard duty in a combat zone can know how that is.”

Around 3:00am a beat-up pickup rolled slowly toward his position. He turned a spotlight on it. Because of the angle he could see only the passenger's side—which was empty, and the bed, which was not. A body lay in it. John called out a halt and when the truck kept coming he fired a warning shot, trying to hit the front right tire. He hit the fender instead and the truck stopped. Holding his empty hands out of the driver's window and above the roof, the driver got out. Keeping his hands where John could see them he lowered the gate and dragged the body out, carefully keeping it

from slamming onto the hard earth. He got in and backed away. John could see the body was wearing Army camo. After a minute it rolled over. Moments later, it started snoring. John radioed his sergeant, who organized a squad to retrieve the man. His ID told them he was stationed with an artillery unit on their base. Somehow he had gone AWOL and, even harder to accomplish in Iraq, found enough alcohol to get drunk. The Iraqi had saved his life, at risk to his own, by returning him.

“An intense mix of dread and exhaustion” might very well describe the state of our Psalmist. He had sinned against the Lord God Almighty and he craved forgiveness. He supplicated the Lord, a verb meaning to beg, to plead. “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (This is a moment where the lack in modern English of a formal second person cheats us of a full understanding of just how afraid this author was.) Rendered into our vernacular this might read, “If Thou, O Lord, should keep track of our sins, Thou, Almighty God, **the Most High**, who could survive your wrath?” Yet the writer trusted the Lord's steadfast love. It was God who would redeem sinners from their sins. He had done something terribly wrong. He dreaded God's reaction and yet, he believed that God's love would prevail.

The Psalmist's Jewish descendants did not see that Jesus literally embodied God's steadfast love. Our passage from John opens with some of them complaining that he had called himself “the bread that came down from heaven.” They had witnessed his feeding of the thousands with a few loaves and fish but followed up on the experience by demanding he keep giving them bread. After all, Moses had also

pulled bread from the sky with the manna that fed the children of Israel. Jesus has angrily corrected them that God, not Moses had performed this miracle, and furthermore, he, Jesus, was now that bread. He was the food that would sustain them eternally. Perhaps with willful obtuseness they had chosen not to understand. Exasperated, he finally said, "I am the bread of life."

Now they say, in effect, "Nope. We watched your momma diaper your behind. You cannot get off with claiming to have come down from heaven." To which he replies, in effect, "Yep. God sent me. And without God no one can believe in me." Then he repeats his claim that he is the true manna, the bread that comes down from heaven and nourishes that faith which leads to eternal life. This leads me to yet another digression on the state of contemporary Presbyterianism—and Lutheranism and every other mainline "ism". Soon after coming here I was asked to perform a funeral in Seymour, where I pastored the 1st Presbyterian Church from 1990-97. In 2018 that church was searching for a pastor and the deceased's family, members there, had been extremely close to us. So I said yes.

Now Jackson County, Indiana is about two-thirds Lutheran. The three largest congregations in Seymour, and each dwarfs all others in town, are Lutheran. So I worked a little joke into the eulogy. The deceased had been a good man. Formerly the City Manager, he had once made a decision that was technically required by the law, yet cost the city dearly. A major employer had tried bribing him and the mayor to give them a permanent tax abatement. Both refused the sweetheart deal demanded by the

corporation, which promptly located in Princeton, Indiana. And now some of you know the name of that corporation. The public, not knowing the inside story, became enraged. Letters to the editor, anonymous phone calls, even death threats—they all hit that City Manager. At his funeral I praised his integrity and said, “And these threats came from Christians...well, they were Lutherans, but close enough. The attendees, most of whom knew my sense of humor, laughed. Frankly, I enjoyed the moment. But I was kind of not joking.

Like the psalmist, I am acutely aware of my own sinful nature. I am **not** better than thou. But I have a bone to pick with the Presbyterian Church (USA). Like the other mainline churches, the Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians etc., we have made our spiritual focus narrower than what Jesus proscribed. For forty-plus years we have emphasized justice and mission at the expense of piety and devotion. ***I want it all***. I want justice. I want our church to fight for justice for historically oppressed people. I want us to grow our hands-on mission work. And I want us to regain our former emphasis on spiritual formation. I believe Jesus does too. In John 6 he conducts what is essentially a prolonged argument with people too preoccupied with their own desires to accede to his. They want payoff. He wants piety.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” Do we believe this? Or do we see following Jesus' ethical teachings as the whole point of Christianity? I submit that following Jesus' ethical and justice and moral teaching—while critically important—are only one piece

of the pie. Ray Cramer, who directed the Marching 100 band at Indiana University from 1975 to 2003, once created a pizza metaphor on the fly. Improvising as he spoke, he called the Sousaphones the crust, the percussion the sauce, the middle brass the meat, the lower winds the veggies, and the upper winds the cheese on top. A trumpet player asked about the trumpets. Cramer, who had played the trombone, a kind of rival to the trumpets, said, "Anchovies".

I want the whole pizza. And I see piety, that spiritual focus that by a gift from God empowers us to become more Christlike, as the crust. The base. The foundation. As Jesus said, "It is the Spirit that gives life." John tells us that this was one of those moments when many stopped following Jesus. They called his insistence that they must follow him as the one sent by God a "hard saying". They may have said this because he, too, used a metaphor and a challenging one, at that. He told the crowds they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. He knew he was referring to his crucifixion, to his sacrifice that would atone, that would incarnate forgiveness for all who followed him. But though he had already warned them at least once in John that he must die for the sins of the world, they could not yet wrap their heads around the concept. He was confusing and challenging and accusatory. And of what did he accuse them? A lack of belief. A lack of piety.

After many left him, Jesus turned to his inner circle and asked, "Do you also wish to go?" For once, Peter had the right answer: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and **we have believed**...that you are the Holy One of

God.” The prophets of old had written of this Holy One. Now, Peter suddenly realized, he stood before them. ***And he believed it.*** Now I do not consider myself a pious person. But I have come to certain conclusions about how we become more pious. Our psalmist modeled one of them: confession of sin. While some may consider our weekly prayers of confession a “downer”, for others it is one of the most important elements of worship. The psalmist would belong to that camp. Adopting a daily ritual of confession keeps us humble. And when we supplicate, when we beg, God for forgiveness we do the very thing Jesus told us to do when seeking pardon.

Of course all prayer can deepen our piety. So can corporate worship and serving others. So can working for justice. But each one of these practices become piety builders only when we do them in the context of seeking the Holy One of God. Whether it is a woman caring for the intimate needs of an elderly neighbor, a youth serving the poor on a mission trip, a man lighting a candle in a sanctuary and praying, a Sunday school class studying justice issues from a biblical perspective, a crew preparing a church meal, a scholar seeking deeper understanding of a theological category, a choir singing praises: when they do so seeking the Holy One of God the Holy Spirit will increase their piety, their sincere, deep devotion to Jesus Christ.

When churches satisfy themselves with just saying the right things about justice issues and being friendly they cheat themselves and those they might have served. Let us not make that wasteful mistake. Let us seek it all, from crust to cheese. Let us seek the Holy One of God. Let us embrace piety. Let us, with Peter, believe.