

## ***The Critical Importance of What We Choose To Worship***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 3, 2021*

*based on Psalm 73:1-26*

Anthony Doerr, Pulitzer Prize winning author of the novel, *All The Light We Cannot See*, has a new novel that came out Tuesday: *Cloud Cuckoo Land*. I haven't read it but I am intrigued by what I've read about it. The book has five distinct plot lines.

In one of them, a character named Konstance, age 13, is living in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century on a spaceship named the Argos. What is notable is that she was born on it and she will die on it before it gets to the planet where it's going, millions and millions of miles away in space; earth being no longer sustainable.

She is part of a *bridge* generation meant to bear progeny who will populate a world unseen. Imagine knowing that you will not see the place your parents left, nor the one your children will be born to populate.

Now, think about it this way – we may not have been born on a space craft built by humans, but who is to say a planet isn't in some manner a spacecraft? And consider this, too -- in a sense, all of us are bridge people. Some of us are more *bridgy* than others, perhaps. Think of the short life of Abraham Lincoln's mother.

The bridge nature of one Biblical hero is made much of. I'm thinking of Moses. Moses was not born in the land that the original Abraham was summoned to by God. He was born when his people were in bondage in exile in Egypt. He is the bridge his people need in order to get home.

He will die on the way to the Promised Land. But near the end, when his liberating purpose has been accomplished, God takes him up to a mountain top so he can look over and see the promised land. It's a mercy of sorts, that looking over, but it is a cruel mercy, at best.

Martin Luther King Jr., on the last night he had a mouth to speak with, spoke to a church full of people in Memphis identifying himself with Moses's end. "I may not get there with you," he said, "but I have looked over and I have seen the promised land."

Now, if you haven't done this already, imagine that you are a bridge person. That your life may NOT be the most important one in your family line, or that, in some special way, you are a vehicle meant to bring something special to the world.

Consider that your children, or maybe your grandchildren, have a role to play to benefit your family, or the planet, or something else, in a way that might make you feel you are just the bridge from which he or she was meant to emerge. Okay, hold that thought.

Now, to this morning's text. This is one of many psalms of lament in the Bible. It may be the most compelling of all of them. It's hard not to read it and see oneself in it as if in a mirror.

Here, again, is how it opens ...

*Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.*

Now this is a conventional statement about a conventional kind of belief. The way to have a good prosperous life, says the psalmist, is to obey the commandments. But right away in verse 2, there is a turn.

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped.

<sup>3</sup> For I was envious of the arrogant;  
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

<sup>4</sup> For they have no pain;  
their bodies are sound and sleek.

<sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not plagued like other people.

The writer is saying, "I almost gave it up. I was brought up to believe God prefers the righteous, but, like a teenager, I am now thinking that I am smarter than my parents. I'm seeing holes in their ethical assurances.

I can't help but notice that people who *don't* go to church and who spend all their time doing devious things instead, wind up on top of the heap. They cheat on tests and get into Yale University. They get insider stock tips while lounging on a beach in Florida in January. They get plastic surgery beginning in their 30s.

They are cynical about religion. They are highly irreverent. And, look, people treat them like celebrities. These people scoff. They say, "You don't believe in that God stuff, do you? There is no God in heaven. That is just primitive piety. You need to outgrow that. People with money don't need religion. It's for the weak."

The poor psalmist. She thinks to herself, "These people are always at ease. And their portfolio just keeps growing. I am tortured about this day and night."

She feels she was misled and is now tempted to forget God and worship the elite who look to her as sleek as jaguars. You don't get anything for keeping your hands clean, apparently.

But then she catches herself ...

If I had said, "I will talk on in this way, I would have been untrue to the circle of your children."  
Now, what does that mean?

Well, I think she is saying, “If I continue to think this way it would be a betrayal of my grandchildren. everyone’s grandchildren. I don’t want them to think of me as a sell-out to the rich and godless. Being tempted to give up my ethics in order to make a lot of money or to gain a powerful position – it makes me kind of sick. Especially when I consider what they might come to think of me.

After all, I may well be God’s bridge meant to bring them into the world.  
If that’s the case, maybe I ought to act like I’m worthy of that.”

As a result of these second thoughts, the psalmist says: “When I thought how to understand my doubts about God versus my worries about my grandchildren, it seemed to me to be a wearisome task, until I went to church. Until I spent some time in the presence of the eternal one.

Now, the speaker doesn’t say how practicing her faith changed her mind. Maybe she had an experience with the music. Or something mystical happened to her, or a reading of Torah touched her. Or maybe she had an experience like the prophet Isaiah had when, inside God’s temple, he had a vision of the holy God and it shook him to his core.

Whatever happened, the psalmist was jerked out of her envy and it was as if she had a moment of coming to herself, like the prodigal son had in Jesus’s famous parable. Maybe she remembered who she was.

At that point, having come to herself, she says something to this effect: “Then I perceived the fate of these cynical, prosperous people, and what I figured out is that they have no staying power.”

“They live in very slippery places and are bound for ruin,” she says. She’s saying that the market value of what they own can collapse in a moment. Besides, having so much just gives them serial nightmares. They wake up and in less than a minute they can’t remember what the nightmare was about, but it leaves them in a cold sweat.

Now, let me ask you: how true is this? How slippery ARE these places the rich and powerful have lodged themselves in? I mean, look, their money is exactly what they use to hire the teams of attorneys they require to keep from being jailed.

Well, while your thoughts might run to particular former office holder who is losing case after case meant to keep his nefarious deeds secret and himself out of prison, consider Senator Joseph McCarthy who pulled one over on the American people back in the 1950s. Nearly everyone was terrified of him and he reveled in his power for four years – four long years !

Every day, it seemed he fingered someone in business or government or the entertainment industry - saying (without evidence) he or she was a communist or a “pinko,” and that person would end up ruined or blacklisted as a result of the Senator’s accusation.

Gradually a critical mass of people discovered that the emperor had no clothes. But for the longest time, as the historian, John Mecham, tells us, 34% of Americans believed every word he said. One third of the country.

Now, as I said, eventually his daily lying caught up with him. But still – it took all those years for enough people to realize they were being played.

It has been said, “The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.” That’s a statement of immense hope, and yet there’s no shame in admitting that sometimes we just grow weary with so many of our fellow countrymen being okay with being lied to. We grow weary of the accumulation of the immense damage wrought along the way.

Senator McCarthy’s legacy? He died miserably not long after he was discredited. He was only in his forties. If he were alive today and you asked him how he felt about his legacy, I bet he would tell you he might wish to never have been born. McCarthyism is the dirtiest word in American political parlance. Little, if anything, touches it.

The arc of history is long, but stay tuned. Try not to lose heart.

The psalmist continues ... “So when I reflected on all that, I had a sour feeling about what almost happened to me. I was stupid to doubt the goodness of God, for being willing, even for a moment, to envy the rich and powerful.

I was a “brute beast toward you, God,” the psalmist says. The Biblical interpreter, Walter Brueggemann, says that a closer translation is, “I was a dumb ass.”

At verse 23 the psalmist has an epiphany” It’s a statement of renewed faith. She realizes the following: “I am continually with you God, you hold my right hand.” Note, it’s not her holding God’s hand, but the opposite – God’s been holding her hand the whole time. Think of that.

I heard recently of a Lutheran aid worker in Africa who walked hundreds of miles holding the tiny hand of a little girl to get her out of a war zone and into a place of peace and safety.

She made a point of holding the little girl’s hand the whole way, and she said that when they got to the haven they had been heading for during that week, the little girl’s hand was a bloody mess. That’s the kind of desperate hand-holding the Psalmist is speaking of.

“Who do I have in heaven but you, O God?” the psalmist concludes. Her prior temptation to give God up now tastes like ashes in her mouth. Now, at the end, she has no desire for anything but the transcendent. This is important because the people she had envied were full of desire – unquenchable desire. You see, they have all this stuff, but they can’t enjoy it fully because they are driven every day by their desire for more.

A few weeks ago I mentioned the result of a study that determined that the amount of money one needs to be happy is something like \$75,000 a year. I suppose it depends a lot on the cost of living of the city where you live, but speaking in average terms, \$75,000. Anything you make beyond that, said the study, will not increase your happiness.

In fact, anything over that might just increase the level of your anxiety and desire. In such a world, desire for more produces sickness. It makes the greedy person impossible to live with and, in some cases, strangely unfulfilled.

It makes one wonder about the billionaires out there who continue to pressure their congressmen and women to pass further tax cuts so they can have even more – which, if you think about it for even a moment, you cannot help but see is nothing short of pathological.

This is the kind of man Jesus had in mind when he told his parable of the guy who pulled down his barns to build bigger ones. He was exposed by Jesus as not being rich toward God, but rich only toward himself.

Jesus is also remembered to have said, “Do not be anxious, for can you add anything to your life? Even a nanosecond? Even Solomon with all his vast wealth and power was not as well off as the birds when it comes to beauty and the joy of merely being alive. The one who created you knows what you really need, and it doesn’t amount to all that much.

Okay, you’ve heard all this before, but I doubt you’ve heard it put quite the way I want to put it right now,

Here’s an extract from a commencement speech that the notable genius, the late David Foster Wallace, gave at Kenyon College in 2005. David Foster Wallace was a very secular man, so when he spoke disparagingly of atheism and in favor of the value of religious worship in this particular speech and at such a secular institution, a school for some of the best and the brightest in our land, it’s kind of stunning. It’s a perfect commentary on the psalm we’ve just been examining. Let me give you a piece of it as we close this ...

*In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as **not** worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it Jesus or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It’s the truth.*

*Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams,*

*parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.*

*Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.*

*They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into (just like the writer of today's psalm confesses), day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.*

*And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along on the fuel of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self.*

*I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away.*

*You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish. But please don't just dismiss it as some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon. None of this stuff is really about morality or religion or dogma or big fancy questions of life after death.*

*The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death.*

*It's about what we worship without even knowing it, on this side of dying, in this culture - bent on seducing us with what we don't need, at every turn.*

Amen