

26 July 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Psalm 27

Hymn: CH4 580: Abide with me

PRAYER

Loving Father

Thank you for calling us to meet you now. We want to ask you to be very close to us as we listen to your words this morning Lord.

Speak to us, surround us with your presence there where we are – each in our own homes; and help us to feel the hope believing in you brings.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come;

Thy will be done;

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power,

and the glory for ever.

Amen.

READING

Psalm 27

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,

it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.

³ Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;

though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:

that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,

to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.

⁵ For in the day of trouble

he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.

⁶ Then my head will be exalted

above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the Lord.

- ⁷ Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.
- ⁸ My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"
Your face, Lord, I will seek.
- ⁹ Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
Do not reject me or forsake me,
God my Saviour.
- ¹⁰ Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.
- ¹¹ Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path
because of my oppressors.
- ¹² Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.
- ¹³ I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
- ¹⁴ Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

MESSAGE INTRO

Abide with me...

Words of comfort. A request to God to be with us, to stay with us,
especially during dark times...

Hymn 580 in CH4, Eventide, was written by the Anglican Priest, Henry Francis Lyte, in 1847, shortly before he died of tuberculosis at the age of 54. The music for it was written by William Henry Monk. It was sung for the first time at Lyte's funeral.

And ever since then it's been sung by Christians all over the world, at funerals, and many other occasions too.

The hymn was inspired by the words of Luke 24:29, where Jesus walked to Emmaus with 2 friends, and they said: "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over."

They didn't want Jesus to travel by himself in the dark, they offered him a safe place to stay and hospitality.

The darkness referred to here is of course actual darkness. Night-time.

But very often we use darkness as a metaphor for difficult times. The most difficult of which of course is death, and the author of this hymn makes use of the words in 1 Corinthians 15:55 to apply this metaphor: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

And that is of course why we often sing this hymn at funerals.

But to me it refers to so much more. It actually refers to the whole of our lives, not only to the end of it.

I find this hymn very comforting – asking God to be a part of our lives, to be with us – during the evening; when we have no other helpers or

comforts; in this world where things change so quickly, and the only thing that doesn't change is God; when we are tempted; through cloud and sunshine; when enemies, tears, even death, threaten us... Because if God is with us – the shadows will flee and heaven's morning will break for us.

Apparently, during World War 2, in the trenches, our brave forefathers, men from our villages and towns, would start singing this hymn, followed by the soldiers in the trench next to them, and pretty soon everyone was singing "Abide with me".

When the singing ended, when the last words were sung, the silence was deafening, and the men in the trenches looked at each other with new hope.

Three amazing friends of our churches, Amy Hawthorn, Ibiyemi Osinaike and Stuart McLean, who have performed for us at the church in the past, produced a wonderful rendition of this hymn.

And I would now like to invite you to listen to this with me now:

<https://www.facebook.com/223158567793612/posts/2837665469676229/?vh=e&d=n>

HYMN

CH4 580

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting?
Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee
In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me
Abide with me, abide with me

MESSAGE

Absolutely stunning, isn't it? Could you also feel the presence of God surround you while they were singing? And could you also hear the deafening silence when they stopped?

With the image of the soldiers singing this hymn in the trenches in my mind, Psalm 27 really speaks to me. "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life..."

This Psalm was also written in the setting of war. The author was afraid of his enemies, but he knew he would be safe in the house of God.

In Old Testament times, this of course was not only a metaphor, it was literally true. There was an altar in the temple of God where people could go to for asylum. If they held on to the horns on this altar, nobody could touch them. They would be safe in the presence of God.

And you know, no matter how dark things are around me, I always feel safe in the presence of God.

Of course we know that God is not only present in his house, he is everywhere. He is there with you now – in *your* house; he is with you when you are home, he is with you when you are out. He is *always* with you – in cloud and sunshine, darkness and light. Nothing and nobody we are scared of can touch us when we are in the presence of God.

And let's face it, we've all been through some pretty dark times these past 4 months. A virus waged war on humanity, and all we could (and still can do) is to wait in our houses while the people on the frontline are fighting in the trenches to keep us all safe.

But on top of this threat to our health, we've had to deal with so much hardship – not just worldwide, but very close to home too.

Some of our own people lost their jobs and are struggling to make ends meet; some of our own people ended up in hospital and we couldn't even go visit them; some of our own people died, and we could only

watch from a distance as the hearse drove slowly past us or their coffins were lowered into the ground...

It's all so unnatural. Heart-breaking. As if it's not hard enough to have to go through terrifying things like this, we've had to deal with so much of it alone.

But you know, we shouldn't really think about like this. Because we are Christians.

And although we might sometimes *feel* utterly alone – we never are. God is with us. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through cloud *and* sunshine. Our faith gives us *hope*.

And *that* is what I hear when I listen to “Abide with me”. That is what I feel when I sing “Abide with me”: Hope.

Even in times when we are surrounded by ‘enemies’ – worries, difficulties, fear, illness, loneliness, loss – we are not alone, because God abides with us.

So why don't we follow the example of the soldiers in the trenches, and when we feel anxious, scared, or alone, start signing the comforting words of “Abide with me”?

And let's not only sing it, but believe it. *Live it*. So our neighbours can see it, and start doing it too. And then their neighbours can see it, and start doing it too. And before we know it, the peace of God will surround everyone. Comfort everyone. And give them hope.

Because where hope is alive, no battle can ever be lost.

Amen