

“Remember Not the Sins of My Youth!”

Psalm 25:1-10

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Rev. Miller and I have created a preaching series for the six Sundays in Lent prior to Palm Sunday. Our theme is “Spiritual Encounters.” We have selected Bible stories where characters have significant encounters with the Holy. This we do as an invitation to this congregation to use these forty days of Lent as a time to reflect on our own spiritual encounters; what they have been like, and what they mean to us.

The character for today’s sermon is the writer of Psalm 25. His name is David. I am guessing he has reached middle age, has begun contemplating the home stretch of his life, perhaps has even constructed a bucket list of things yet to be accomplished or completed. As I read through Psalm 25, I get the feeling that David has been awakened in the night by a nightmare. He has leaped out of bed, his mind filled with all the shenanigans of his youth, all those naughty choices of his teen years, all those questionable decisions of his adolescence. He has had a spiritual encounter! God has confronted him in his dream.

I picture David sitting on the edge of his bed, his hands folded in prayer, his head raised toward heaven, his voice crying out, “Remember not the sins of my youth!” Can you picture this guy? He is in a cold sweat. He feels the weight of the burden he carries. His dream has propelled him to address some unfinished business. I imagine him lighting a candle, moving to his studio where he writes his songs, sometimes, like Billy Joel, “in the middle of the night.” Verse after verse pours out of his soul, and he entitles his song, “Remember Not the Sins of My Youth.”

The song sounds a lot like a modern day country and western song, a lament. Johnny Cash and Tammy Wynette are the modern day psalmists. Their songs often have that feel of a late night encounter with the Holy. Psalm 25 is a reminder that God often encounters us in our dreams. We awake knowing we have work to do.

The psalmist seems to know that the sins of his youth are holding him back from being fully alive, from living the abundant life; holding him back from a fuller, deeper relationship with God. The sins of his youth are somehow interfering with his current relationships, with the way he feels about himself, with the way he now imagines his remaining days upon the earth. He values his relationship with God and feels that all the bullying he did as a teenager is now adversely impacting his life. I say 'bullying' but that is just a guess. It is anybody's guess what the content of the psalmist's nightmare has been. It doesn't matter. What matters is our own unfinished business, our own spiritual baggage. During these weeks of Lent, my daily prayer will be an uttering of Psalm 25, "Remember not the sins of my youth."

I like this psalm writer and I like his prayer. I can identify with him. You see, I am on my high school's committee for planning our 50th reunion this June. Basically, I am responsible for tracking down about fifteen of my classmates and encouraging them to attend. Contacting them has been a joy, for the most part, but it has also brought to consciousness some painful stuff from those teenage years. They were awkward years, clumsy years, years of wounding and of being wounded. They were years of astonishing successes and of blistering defeats. As I call to mind the sins of my youth, I name them, I confess them, and I ask God to be like my Math teacher who ended each day by erasing the marks on the chalk board, wiping the slate clean. Mr. Carpenter was his name. We called him Carpy when he was beyond earshot.

He seemed to find great delight in taking the eraser in his left hand and dusting all the marks off that side of the board; then shifting the eraser to his right hand and doing the same on the other side. It was his delight in preparing the chalk board for the new day coming. In fact, he was so aggressive about this work of erasing that he always had some of the chalk dust on his sleeves and on his sweater. His fingernails were stained a powdery white. On reflection, I see that Carpy was like a god to us. He helped us to leave behind all the algebraic mistakes of the previous day and to step into the next day ready for a new beginning with a new equation. When Carpy died last year, I attended his memorial service, and I wept. At the time, I didn't realize why. But now I do. He was one who chose not to remember the dreadful errors of our youth, not the ones inside the classroom and not the ones beyond the classroom, either.

I wish I could introduce the psalm writer to Mr. Carpenter. I'd like to assure David that God does not remember the sins of our youth; that God is the One who provides the grace for letting go of yesterday's foolishness in order to seize today's delight.

Of all Robin William's movies, the one I like the most is *The Dead Poet's Society*. In this film, he makes 'carpe diem' a household phrase. Carpe diem. Seize the day. What the psalmist learns is that the day can be seized when the weight of yesterday's burdens is released.

The writer of Psalm 25 had a spiritual encounter with the Holy. He encountered the Holy in a dream. More accurately, he encountered the Holy in the painful remembrances of his youth. The encounter caused him to tremble, mightily. But the encounter became a life-giving encounter, for it was in his trembling that the good news came to him, that God's love is steadfast, that God's purpose is to set people free, even free from the sins of our youth.

As we travel through these days of Lent, heading toward the cross, let us find time for naming the sins of our youth and surrendering them to God whose love is steadfast; who, like my Math teacher, takes delight in setting us free to live each new day with abundance. In the greatest of hope, Amen!