

**1 Peter 5:6-11**

**Psalm 77**

**July 20, 2014**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

***A Summer in the Psalms***  
**GOD'S INVISIBLE FOOTPRINTS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Mary was born near the end of 1922. She was one of eight children. When Mary was six, her mother died and her father raised Mary and her brothers and sisters by himself. She grew up during the Great Depression. She married at the age of sixteen, but she left the abusive marriage. She returned home when she found out her husband had shipped out to serve in World War II. When he returned from service, he was able to get custody of their only son. Mary spent many years trying to get her son back.

In the late 1940's and early 1950's, Mary dealt with her own polio and a serious accident that almost killed her second husband. For twenty years, Mary worked as a nurse and community volunteer. When her husband died of heart disease, Mary moved out of her home of over twenty-five years. As she was packing, she found a small case full of poems she had written over the years, including one she had not seen since 1959. In the late 1940's, Mary had seen her poem in print, credited to "Author Anonymous." She had written the poem in 1939 at the age of seventeen, inspired by the events of her childhood and teenage years. However, at the time she saw the poem in print, she was discouraged from trying to claim the poem as her own.

When she found the poem in the suitcase, Mary decided to pursue her claim and was awarded a copyright. Eleven years later, the original copy was authenticated by a forensic specialist as being fifty plus years old. Mary was recognized as the rightful author of this poem:

*One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.  
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.  
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.  
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,  
other times there were one set of footprints.*

*This bothered me because I noticed  
that during the low periods of my life,  
when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow, or defeat,  
I could only see one set of footprints.  
So I said to the Lord,*

*“You promised me, Lord,  
that if I followed you,  
you would walk with me always.  
But I have noticed that during  
the most trying periods of my life  
there have only been one  
set of footprints in the sand.  
Why, when I needed you most,  
have you not been there for me?”*

*The Lord replied,  
“The times when you have seen only one set of footprints,  
is when I carried you.”<sup>1</sup>*

Twenty-five hundred years before Mary Stevenson wrote “Footprints in the Sand,” another poet wrote about God’s footprints. His poem was based on the tragic events in his own life, as well in the lives of his people. His capital city had been ransacked by the superpower of the day. He and his fellow citizens were deported into exile, where their captors mocked and taunted them, and said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” Perhaps the greatest insult and tragedy of all was the destruction of the Temple, God’s house, the very sign of God’s presence among his people.

It’s no wonder the poet lamented this low period of his life and his people’s life, with all of its anguish, sorrow, and defeat, with these soul-baring words:

*I think of God, and I moan;  
I meditate, and my spirit faints.  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.  
“Will the Lord spurn forever,  
and never again be favorable?  
Has his steadfast love ceased forever?  
Are his promises at an end for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (Psalm 77:3, 6-9)*

At our session meeting last Tuesday night, Elder John Green shared a poem in his opening devotional that his father had written. John introduced the poem by telling us a little bit about his father who was a jeweler, and about how his father wrote hundreds of poem during his lifetime. John began his devotional by commenting on the tagline that I have included in my e-mail signature now for several years: “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?”

I heard that question in October 2008 on the first retreat in The Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program. Almost six years later, the question still provides me with good guidance as I face different situations. When I get called to the emergency room at the hospital, I ask myself, “Where is God already at work in this situation?” When the session meets, I ask myself, “Where is God already at work in this situation?” When I meet with people and listen to their stories and difficulties, I ask myself, “Where is God already at work in this situation?”

Every once in a while I think about changing my e-mail tagline. Almost inevitably, though, someone will mention the question to me. In the past week, three different people have talked to me about that question. When I told one friend I was thinking about changing it, she said, “Oh, don’t do that! I like getting your e-mails and seeing that question. It makes me think about what God has done and is doing.”

Sometimes it’s harder than at other times to see where God is already at work in this situation. That seems to be the case for the writer of this psalm, when he lays all of his feelings on the table before God: “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. . . And I say, ‘It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’” (Psalm 77:1-3, 10)

Another friend talked to me about that question in my e-mail one time. In the midst of some difficult times, the person asked me, “Where **is** God already at work in this situation?” Considering what was happening in the person’s life, I could very easily understand why the question got asked.

When in your life have you said to yourself, “I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints”? What times and circumstances have been so hard for you that you were so troubled you could not speak? What has knocked you down so low that you found yourself wondering, “Has God forgotten to be gracious?”

Something very interesting happens a little over halfway through this psalm. In the first twelve verses, the psalmist talks about himself — A LOT! Fourteen times he says “I” — “I cry aloud, I seek the Lord, I think of God, I moan, I meditate, I am so troubled, I cannot speak, I consider the days of old, I commune with my heart, I meditate, I say, I will call to mind, I will remember, I will meditate.” Nine times he uses “me/my” — “hear me, my trouble, my hand, my soul, my spirit, my eyelids, my heart, my spirit, my grief.” We can relate to his despair, can’t we? When life is crumbling all around you, when the floodwaters have reached your neck and you feel like you’re going under, when you go through the dark night of the soul, it’s almost automatic to say, “I . . . I . . . I . . . I.”

Then, abruptly, just like that, beginning in the thirteenth verse, we don’t hear about “I, me, my” any more — not a single time in the final eight verses of the poem. Instead, we hear “your mighty deeds . . . your way . . . our God . . . You are the God who works wonders . . . you have displayed your might among the peoples . . . your strong arm . . . your people . . . When the waters saw you . . . your arrows flashed . . . your

thunder was in the whirlwind . . . your lightnings lit up the world . . . Your way was through the sea . . . your path, through the mighty waters . . . You led your people.”

There’s a complete change of focus — from “I, me, my” to “you.” And in the midst of all of the you’s and your’s, this is what we hear: “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; **yet your footprints were unseen.**”

Why the abrupt change of focus? Listen to what the poet says, even in the depths of his troubles and struggles: “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.” (Psalm 77:11-12) In the midst of exile in a foreign land, with his captors mocking him about his “powerful” God, this believer remembers what God has always done for his people. Specifically, he remembers another time when God delivered his people from a time of slavery and captivity by parting the waters and leading his people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Mary Stevenson found great comfort — and has given great comfort to many people — with her poem about footprints in the sand, when the Lord carries you in the most trying periods of life. In the psalm, here is a believer being honest about and finding hope in the times even when you can’t so easily see God’s footprints.

Maybe God was working on my heart as I thought about today’s sermon. Four or five people in the past week or so have talked about looking back over their lives and being able to see how God was at work at different times — especially the difficult times — **even though they couldn’t see God at work at the time!** Let’s think of those times as “God’s invisible footprints.” Just because we can’t, don’t, or won’t see God at work in our lives and in this world doesn’t mean God isn’t already at work in this situation. As Job 37:5 says, “he does great things that we cannot comprehend.”

Nowhere in today’s psalm does it say that remembering God’s wonders of old and meditating on God’s mighty deeds will make all of your troubles magically disappear. There is no indication that the poet suddenly had a change of heart between verses 12 and 13, so that he was no longer troubled and wondering whether or not God was still at work in his life and among God’s people.

No, the poet calls to mind the deeds of the Lord, his wonders of old, all God’s work, his mighty deeds and finds encouragement, as the hymn says, “for the living of these days, for the living of these days.” Not only that, he finds encouragement for the days to come, even though he surely knows the days to come will bring their own share of heartaches and sufferings and challenges.

What gives him hope is trusting God will act now and in the future as he has **always** acted for his people in the past. That’s why he can say, even in the middle of his troubles, “What god is so great as our God?”

When we come to the Lord’s table for the sacrament of communion, we praise and thank God for all he has done for us, all the way back to the creation and down through the years. Part of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at the Lord’s table says, “Remembering your gracious acts in Jesus Christ, we take from your creation this bread and this cup and joyfully celebrate his dying and rising, as we await the day of

coming. With thanksgiving, we offer our very selves to you to be a living and holy sacrifice, dedicated to your service.” We remember what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ, we trust God is already and even now at work in and among us, and we look forward to God’s future with hope.

So, here’s my tagline for today’s sermon: “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?” A good place to start is to think about how God has already and always been at work in your life — even when his footprints were invisible.

***Let us pray: Gracious God, in difficult times, help us to remember you are strength to all in need and hope to those who travel along hard ways. Strengthen our faith. Guide us through the uncertainties of our journey. Hold before us the vision of your eternal kingdom, made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mary Stevenson, “Footprints In the Sand,” at [www.footprints-inthe-sand.com](http://www.footprints-inthe-sand.com), The Official Website for Footprints in the Sand operated by the estate of Mary Stevenson.