

"Thank God for Social Security"

Psalm 121; Ephesians 6:10-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 5, 2014 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I suppose it's natural that the older we get the more we think about our financial future. So as we total up our projected retirement income we know an important part of it will come from Social Security. For some of us it may turn out to be our primary source of funds, though the program was designed to be supplemental to pension and savings.

Social Security is one of those programs that originated out of the Great Depression years. Congress in 1936 passed the enabling legislation that made this a mandatory program so that one's later years would not have to be spent in poverty. Most people are grateful for this safety net program and wonder where we would be without it.

While we can value the Social Security act, this government program really has little to do with today's sermon or its title. Instead, I want to explore the greater question of where we find real security in an insecure world, which is what our scriptures address this morning.

Most children are born into a narrow, but protected, world. They know the nurture of a parent's arms, a sheltering home, a comfortable crib. They can eat pretty much whenever they want, and most immediate needs are taken care of in a loving and tender way. There is a safe environment surrounding them.

As we grow we learn to feel comfortable in ever more open spaces and with an ever expanding circle of people. We delight in the new, but we also never cease to return to what is familiar, what is trusted. We venture out, but we also are glad to return to our proven places of security.

We also look to what is restorative when we are all but spent out. I still remember clearly my goddaughter, Katharine, when she was about five. We were over at her parents' house and she was busy outside playing with a friend.

Shortly before we were about to leave, she came into the living room looking exhausted. All the fire had gone out of her eyes, the energy out of her legs and arms. I thought maybe she was getting sick. Thankfully her mom recognized the symptoms.

"Do you need to be held?" she asked. Katharine got up in her lap and let those mother's arms encircle her in the familiar way that they had done countless times before. She just lay there, like a rag doll, for a good five minutes. Then up she popped and hit the floor running. By the time we were going out the door she was back in the thick of play as if there had never been an interruption. She needed a few moments of security to be restored, and she knew where to come to find it.

Life is a great adventure but, as we go along, it also becomes a quest for security. This takes myriad forms. Insurance, burglar alarms, karate courses, seat belts, vitamins are all defenses against hazards that we may identify as threatening.

Some people seek safety by trying to keep life as much the same as possible from day to day, by mistrusting everything which represents change. Others find security by following some leader who demands total allegiance and unthinking response, or by immersing themselves totally in work. And a growing number seek security through alcohol and drugs.

In spite of such errant substitutes, the human need for security is legitimate. We do have a strong inner striving for those things which bring balance and confidence back into our lives. The problem is that we often look for this security in the wrong places. If so, we are disappointed time after time in our search, and we don't seem to understand what is the problem.

The Bible addresses itself to the human need for security in both of today's readings. The psalmist raises a question for himself and for us (Where will my help come from?) and then answers with no hesitation (My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth). Why is he so confident? Because the One who keeps Israel does not sleep. God watches over us wherever we go and at all times.

The original setting of this psalm is when the pilgrims prepare to leave from the temple in Jerusalem. Most probably it was a dismissal song, a benediction, as they got ready to start their long trips back home.

As these religious travelers look east over the Judean hills, they consider what help they can rely on as they make their arduous journey. The vast wilderness before them seems so great and they so small to meet the challenge. They know that their strength alone will not be enough for what lies ahead, yet the answer comes almost as readily as their fears. It is God who will give them help, answer their insecurity, and guide them in the paths that they will take. They are reminded that this is their help.

Surely we, too, are scared at times like those pilgrims of old. We have our journeys that we venture out on as well. Whenever we undertake anything new we're always a bit uncertain. Anything can go wrong.

So in this psalm here are some calming words, as well as those we find expressed in the 23rd psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake."

At the uncertain points of life I am reminded that God's presence is promised me, that I will never venture out alone. It's not a false confidence holding out that no problems will ever arise. It's rather a deeper feeling of security because I know that God walks with me every step I take, that God accompanies me every mile I drive, that God is present in all my new situations. And God's strength will ultimately be sufficient for whatever I encounter along the way.

Those ancient pilgrims with sandals and carts are not really all that different from you and me with our cushioned Nikes and fuel-injected cars. All of us are forced to go back to the point of our help, our security, before we start out on the journey. Our forward movement will always be more tenuous should we forget the source of our real strength.

Paul, in writing to the Christians at Ephesus, gives some valuable advice for strengthening ourselves for whatever the day will bring. He says we do this by arming ourselves with what gives us protection. He likens this to the armor a soldier of his day would wear as a protection against enemies. Paul, likewise, tells us to “put on the on the whole armor of God....”

The underlying message in both of these scriptures is that human security is not so much what we can do for ourselves, but in accepting what we can't do for ourselves. Our greatest protection comes from surrendering ourselves to God, not in pumping iron or arming ourselves to the teeth.

The greatest "social" security is that which only God can give, and which God willingly does. No, it doesn't put money in the bank, but it does provide us with assets that can draw on as needed. It's the kind of social security that is there for us, day in and day out. The harder our way, the more we need to rely on this assurance. The greater our fears, the more we need use what has been provided and ready.

Where does our security in life come from? The psalmist tells us that our help comes from the Lord, from God who made heaven and earth, from the Almighty who created you and me. This kind of “trust” fund we can rely on.