

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Psalm 36

Sermon Title: "Always, Forever, of Supreme Importance" (Lessons from a Really Old Guy series)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

March 9, 2014

During this season of Lent, we are asked to deal with a problem that affects us all. The problem is sin. It doesn't matter where we come from or what our backgrounds are, sin is always there to become a problem to us.

Sin gives us a big ego. It makes our heads swell, and we think we are so important, more important, than everybody else. Sin puts big words in our mouths. It gives us those cutting words, so we can hit people where they hurt and make them suffer.

Sin even makes us believe that we are right all the time, even when we are sinning. It is interesting how King David points out in verse 2 of Psalm 36 that people flatter themselves even when they are found out in their iniquity. People don't like to be wrong, because the sin within us doesn't want to be wrong. It wants to have its way without interference, and so when people are caught doing something wrong, instead of apologizing they may go on the defensive. They cannot believe that somebody else is suggesting that they are sinful, so the accused person blames and

passes the guilt and even hate people for putting them in some religious corner. Sin doesn't like to be wrong, and so it tries to make all do-gooders look bad in some way; and then sin can go on its merry way and do whatever it wants in us.

We get the idea by now, don't we? We know how sin affects us all. During the season of Lent, we are well-aware of how sin is a constant problem.

Psalm 36 doesn't just talk about human sin – it also talks about God's righteousness. Verses 5-12 speak of the mercy of God, which is in the heavens, and the faithfulness of God, which reaches the clouds. In other words, as high and unreachable as the sky is, so are God's mercy and faithfulness. They cover all things and all people in all places.

God's righteousness is like a great mountain, which means that God's righteousness is stronger than anything we may imagine. God's righteousness is invincible, unconquerable, and impenetrable, just like a mountain. God's judgments are like the great depths, meaning that they are bottomless. There is no end to God's judgments on us, which might sound bad to the person who likes sin. For the person who sins, God will constantly judge their sin against them, hoping they might see how far off they are and then repent. For those who do repent, who do not like to be

dominated by sin, God's judgments are pure. They are good for the follower of God, because God judges us to be faithful, merciful, and full of goodness. God then determines that we should live forever with him. God's vast judgments may go either way depending on who God is dealing with, and God's judgments will never end with every generation that is born.

So Psalm 36 seems to say that people are affected by sin on the one side, and some of those people may be so affected that they like their sinning. But on the other side is God's goodness and perfection, and God is calling us to know him better. God is calling us to turn away from our sin, and accept his life-giving gift of wholeness, completeness, salvation.

There are people out there, even people like us, who say yes. They admit that they are wrong, and that God is right. They admit that they don't have a life without God, and so they choose to live for God. God's mercy and faithfulness and righteousness are given to such people. But there are still those who refuse God. They remain in sin. We may not understand why, but then we look to Psalm 36:1, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." King David seems to say that this very thing underlies why people choose sin over God. They have no idea of God, no concern, no preference, no liking, no nothing when it

comes to God. God, to them, is of no importance.

I once came across a book that contained the theological writings of a really old guy. This really old guy is Abraham Joshua Heschel, and he is known as one of the great Jewish spiritual teachers of the last century. I read this book from this really old Jewish guy, mainly because my study group back in PA was reading it, and so I had to as well. The younger generation may think that they cannot learn from really old people, but the minute I picked up Heschel's book, I was stuck to it.

These are the first words that hit me, "God is of no importance, unless God is of supreme importance."¹ A person could chew on that for days, because the meaning is profound. Let me put his words in a different way: "God can only be for us of supreme importance or of no importance at all. There is no middle ground with God. We either see God as everything or nothing, never something, never almost kind-of everything maybe." Heschel is saying that we cannot sit in the middle of the road and have a half-hearted relationship with God. It is either a completely intimate relationship, or it is nothing. In poker terms, we are either all in, or not. In maternal terms, a person is either pregnant or not. "God is of no

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, 19.

importance, unless God is of supreme importance.”

That is the problem with those who do not fear God, as King David describes them in Psalm 36. God is of no importance to them – sin is of all importance to them. God doesn’t rank. God has no sway in their lives. They might even say they believe there is a God, and they like to think they are going somewhere after death, but there is no transformation, no regeneration, no faith. According to the really old Jewish guy Heschel, they like sitting anywhere they like in the road, and one still doesn’t view God as of supreme importance until they cross the road completely.

In verse 10-12, King David describes those who has crossed over to be as close to God as possible. “Oh, continue your lovingkindness to those who know you...” verse 10 says. The verb *to know* means to recognize, to admit, to acknowledge, to experience the one true God. Remember when we talked about Proverbs 3:5-6, and the one line said, “Trust in the Lord with *all* your heart...” And then we mentioned the great commandment from God in Deuteronomy, the one part saying, “Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”² The verb *to know* means to put forth all of our effort – not just our best effort – but all of our effort in acknowledging God in all things, in recognizing God at all times, to

² Proverbs 3:5 and Deuteronomy 6:5, respectively.

experience God in the most holy and in the most common activities.

King David emphasizes this knowing God, this viewing God as of supreme importance, in verse 7: “The children of humanity put their trust under the shadow of your wings.” Those who know God and view him as of supreme importance love to have God’s wing of care and compassion over them. It is like a cool shade at the hottest time of the day. It is like a warm blanket on the coldest and darkest of nights. We love how God’s mercy and faithfulness is higher than the clouds and the heavens, covering everything underneath including ourselves. We love how God’s righteousness is stronger than a mountain, opposing sin and stopping it in its tracks. We love that God’s judgments are so deep, that they see right into our hearts, and God sees Jesus there, welcomed and at home.

Those who view God as of supreme importance know God deeply, as they are known by God through and through.

We could take a solid week, just reflecting and absorbing that simple sentence of a really old Jewish guy. And if that wasn’t enough, Heschel moves on to the next paragraph in his book, and again we could be stuck on the words for weeks.

He says, “The search of reason ends at the shore of the known...”³ Everything that we could know has its limits. It is like standing on a sandy shore, and we know almost everything about that shore; but we have to stop because there is a great ocean in front of us, and we cannot go on. Heschel continues: “On the immense expanse [this ocean] beyond [the shore] only the sense of the ineffable can glide.” The word *ineffable* mean indescribable, beyond words, deep, profound, in other words, God. Heschel calls God the Ineffable, because God is so beyond us in presence and majesty. Over this immense expanse like a great ocean, which we cannot travel across, dwells the Ineffable, the God Beyond-Words.

Heschel then says that our realm has its limits, and we cannot go beyond those limits without looking to the God who is beyond all limits, and indeed beyond all understanding. We cannot leave the sandy shore, but with God we too may glide across the immense expanse. With God we may understand some of that wisdom beyond words. We may understand a little bit better our God who is beyond words, so deep and so glorious. As we continue to travel with God, there is harmony, there is growth, there is a connection with God that cannot be separated.

In Psalm 36, those who have no fear of God love

³ Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*, 19.

just standing on the sandy shore. They go no farther. They love where they are: the lives they have created for themselves, and the things they have achieved and still want to achieve for themselves. They don't think they have to know anything more than what they may invent for themselves. They don't think they have to grow in any way, other than in ways that make them more comfortable, more satisfied with themselves. Those who do not fear God do not know that they may sail beyond the sandy shore. They don't understand what excellent things await them in the depths of the ocean.

However, those who fear God, even we who understand God is of supreme importance to us, we know that the sandy shore is not the limit. God who is limitless has much more to offer us. The God Beyond-Word, Beyond-Understanding, invites to come along for a ride and see the new things he is doing.

For we who stand on the sandy shore know that there is more to life than what we know right here. There is more to discover than what we see right now. There are deeper mysteries to know. There is a vast God to explore. There is so much more to experience about love and mercy, forgiveness and grace. There is so much more growth, and so much more flourish that we need to do. So we accompany God and sail across the immense expanse, and even dive deep into it on

occasion.

In Psalm 36:8, it says that those who view God as of supreme importance “are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of [God’s] house.” Whenever we eat too much and we say we are full, we have reached our limit of eating. We cannot go any further without severe damage. When we put gasoline in our cars, the pump switches off because the tank is full. If we try to pump more gas, it will spill out and on to the ground. When we talk about the “fullness of God’s house,” however, we are not talking about reaching limits. Who can measure the fullness of God’s house, or let alone the fullness of God? Nobody. God is too vast to comprehend. Did we not say in verses 5-6 that God’s mercy is in the heavens and God’s righteousness is like a great mountain? The idea is that God and God’s works are bigger than anything we can handle. Greater than anything we can manage. In verse 8, we are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of God which is limitlessness.

In verses 9-10 it says, “You give them drink from the river of your pleasures, for with you is the fountain of life. In your light we see light.” Rivers seem to never stop flowing. Fountains seem to never stop shooting water in the air. Light seems to never stop shining in the darkness. They are like the fullness of God, which never gets full. We will never reach that

limit, since God is so huge. We revel in that. We love that there is always more to understand, always more to recognize, always more to love about our God. The immense expanse that we travel over with God is infinite.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, and during this season we purposefully seek God through repentance and reflection. We may pray, we may fast, we may give up something or take on something. Whatever we do, the hope is to have God be of supreme importance always. God is the Air that we breathe and the Food we partake. God is everything, and we want Everything.