

Psalm 80:7-15 Pastor Bill Uetricht 18 Pentecost 10/8/17

Sometimes I am amazed at how contemporary the Biblical word is. Now don't get me wrong. I realize that it was written a long time ago by people whose world and worldviews were so remarkably different from ours. But for some reason, this book can be such a living word for us who live now.

Our first reading, which initially lulls us by telling us that a love song is being sung to us, takes us to the wrath of God, which is not something that is added on to our lives, like a lightning bolt that comes because we have misbehaved. No, the wrath of God is seen as a matter of allowing a nation to reap what it has sown. In the midst of God's anger, we hear the evaluation of what it has sown: "he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard the cry of those oppressed.

Sound contemporary to you? But that reading didn't intrigue me as much as the Psalm for today. This Psalm is known as a national or communal lament Psalm or song. Something terrible has happened in the corporate life of Israel, something horrible, something that caused the nation in the early part of the Psalm to feel as if it had been fed with "the bread of tears," tears given them to drink in full measure. These tears, this grief cause them to cry out to God: "Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

The people are longing for a different world, are yearning for a vastly different situation in their nation. They want to be saved—not taken off to heaven, as the term "saved" means for so many in our culture, but rescued out of the horror of their current circumstances.

Seem like a contemporary desire? Sound like words you have spoken or have heard uttered? "Stir up your might and come, O Lord. Restore us. Bring us to some sense of sanity."

After our prayer gathering on Monday night, I said to several people that one of the challenges of preaching these days includes the

reality that lament could be the subject that preoccupies every one of my sermons. It's as if every week there is yet another national or global opportunity to name pain and lament it.

The Psalm writer today is lamenting an event of public consequence. What that is we do not know for sure, but some want to suggest that this writer may be lamenting the Assyrian invasion of Israel that was quite devastating to the Northern Kingdom. The Psalmist writes: "Why then have you broken down [this nation's] walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it." Obviously, there is some sense that the security that Israel once knew is not the security they know now. Somebody has come into their country and ravaged it. The protective walls have been broken down.

Israel is experiencing their own vulnerability, and feeling as if they have been abandoned by God. And so they lament. "Stir up your might and come to save us; we've got problems here. Stop turning your back on us. You helped us out in the past. You brought us out of Egypt in the past, made a way for us in the past, gave us a land in the past. Now don't make yourself scarce. Show up now! 'Turn again, O God of [might and power], look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine (this nation). We're tired of feeling as if you don't care.'"

Lament isn't always pretty. Lament is not the religion of saccharinely-sweet rhetoric that tries to convince yourself and others that everything is okay, that we are a such a God-intoxicated people that 59 murdered men and women and hundreds injured are no threat to our own wellbeing and to our sense of who God is in our lives. Lament is not the religion that says to the Puerto Ricans, the Mexicans, the Floridians, the Texans, the Dominicans from the Virgin Islands, oh, just "put on a happy face;" it could have been worse. Lament lays it on the line. Lament tells the truth. Lament identifies the pain. It names it. And it often wonders where God is in the midst of it. The faith of lament includes the real possibility of doubt. We are not sure about it

all. We feel distant from the One we thought brought us out of Egypt, the one we thought cleared the ground for us to go into a new land.

Lament is not a bad thing. It has Biblical authority behind it. Sometimes the best work we do is lament. We live in a culture that has tried its best to prevent us from lamenting, prevent us from fully grieving. We as a nation are not good at either grief or lament. We are quick to want to turn the channel, to put *this* behind us, to heal, to name the good that has come out of the pain. Grieve or lament? We've got money to make, places to go to, achievements to achieve. We don't have time to grieve or lament. Besides, who likes hanging out with downers?

Well, the Bible seems to, because it is full of lament. It's willing to name the pain. It's willing to sit with it for a while. It's willing to struggle, even with God. And I suspect that we would do well to follow the Bible's lead. We need to stop running. We need to stop covering up the pain. We need to be bold enough to name the sickness, the sin, the guilt, the shame, and even the sense of abandonment from God that we sometimes feel. We'd have better politics, better religion, better psychological and spiritual health, if we did so.

Much of political talk these days is shallow because we haven't fully faced the pain, haven't sat long enough in our grief to realize the immensity of our problems. Too much of the religion we get these days is also shallow. It is religion without lament, religion preoccupied with telling God how great God is, religion that is too sure that it knows what God is up to. From my perspective, this kind of religion doesn't serve well communities in grief. No, it would rather pretend that all of this pain isn't real. Pain repressed does not give us good religion; it gives us hokey, shallow religion.

Pain repressed doesn't give us good psychology, either. Now truthfully, some pain has to be repressed, but to make the repression of pain a way of life is often to take us to unhealthy places. When we push it down it comes out here or there. When we repress it, sometimes we find ourselves engaging the pain in secrecy. And all of a

sudden, folks who are acquainted with us say, “I had no idea that person was like that.” Look at what the brother to the Las Vegas killer is saying these days. “We had no idea.” Repressed pain, repressed anger, repressed guilt—they often don’t serve us well.

Running away is not our calling. Sometimes we need to tell the truth. Sometimes we need to grieve and to sit a while in the grief, even if you are like me, and you don’t want to. Sometimes we need to wonder and doubt. It’s a helpful check on our certainty that often doesn’t serve us well. Sometimes we need to lament. And this may be one of those times.

Now I realize that grieving and lamenting are both very vulnerable activities. They suggest that we do not have it all together, that we have been hurt, that we have been injured, that we lack the ability to figure it all out. And I know that vulnerability is not an easy thing. Most of us have probably spent much of our lives making sure that we aren’t vulnerable. And we have even used religion to bolster our efforts. (“God is not going to give me anything more than I can handle. Everything works together for good for those who love God. Every time God closes a door, he opens a window.”) But sometimes, and this is especially true as we get older, this kind of cliché living just does not do the trick. Sometimes, if we are honest, we just stare directly at our own vulnerability. It’s laid bare to us.

You know, as I was reading our gospel text for today, one of those harsh and somewhat cruel texts from Matthew, a connoisseur of harsh texts, I couldn’t help note the strange behavior of the owner of the vineyard. He sends some of his servants to collect the harvest from the tenants who were leasing the land from him. These first servants are killed by the tenants. And then, believe it or not, the owner sends some more servants. Predictably, they are killed. And then, the owner, as odd as he is, sends his son to the tenants. Come on, Mr. Owner, how dumb are you? What do you think is going to happen now? And what you expected is what you get. They kill the son, too.

Maybe the owner isn't really dumb. Maybe the owner is willing to be vulnerable. Maybe this owner loves so much that he won't stop trying to get to the tenants. And love is vulnerable. Love vulnerably lays down its life to go after the ones who are loved.

This is a time for lament. This is a time for grief. This is a time to wonder about God. Where is God is a perfectly appropriate question? And I would vulnerably suggest to you: I don't know for sure. But this I do know. If Jesus, and he is the son in Matthew's story, is any sign of what God is up to, where God is in all of this mess, we will discover him—or more appropriately put, be discovered by him—not in the places where we have it all together, where everything is clear, but in vulnerability, in telling the truth about our brokenness and our pain, in identifying with the victims of violence and life's randomness, and in joining those who are vulnerable enough to lay down their lives for someone else.

If Jesus crucified is any sign of what it means for God to be present in our lives, and I think that is the Christian message, then the place we look for him is not power or control or certainty. No, we are discovered by him as we let those things go and find ourselves linked to every other poor hurting, grieving, lamenting child of God. Martin Luther put it this way: "At the foot of the cross, we all are beggars." We're all vulnerable. We're all in this together. And I trust—I am not certain—a vulnerable, crucified God is in there with us.