



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 19, 2018
PROVERBS 9:1-6; PSALM 34:9-14; EPHESIANS 5:15-20; JOHN 6:51-58

PSALMS FOR TODAY

Well this is the third week of four in which we hear this passage about the Bread of Life from the Gospel and because we've heard the sermon the last two weeks and may again next week, I want to take a pass on that. And I was thinking maybe I should unpack what Paul's instructions to the Ephesians about don't get drunk on wine, it's debauchery. No, I don't want to do that today.

What I want to do instead is to look at the psalms. The psalms which we read and sing from more than any other book of the bible in our worship. Some people will struggle with them as I do; because they have anachronisms—some culturally problematic things in the psalms—and yet I believe there is great wisdom and beauty in them. They are not going away any time soon in our worship, nor should they. So, let's see what we might do with them today.

I hear a lot of folks speaking about the despair of the troubled times in which we live. And I think the psalms have rich things to say to us in reference to that. If we were to make the most sense of them, it could be said that we must speak the deeply honest truths of our hearts to God in the context of community. We must speak the truth in our hearts to God in community. That's what the psalms are—cut to the chase—that's what psalms are. Speaking the truth along the range of experiences of the human condition. The psalms bring forth voice to joy and thanksgiving and deep gladness

and praise and also brings voice to fear and anger and loneliness and hopelessness and grief.

It is important to understand and remember that the psalms are stylized speech. They are poetic. They contain metaphors and allegories and parallelisms that come right into our day and time—into these troubled times. Into the meaning of our lives if we are willing to wrestle with them, and grapple with them.

We wouldn't take a Mary Oliver poem or a poem from Brunei at just face value, would we? Nor neither should we the psalms. So, if they bring you up short in some way, think about what's underneath it. Why is it under your skin in some way.

I believe the psalms elaborate on what I believe is the script of life: "Orientation—Disorientation—New Orientation". I think that's the trajectory we are all on and it's cyclical for most of us. And all 150 of the psalms can be situated on that plot line in one way or another. But anachronisms are not. Everyone of the psalms finds expressionism in our lives today. That's the invitation, that's why we read and sing them.

Yes, most of the psalms express joy, in reference to God; in context to community. I suspect most of those are easy for us to assimilate in our lives. Psalm 34, we heard an excerpt from this morning. We sang it, taste and see that the Lord is good. You hear the joyful trust in that.

In psalm 23—*The lord is my shepherd I shall not want* for anything—the most well-known of the psalms they are beautiful, they are there.

My favorite psalm, at this moment in time, is psalm 133—*Behold, how good it is when kindred live in unity! It is like fine oil upon the head, running down on the beard of Aaron.*

Can you hear the gift of abundance that comes in that brief psalm? Can you hear the life as it should be? As God intends it to be for us. And the image of decadent oil, fragrant, sacramental just brings it up for us poetically.

But then there are the lament psalms, several of them, many of us will find them more troublesome to apprehend in our lives. The words and sentiments of the lament psalms will likely ring hollow for you if you are living along some stretch of orientation in your life in which affluence and self-sufficiency rule your day.

If your work or your health or your family life are deeply satisfying to you in the moment, you feel like everything is peachy, but we all know there comes a time in life when all is not peachy. When all is not rosy. Maybe then, the lament psalms will speak to your soul.

And yet even if this is not that day, the invitation to say the psalms together remains because we are invited to ask if it is not on my heart, on whose hearts are these words being spoken? And can we stand with them as they speak those words? Can we hold the space to be with them? And say that psalm with them?

Let me offer just a few examples here of lament psalms that have bearing on our lives in these troubled times. But remember the psalms are predicated upon the understanding that we don't hold back with God. We speak deep truths out of our hearts. There is no pretense of niceties. And we believe as people singing the psalms that God can handle that.

So let me begin with Psalm 44; it is a song of rage really—*God, you have forsaken us, you have gone out with our enemy...we didn't forget you, but you've forgotten us...rise up and help us, oh God, save us for the sake of your love...*

That psalm was spoken by people around the world on September 12, 2001; even while our leadership in this nation spoke of crusades against Muslims. The words are there for us. Even in our own time, could we hear

this psalm, those words being murmured by a single mother who after covering her children with a blanket in the backseat of her car on a street in Seattle as they have no safe affordable housing in the city and we can hear her saying “why have you forsaken us O God. Rise up and save us for the sake of your love.”

Or Psalm 88—it's a tough one, because unlike some other lament psalms, it doesn't turn to hope in the end, it just stays and lingers in the depths of disillusion—Disorientation:

O Lord, my God, by day and night I cry to you. I am full of trouble; my life is at the brink of the grave. Lord, why have you rejected me? Why have you hidden your face from me?

Whose voice could this be? Perhaps one who has lost a child in the quagmire of drug addiction and the parent speaks vulnerably to God in the moment, speaks the deep truth in their heart, not knowing whether their beloved child will ever come home again.

Or maybe it's a victim of abuse by priests in Pennsylvania this week. Who's had all of this dredged up again. Publicly.

Or psalm 30. *Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning...* Can you hear the turn for hope? Or psalm 23 again: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, O God, your rod and staff, they comfort me.*

Could these verses be voiced by one who is battling cancer who rises each morning with hope in her heart and resolves to live today. Today, because this is the day she has? This is the day we all have. And she is inviting us into this prayer. She speaks the truth to us. And for us.

Or psalm 109—perhaps the most difficult of all. I suspect some of you have never heard it read or read it yourself. We will never read it on a Sunday morning our lectionary will never put it in—it is too raw, it is too hard. It is so full of rage and vengeance for the wrong that has been done to the victim who speaks to God. About the perpetrator.

When he is judged let him be found guilty; and let his appeal be in vain.

Let his days be few, let his children be fatherless, and his wife become a widow...

Because he did not remember to show mercy...

It makes us cringe, doesn't it? These are not proper sentiments to speak to God.

The great bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann, once asked a group of clergy what this psalm 109 meant. Who might be speaking it. He wasn't sure. Linda, a Disciples of Christ pastor, spoke up and said she knew. She knew whose psalm it was: it is the psalm said by a woman who has been raped, and she speaks in her raging grief to God what is truly on her heart, wanting desperately to be released from that grip of vengeance.

In community, can we stand to hear the woman's story, because that is our work. Can we simply hold the space for her to share it with us?

Or psalm 51, traditionally noted as a psalm of David spoken in the voice of David; it wasn't that it came centuries later, but David was indicted by the priest Nathan for his sin of raping Bathsheba. We say it communally in Lent every year as a psalm of repentance for our own brokenness.

Have mercy on me, O God...wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me...

Could this be the psalm that gives voice for a man who has sexually harassed or assaulted women, and now stands accused in our culture, and with contrite heart he is ready to make amends—whatever that might look like? How might we as community, create space for him to share his story?

I could go on, but hopefully you get the point. Maybe some of you were wishing that I had picked up that thing about wine and debauchery at this point.

But I hope you see the psalms are a rich resource for us in these troubled times, they are deeply counter-cultural, which is why we struggle with them, and yet they have such remarkable truth to open us too.

The counter-cultural thing is that it tries to subvert the things we are taught over and over and over again from an early age. We are taught to suppress our emotions, don't speak the truth; never share your weakness with others.

Your autonomy is your prized possession in this country, and ultimately it says God doesn't exist or if God did, checked out a long time ago and has nothing new to offer you here.

The origins of the immigration crisis in our nation today can be traced directly to a fiercely held narrative that this is a scarce world; that there is not enough to go around for everyone and if we let "those people" in, they will take some from us what is rightly ours and we must keep them out if we are to keep what is ours. It is functional atheism. It says we don't believe that God will show up and guide us into a different day.

And the psalms come along and offer us a voice to subvert that way of thinking because the psalms say repeatedly that things are not as they should be, and God—it is your job to make it right! That is what we say when we say the psalms—God make it right. That is our hope in you our God, that is our expectation for you our God. That is why we keep reading the psalms.

When your money is placed here on the table in a few minutes along with bread and wine, they are presented as gifts to be received by God who will bless them, break them, and return them to back to us and to the world as emancipated energy—that is the pastoral mystery, the Eucharistic mystery that we celebrate around the table each week. When we share ourselves honestly with God in community, energy flows.

When we refuse to share ourselves, honestly to God; in community; violence happens. Every time. Violence to ourselves, violence to others, violence to God.

But the script of life, this master plot runs through the Good Friday experience of protest, complaint, and lament (things are not as they should be), these are troubled times. We want it differently; but we are always leaning into the Easter Sunday experience of praise, thanksgiving, and dance that God is yet to stand up and deliver once more.ⁱ And will again for us. For our world here and now.

The trajectory of the psalms, if you get beaten down by any of these, go to psalm 150, the last one because it is just a hand raising, glory halleluiah, God you have got it all figured out and we have to be with you!

But the truth is gladness, joy, thankfulness, gratitude on the one hand; grief, despair, fear, anger, loneliness, hopelessness on the other.

You can't fake those emotions in your heart. Culture is trying to tell you to fake it, but you can't fake it in your heart. And the psalms are saying let it open, share it with your community. Share it with God in your community. It is all in the psalms waiting for you and for me. So, I will close with an appeal to you.

In just a few weeks' time, on two Wednesday evenings in September—19 and 26—members of the clergy here will facilitate a conversation for this community that we are entitling "Resilience in Troubled Times." We think we that we are called to be a resilient people in troubled times and I want to make an appeal to you this morning as members of this community, attend those two evenings, show up and be a part of the community if you can.

Prioritize it on your calendars and be there those two evenings if you can. In the meantime, find a way to find your rhythm each day by reading the psalms. Strike it however you can. If this sermon and reading the psalms surfaces some troubles for you that troubles your spirit, speak to one of the clergy, speak to a friend here whom you trust.

Because we are in it together, we are in community. We make our way in community. If the version of the psalm in our Prayer Book has too many masculine references for God for your comfort, use the St. Helena Psalter, I have appended it on my sermon manuscript—copies in the narthex and will be posted on the website tomorrow.ⁱⁱ

But read the psalms and let them open what is in your heart already. Because this is what we know, we all yearn for the emancipated energy of God's grace and love and spirit to flow in our lives, and in the world. And I believe to my bones that to experience that lifegiving energy, we must speak the truth that is in our hearts. And speak it to God. Speak it in community. And listen to those who can be the truth tellers for us when we can't.

Will we have ears to hear?

Will we have voices to speak?

Will we have hearts that can stand courageously and speak of God's loving work in this world even now.

ⁱ Of course, this is our Christian lens of reading the psalms.

ⁱⁱ The St. Helena Psalter. Inclusive language, even if some poetic beauty is lost in translation. slechurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/The-St-Helena-Psalter-CA1.doc

The King James Version of the Psalter. More traditional. <http://www.episcopalnet.org/1928bcp/Psalter/kjv.html>
The Coverdale Psalter. <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/Psalms.htm>