

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 9, 2023

Psalm 44

So, friends, it's a joy every time we get to celebrate the sacrament of baptism and welcome another little one into our community of faith. We get to continue also this morning in our summer long sermon series we've entitled Psalms of Summertime. So, yes, we have learned all about the different ways in which psalms function, and this morning we'll continue that by reflecting on how the psalms help us to understand and recognize communal lament. We're going to do that with the words of Psalm 44. We'll read it together. If you brought your Bible, I invite you to go ahead and turn to it now, or you can grab one of your pew Bibles, and we'll read together from Psalm 44 after we pray together. So let us pray.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us in these moments. Just as you moved over the waters of creation, just move once again here. Live amongst us and within us. Quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. And all God's people say together—Amen.

Psalm 44, entitled National Lament and Prayer for Help in the NRSV.

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:
you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;
for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;
but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them.
You are my King and my God;
you command victories for Jacob.
Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down our assailants.
For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.
But you have saved us from our foes,
and have put to confusion those who hate us.
In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever.
Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.

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You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have taken spoil for themselves.
You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.
You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.
You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.
You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing-stock among the peoples.
All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face
at the words of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.
All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,
yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.
If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,
would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.
Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not cast us off forever!
Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
For we sink down in the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Psalm 44 is the first in a series of communal lament psalms. In a few weeks we'll unpack personal lament as well, but Psalm 44 is the first in the psalter that not just articulates the personal but also the communal angst, anger, grief of the people of God. The people of God are

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at war, and for a time they have been triumphing in that war, and then all of a sudden they are no longer.

They have been led out, they believe, like sheep for slaughter.

And so the psalmist brings before God lament of an entire community.

I wonder, though, for us if we might place ourselves there with that people, feeling abandoned, feeling forsaken, feeling like things at one point were good. We were in a safe and even triumphant place, and then things changed; or maybe, or maybe it might be more honest for us to say we were always in the midst of division and hurt, and yet we didn't feel it in the same way, but now we do.

The shape of the psalmist's lament is something for us to learn from. In the first several verses the psalmist is giving credit to God. 'We've heard all about what you do from our ancestors. They told us that you show up, that you are with them in the midst of the most difficult times in their lives. You don't forsake them. You don't leave them. Every triumph that they have, we know it actually wasn't their sword that accomplished that or their hands that brought it into being. It was yours.' The psalmist wants to outline for God that the psalmist understands and knows that God has acted in the past in a particular way, and wants to give God credit for that. And then after verse 8 when all the credit has been paid, we get the most honest transition perhaps in all the scripture. "Yet you have rejected us and shamed us. We have given...given thanks to your name forever, and you have rejected us and shamed us." Honest confession of the feelings of rejection and shame that the people of God feel.

'We can tell you aren't with us anymore. We go out to fight our enemies, and they triumph over us. Our swords are no match for theirs; and not just that, but we have to listen to their taunts too. They're not just beating us, they're talking about it to us; and the people around us who used to think that we were privileged, or maybe even we told them that we were privileged, they're turning their taunts against us too.'

The whole second movement of the psalm is the petition of grievance against God.

And then in verse 23, "Rouse yourself. Why do you sleep, oh Lord?" This is something that the psalmist will ask of God multiple times throughout the psalter. 'Wake up! We want to feel and sense your presence here with us in the midst of this difficulty. We need you to help us not feel cast off. Stop hiding your face from us. Make yourself known in some way that is life-giving and good.'

Communal lament was not begun by the psalmist, but this psalm, Psalm 44, this one that frames communal lament, it does give us many things from which to learn. It actually helps to shape some of the things that we see in our culture and in our world this day. Communal lament is something that has been expressed by the people of God, by people all across the world, for as

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long as there has been life. In the more recent past we have experienced together as a nation what communal lament looks like upon the murders of Ahmad Arbury and George Floyd. We have seen what communal lament looks like in our community upon the murder of Liza Fletcher.

We have seen what it looks like for communities to join together in one voice and cry out, “Where are you God? We’ve heard that you have been present, but we don’t sense you here anymore.”

This past week I had the pleasure of being in Paris for just 48 hours.

There were...there were communities to the west of the center city where I was who were lamenting as a community for the continued violence that happens against people with black and brown skin in France and across the world. Communal lament is a way of expressing the deep grief that is not simply individual but is held by everyone.

And the psalmist gives us a framework for what it might look like for us to lament as well. Communal lament allows the pain and grief of the world to be expressed. The psalms of communal lament give us language for our grief, for when we feel abandoned and shamed and angry and even rejected.

This past week has been a difficult one in the life of our nation.

John Pavlovitz puts it this way. “Some things are bad, and we cannot and should not minimize their implications for people or the planet. This week has been a bad week. This week has been a bad week for diverse humanity. It has been a bad week for vulnerable people. It has been a bad week for racial equity. It has been a bad week for people buried in debt. It has been a bad week for those who grieve the erasing of so much progress in such a short time. Even if we saw it coming, even if it felt like a foregone conclusion, nothing really prepares us to see the worst of our fears realized. It is not good when hard-fought civil liberties are taken away from millions of Americans, when our highest court is weaponized by an extremist minority. It is not good when bigotry becomes lawful. It is not good when a marginalized community loses decades of protection in just a few hours.” Communal lament sometimes is the only...the only way that we can express what we are feeling at a given point in time.

And yet, the psalmist does communicate. As Anna told our kids not too long ago, God actually desires to hear the honest confessions of our hearts. God was not angry at the psalmist when the psalmist called out God for God’s absence. God listened with open ears to the cries of God’s people because that’s who God is.

The good news for us even in the midst of communal lament is that God has solidarity with us in it. As Richard Rohr puts it, “The cross was Jesus’s voluntary acceptance of undeserved suffering as an act of total solidarity with the pain of the world.”???

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And reflecting on this mystery of love can change our lives. Jesus even laments for us from the cross. It's named "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Jesus offers to us then a witness to and confidant in our communal lament. Jesus understands our lament."

And so, whether it be something happening here in Memphis or across our country or on the other side of the world, there is a power inherent to hearing communal lament spoken aloud.

Barbara Holmes says that this type of event is important for several reasons. First of all, "It wakes us up, and in so doing makes us mindful of the pain of our neighbors who no longer can go about business as usual."

It's important, also, for another reason. The collective wail reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering. The sheer power and resonance of a grief-stricken chorus reminds us that we are beings, we are beings of quantum potential. We still have agency in every cell of our being, enough to survive even this moment. Communal lament then, friends, binds us to the struggle of each other. When we lament, we join with a great choir of faithful witnesses across the generations who yearn for justice and to be seen and known by their creator. Communal lament pulls us out of our bourgeois cocoons of niceness. It unmask the hardships of the world before us. Communal lament presents us to the world as we are, and it presents the world as it is too.

We are then a faithful presence, and a faithful presence in the midst of brokenness is a threat to the powers and principalities of the world.

Walter Bruggeman was interviewed in the wake of Michael Brown's murder by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, several years ago. In that interview he said, "the laments in the books of Psalms and Lamentations are all an expression of grief, but they are also an expression of hope. They are an insistence, they are an insistence that things cannot remain this way and that they must be changed. Such prayers are partly addressed to God, but they are also a communal resolve to hang in and to take transformative action. Unless that kind of grief and rage and anger is put to speech, it can never become energy. So I believe the transformative function of such lament is that it transforms energy and rage" into something positive and hopeful, and that's what we get at the end of Psalm 44 from the psalmist.

The psalmist has given credit to God for all that God has done in the past and has also named, quite honestly, 'I don't see you now. Where have you gone? We are hurting, we are feeling marginalized, we are feeling left out. We are being threatened and killed all day long, and you are not here.' And then the psalmist comes to perhaps the most honest question of the Lord or request thereof. The psalmist says, "Rouse yourself. Are you going to sleep forever?"

'Don't hide your face from us, don't forget our afflictions and oppressions. Rise up and come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.' The psalmist, even through lament, still believes that God is powerful, that God is at work, that the God that they have heard of and heard

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about, the one who protects, the one that brings justice, the one that brings equity, the one that can bring victory, that God is still alive.

And the claim here, the psalmist's claim here, is that that God can be roused once again. Roused through our perception. Roused through our action. Roused through our lament and then our action.

Each of these psalms is going to have something different to teach us. This week, this song, it is here to teach us that we must listen to the deep groanings of our brothers and sisters here in Memphis and across the world. We are to be roused from our cocoons of privilege that we are to still hold on as people of faith to hope that God is still at work, that that God that the people have spoken of for so long can still be found here every time we practice love, every time we practice advocacy, every time we practice hope.

The psalmist laments, and then the psalmist turns and asks to see God once again. May we do the same.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.