

Sermon Series on the Book of Psalms

Book of Psalms 2: Songs of Lament

Psalms 13, 35, 79, 88, 109, 50

13 April 2008

As a UCC minister, I've been fielding a lot of questions lately about Jeremiah Wright, in person and over the phone, from friends and from perfect strangers. I don't watch the news on TV, so I hadn't seen these clips myself. So I went online to *YouTube*, and there I found not only the news clips, but I found a member of Trinity UCC who posted 5-10 minutes excerpts from those sermons, providing the entire context from which the little clips were taken. I was surprised to discover that in context, Rev. Wright is actually saying almost the exact opposite of what the shorter clips seem to imply so clearly. That "chickens coming home to roost" clip: in fact he was quoting a US ambassador who said that – a *white* man. I wonder why folks aren't accusing Ambassador Pike of being racist and anti-American. In fact, Rev. Wright's sermon, which he preached the Sunday after 9-11, was all about how we need to break the cycle of violence and hatred, and he called for a deep self-examination and contemplation. His text for the sermon is Psalm 137, a psalm of lament and grief, but also he warned a psalm that ends in unrighteous hatred and revenge – as I discussed in last week's sermon.

I've been pointing people to those clips, and most folks have been glad to see the full context, but other people persist in being upset by Rev. Wright. That's their right, of course, but one friend of mine told me the reason she didn't like Wright is because he complains about America. "If he doesn't like this country," she said, "then he should just leave!"

Now, I can understand why you might want to say that. My friend loves this country and is upset by what she hears as Rev. Wright bashing it. But what is the implication here? That no one should complain? I mean, honestly: who *doesn't* complain about this country? Any of you? If you say yes, well forgive me – but I don't believe you! Perhaps you think this war is the stupidest thing ever. Or perhaps you think the US hasn't done enough in the war. Maybe you think taxes are too high, or perhaps you oppose tax cuts for the rich. Does the government do enough about our schools? About health care? About the roads? What about the fact that stamps are going up one more penny next month? I'm pretty sure all of you complain about at least one of those topics! So does that mean you hate this country? Does it mean you should just pack up and leave? (New Zealand seems to be the preferred country for emigration.) Rather, I think people complain because they love their country and want it to be better. Show me a country whose citizens never complain, and I'll show you a country ruled by a totalitarian regime.

This sermon is not meant as a defense of Rev. Wright, but I do think he provides an excellent introduction for the next part of our series on the psalms. As I said last week, the psalms have a three-fold theme: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Last week we looked at the orientation psalms, the psalms that set out the principles of our faith, the grounding of our spirituality, summarized by that ancient refrain, "God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." That refrain is true. But if it were all we had, then it would make for a shallow spirituality, because all is *not* right with the world. What then do we do with this apparent contradiction between a good creation ordered by God, and the world as it appears to us? Is our faith a lie? Or do we just have to ignore the bad things in order to cling to our vision of a gracious and loving God?

The psalmists, we find, do not ignore the bad. Rather, they complain. Frequently. Loudly. And as we will see, they can be downright nasty about it. The first psalm is one of orientation, but the second and the third psalms start sliding into complaint and lament, and the complaining goes on and on. Yet the community of faith did not say of these complainers,

“If you don’t like our religion, then leave!” Rather, they included these psalms in the Bible. Sometimes we are embarrassed by their passionate outrage. Their anger seems impolite at best, and their desire for vengeance even seems anti-religious. But they are not.

Let’s look more closely at just a few of these psalms. The 13th psalm concisely expresses the basic form. It starts with a cry: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” It then gets to the point: “How long will my enemy triumph over me?” The psalm ends, though, with confidence, with reorientation, and it uses that old refrain, “But I trust in your steadfast love.”

This is the basic personal lament in a nutshell, and it is repeated many times throughout the Book of Psalms. Often the lament is deeply personal, going into detail about the wrongs this “enemy” has done. Psalm 35 is an example. It opens with militaristic language, “Contend, O LORD, with those who contend against me!” It talks about being trapped by enemies, “Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about.” This is personal and particular, and we don’t really know what the psalmist is referring to. “When I stumbled, they gathered in glee....Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked, they gnashed their teeth at me.”

This psalm doesn’t passively wait for God’s steadfast love. Rather, the psalmist gets very detailed about what he or she wants God to do. “O LORD, you have seen this; be not silent. Awake, and rise to my defense! Vindicate me, and put them to shame!” It’s almost a bargain: “If you do these things, O Lord, then my tongue will speak of your righteousness.” We know that praise should not be conditional, but surely it is a human impulse to sometimes bargain with God. “God, if you cure my aunt, if you get me a job, if you do A, B, C, *then* I will give to charity, quit drinking, go to church every Sunday.” It’s not humanity at its finest, but then, when do we *ever* manage to be at our finest? It is a bit comforting to know that we can show our wants to God.

While many psalms are personal, others are communal, referring to events that affected the whole nation, particularly the defeat by the Babylonian empire and the exile. Psalm 137 is the most famous of these. Another is the 79th, which is about the destruction of the Temple. Here again is a cry, “How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” And like the 35th psalm, it is followed by detailed instructions: “Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you!” There is some awareness that Israel may have somehow brought this upon themselves: “Do not hold against us the sins of our ancestors,” and it ends with the same bargain as 35: “Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever and ever.”

Examples abound of these kinds of lament psalms, both personal and communal, but amid them there are two that stand out as coming from the very depths of human despair and vengefulness. Psalm 88 is notable in that it is the *only* psalm which contains no hint of reorientation of trust. The psalmist cries out and cries out, and there is no indication that God has heard. It is a cry of absolute despair. This is very hard for us to hear. But Walter Brueggemann says that even though God is silent, there is still a relationship present. The psalmist does not reject God or turn away, leaving for another religion. Rather, the complaints are directed straight at this apparently silent and absent God. This despair in fact reflects a kind of faith.

Psalm 109 I mentioned last week. I wanted us to read it aloud as a congregation, but it turns out to be quite long, so instead I’ll read excerpts from it. Be warned! It’s not exactly for the faint of heart. It begins conventionally enough: “O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me.” But it quickly turns nasty: “Appoint an evil man to oppose my enemy! When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his

prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.” Harsh words! Again, we do not know the details of what the psalmist has suffered, though there are hints throughout the psalm that this “enemy” was someone who had once been counted as a friend, or at least a neighbor. But if the detailed vengeance is hard to swallow, surely we can relate to the anguish in v. 22-25: “I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow, I am shaken off like a locust. My knees give way from fasting, my body is thin and gaunt. I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads.”

This psalm ain’t pretty. But maybe you too have been wounded in your heart, and you can relate to the feelings. Or if you have not, Brueggemann invites us to imagine those who can: a victim of rape, someone whose child has been killed – maybe even a people who have been enslaved for 250 years. This psalm isn’t a model for us, but it is a reflection – a reflection of our own anger. The good news here is that God can take it. It is better to vent this anger to God than to take up arms yourself. And that is perhaps an important lesson in this psalm, that the psalmist leaves the vengeance to God and does not threaten to take action him/herself.

Indeed, vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay. And while there are psalms about complaint, we need to know that it is not always the psalmist doing the griping. Sometimes it is God who needs to air a grievance. Our relationship with God is not a one-way street. It is a two-way covenant. If God is patient enough to listen to our griping, we should not be surprised when God has a thing or two to say in response. Indeed, if Psalm 88 is about God’s silence, Psalm 50 assures us that “Our God is coming and will NOT keep silent.” The psalm begins with God summoning the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. *God is still speaking*, but we may not like what we hear.

“Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you. I am God, your God. I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice thanksgiving to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High.” But this is not a mere issue of what kind of sacrifice one makes. Indeed, it is not about animal sacrifice at all, but about the spirit in which it is offered. It must be offered in a spirit of genuine thanksgiving, not just to get what we want or to curry favor. And just as importantly, our offering to God must include our own hearts, as evidenced in the way we treat one another. Think of the vindictiveness of Psalm 109 and then hear these words: “You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done and I kept silent” – interesting, that God’s silence here is more a matter of God holding God’s tongue! “You thought I was altogether like you,” says God, and indeed the psalms of lament run the risk of equating our own moral outrage with God’s. Sometimes they may overlap, but they are never quite the same. “I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face,” God warns. It is entirely possible for us to call on God’s name, and yet not really want the real God to answer, so God warns, “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue you. Those who offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving are the ones who honor me.”

What then do these psalms of lament show us? What can we learn from them in all their messy, embarrassing, even upsetting...glory? First of all, they show us that life is messy. None of us lives the placid life described in the orientation psalms. Things get upset, and we get upset in response. It’s not that we should not get angry or complain, but rather that there are proper ways to deal with that anger. First, we bring it to God. Don’t bottle it in. God will listen, because even if we are quick to anger, God is not. Voicing our anger to God may help cool us off. Secondly, we need to leave the

vengeance to God. Our faith says that God's steadfast love endures forever. God does care, God does know, and if God sometimes seems to be silent, it may just be because we are too busy listening to ourselves.