

Sermon – December 3, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Psalm 80 : 1 - 7

So yes, today's reading that we just heard is not a happy one. It's a desperate plea for God's help, and an accusation. It's a prayer that says, "God, you've done such good things in the past—I've seen it—but from where I'm sitting right now it feels like you've abandoned me. It feels like all my prayers are doing is making you *angry*. You've turned the world against me, and all I want is to make it right—to be back in your good graces so that all *this...* can just ease off."

On it's own, that's not a comforting thing to read in the Holy Bible... but if we remember that the book of Psalms is a collection of prayers and songs written by *people* and collected in God's Temple... if we let it, it can start to feel less depressing and more... affirming.

I mean who among us hasn't had a day, a week, a month, or even a year, when it feels like the whole world's against you. That God must be angry with you, or just... *done* with you. As the song says, "It's like you're always stuck in second-gear... your job's a joke, you're broke, your love-life's D.O.A."

Who among us hasn't been tempted to turn to God and say, "You've been kicking sand in my face this *whole* time, and I don't know what I did to piss you off, but I just need you to *stop... please*." Let your face shine upon me, and be gracious unto me.

There's a great many Psalms praising God for the good God has done. There are Psalms of thanksgiving for blessings bestowed, and Psalms full of confident faith in blessings to come. But there are also Psalms for those days when blessings are nowhere to be found, written by people just like us when all we can see around us is the darkness. Pastor Eric has said that whatever you're feeling, there's a prayer for you in Psalms. A flavor for every season.

Now, those prayers of lament... in many of them, a student of history can find clues to the source of the lament. The Psalmist might mention certain countries, conflicts, or kings that pinpoint the range of years that they wrote it in. The Psalmist might also determine a *reason* for the misfortune:

The people of your cities were sinful, O God, so you sent a foreign army to conquer them to teach a lesson. Your prophets lack the courage to stand for righteousness, so your people languish in poverty and illness.

But then there are Psalms like this one, which—aside from the mention of three geographically separate tribes of God's people—it doesn't tell you *where* the writer is, *when* the writer is, or just what is happening that makes the writer *feel* like God is against them. And even more telling, the person writing the prayer doesn't even try to make

excuses. To reason it out. Whatever the writer and their people were facing in the moment this prayer was put to parchment, the best explanation they could come up with is that God had to be angry with them. They didn't know what they did, and they couldn't guess what they could possibly do to turn it around, and all they're left with is a desperate plea for God to change God's mind and save them from their misfortune.

Relatable.

What we're talking about here is the individual's perception of God's inaction. How do we pray when it feels like God is not stepping in for us?

How do we pray when it feels like the universe is against us and God hasn't lifted a finger? It's about prayer, the answer to prayer, the experience, and the response.

I think the first thing we can learn from this Psalm is that it's okay to be angry with God. It's okay to come to God and say, "You're being unkind to me." It's okay to tell God just what you're experiencing. It's not a sin of pride to feel like the whole world's against you, and it's not a sin of wrath to tell God just how that makes you feel. Some people will tell you you shouldn't go to bed angry, but *I* tell you it's *okay* to go to *prayer* angry.

"Come as you are." We say it about church, we say it about the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and we should say it about prayer too. If you come to God as you are... then that's how God will come to you.

Now, this Psalmist is also an example of the fact that we can't always *hear* God's answer to a prayer. We can't always *recognize* what God's *actually* doing, and we can't always *understand* what it is God *does*. Sometimes when we come to God in prayer, we are met with only silence. We make a desperate plea for urgent aid... and nothing changes. Certainly nothing we can see, and certainly not in the time-frame we *need*.

Now there are a few ways we can interpret that. Perhaps we're praying for the wrong thing, and we need to take the time to discern what it really is we should be asking for. Perhaps we already have the answer and we just aren't seeing it, or God's blessing is taking a form we weren't expecting. In the season of Lent, we spend forty days recognizing that we must transform *ourselves* in order to allow *God's* transformation to have somewhere to take root. And in the season of *Advent*, which begins today, we join with the generations who have come before us in recognizing that sometimes for the answer to prayer, we just have to *wait*.

Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting in a spirit of hope. Hoping for peace, within and without. Hoping for joy—and all that brings it—to come. Hoping for love to fill the emptiness in our hearts. We pray, even as desperately as the Psalmist today... and sometimes all we can do *then...* is wait.

But *how* do we wait? *Why* do we wait? Do we wait because God is *ignoring* us? God has put us on cosmic *hold*, where choirs of angels sing the chorus to “The Girl from Ipanema,” and Saint Peter comes on every few minutes to say, “Your prayer is very important to us”?

Do we wait because God wants us to suffer just a *little* longer so we’ll learn our lesson? Do we wait because God *forgot* about us, or has *better* things to do than watch over this child whom God loves? No.

I’ll give you a Christian answer, though it may not sound that way at first. I think a lot of the times, when we bring that desperate prayer to God and we hear nothing and all we can do is *wait* and *hope*... I think God is desperate too. I think God is desperately trying to come up with a way to answer our prayer that will *finally* make sense to us, because God has been trying to answer it before the prayer was even on our lips. Before we could even find the words for the prayer, before we even thought *to* pray; before we even experienced the feeling that would spur us to prayer, God knew what was on our hearts and *had* the answer. The blessing, the meaning to be made, the solution, the direction—whatever it was we truly needed, God had it and was *ready* to give it.

But we didn’t see it. We didn’t hear it. We couldn’t understand it, we couldn’t make sense of it, and so all we could feel—and we’ve *all* felt it—is that God didn’t answer it. God ignored us, or worse, God was angry with us. *That’s* why, right?

But that’s not the God I see when I imagine God hearing our prayers. The God *I* see is furiously flipping through manuals and yanking open drawers and tossing tools left and right going, “Nope, not this one; nope, already tried that; nah, that’s a Phillip’s Head and I need a flathead.” God’s as *desperate* as the Psalmist to find a *way* to answer our prayer... that *we’ll* understand... that we’ll be able to *do* something with.

And the reason that’s a Christian answer has everything to do with Advent. So to conclude this sermon, I’m going to read you a very short story by Louis Cassels. It’s a Christmas story, one that moves me every time I read it. One that makes a little sense out of Christmas, and one that explains to *me* the *lengths* God will *go* to try to speak in a language that we humans will understand, when all we do is pray... yet the answers are so hard for us to hear, and the blessings are so hard for us to recognize.

Now the man to whom I’m going to introduce you was not a scrooge; he was a kind, decent, mostly good man. He was generous to his family and upright in his dealings with other men.

But he just didn't believe all that stuff about God becoming a man, which the churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn't make sense, and he was too honest to pretend otherwise.

"I'm truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite and that he would much rather just stay at home. And so he stayed, and they went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier. Then he went back to his fireside chair to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another and another — sort of a thump or a thud. At first he thought someone must have been throwing snowballs against his living room window.

But when he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it.

Quickly he put on a coat and galoshes and then he tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them. So he hurried back to the house, fetched breadcrumbs and sprinkled them on the snow. He made a trail to the brightly lit, wide-open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the breadcrumbs and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow.

He tried catching them. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them and waving his arms. Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn. And then he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me — that I am not trying to hurt them but to help them. But how?

Any move he made tended to frighten and confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed, because they feared him.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see and hear and understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. And he stood there listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. And he sank to his knees in the snow.

“Now I understand,” he whispered. “Now I see why you had to do it.”