

Do you know what the most common type of psalm is? It's the psalm of lament. Fully one third of the psalms are psalms of lament. Do you know what the classic psalm of lament is? It's Psalm 13, our reading for today. Somebody planned this. Psalms of lament follow a pattern of an address to God, a complaint, a confession of trust, a petition, words of assurance, and a vow of praise. In the case of Psalm 13, all this is accomplished in just six verses. There's not a lot of time that elapses between the complaint and the vow of praise; the complaint and the praise hang together as closely as the arteries that move blood away from your heart and the veins that take blood back to your heart. Martin Luther wrote about the mood of Psalm 13 that it is the "state in which hope despairs, and yet despair hopes at the same time; \* \* \* and all that lives is 'the groaning that cannot be uttered,' wherewith the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us, brooding over the waters shrouded in darkness. . . . This no one understands who has not tasted it." But we have all tasted it.

This psalm starts out with the question, "How long, O Lord?" which I think is a kind of pain of its own. The thing that hurt is bad already, but what makes it worse is that often we don't know how long it will last, if it will intensify, or if we're missing something we could be doing to make it better. "How long, O Lord?" raises the anxiety question: what could still happen? Is there another shoe to drop? Is there another injury on its way? In the simplest way, we're like toddlers who scrape their knees: it hurts plenty already, but also there's blood coming out and that's *really* not supposed to happen, what does it mean? Pain is bad; uncertainty or anxiety makes it worse.

I learned long ago that looking for an all-encompassing explanation for suffering is a fool's errand. As Anne Lamott says,

... when hardships and terror appear in our lives, we first ask, "Why?" I usually add, "Would it have been so much skin off Your teeth to cut us some slack here?" But then I remember that "Why?" is rarely a useful question. After that, we ask, in a cry from our hearts: What on earth are we supposed to do? It's perfectly rational to expect or hope for an answer from God—I've never thought Job was being unreasonable. I personally would like a lot more stuff around here to make sense. But when something ghastly happens, it is not helpful to many people if you say that it's all part of God's perfect plan, or that it's for the highest good of every person in the drama, or that more will be revealed, *even if that is all true*. Because at least for me, if someone's cute position minimizes the crucifixion, it's bullshit. Which I say with love.

Suffering is not a problem to be solved; it's an elemental human experience. In fact, Barbara Brown Taylor sees pain as a spiritual practice—not that we should seek it out, but that since it inevitably comes, we should be aware of that dimension of the experience.

Pain, she points out, "is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy, and yet the majority of us do everything in our power to avoid it. We spend a great deal of money on painkillers. We drown our sorrows in alcohol. We ask for nitrous oxide at the dentist's office." Taylor maintains that pain forces us to be honest, because the experience is so all-consuming. When we are hurting, we can't pretend too long; we can't focus on other things for very long. Pain, she says, strips away our illusions about how strong we are, how brave, how patient and faithful.

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart

all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" Maybe it's not noble or uplifting, but the speaker is certainly fully present. And we know that one thing is possible in the midst of this anguish: we can lean on friends who will say, "I hear you." They can't do it on God's behalf; that's up to God. But they can bring cold water or bake a casserole. They can demonstrate that we're still connected. As Anne Lamott says, "We live stitch by stitch, when we're lucky."

But it's not friends with casseroles who bring the psalmist to the prediction that "my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." This is something more fundamental. I think it's the knowledge of what Walter Brueggemann talks about, the move from orientation to disorientation *and then to new orientation*. We know from experience that when the bottom drops out, that is never the end of the story. The God of resurrection does not let death or loss have the final word. The losses are real, and we always carry scars, but there is also always a new orientation, a new ground on which to stand. The cry of despair is very close to the thanksgiving.

Let me quote an actual Bible scholar. "Faith is not a cure, an escape from our trouble, a panacea for the awful anxiety and fear which belong to humanity. We would like to think that we begin at one end of this psalm and come out at the other, leave doubt and fear behind, and emerge in perfect trust and security. Surely faith works! Surely one day we can say "I believe" without having to cry out "Lord, help my unbelief!"

"Nothing in the careers of the prophets or in the letters of the apostles or even in the life of our Lord suggests that it does. In this world as it is and in this humanity as it is, faith is more likely to bring the tears of a Jeremiah, the stigmata of

a Paul, a night in Gethsemane. The Psalm is not given us to use on the rare occasions when some trouble seems to make it appropriate. It is forever appropriate for us as long as this life shall last. We do not begin at one end and come out at the other. The agony and the ecstasy belong together as the secret of our identity. We are simultaneously the anxious, fearful, dying, historical person who cannot find God where we want him to be, and the elect with a second history, a salvation history, a life hid with Christ in God. “ [James L. Mays, Union Theological Seminary, Virginia]

Is that good news? Is it bad news? It’s just the way it is. And again, as with last week, the poet Rumi has the best take on this part of the human condition. He talks about a man who had spent his nights calling out God’s name until his lips grew sweet with praise. Then one night a cynic asked the man if he had ever heard anything back. Since he had no answer to that, the man stopped praying and drifted into a muddled sleep. Khidr, the guide of souls, came to hi in a dream and asked him why he had stopped praying. “Because I’ve never heard anything back,” the man said. “This longing you express *is* the return message,” Khidr told him.

The grief you cry out from  
draws you toward union.  
Your pure sadness  
that wants help  
is the secret cup.

master.  
That whining is the connection.  
There are love dogs  
no one knows the names of.  
Give your life to be one of them.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its  
[“Love Dogs,” *The Essential Rumi*, quoted in BBTaylor, *Altars in the World*]

Let us pray.

You, mother God of all time, meet us in this time, walking with us in darkness and in light. Help us who know we can count on your love and your dynamism to transform us. May we use what you reveal to us here to restore creation according to your will. Amen.