

Sermon for Third Sunday of Pentecost

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o lord our strength and our redeemer

You may or may not know that most of the churches share a 3-year cycle of Sunday readings called the Revised Common Lectionary – so Christians around the world are listening to the same passages each week, and go through the entire Bible over 3 years.

There are some passages it's easy, even delightful, to preach on.

Two weeks ago, we had the creation and the Great commission – I would have loved that.

And then there are weeks where it's not quite like that, and this is one of those weeks.

I know you just heard them a few minutes ago, but let's review some of today's verses.

From the Psalm:

9 I have become a stranger to my own kindred, *
an alien to my mother's children.

16 Save me from the mire; do not let me sink; *
let me be rescued from those who hate me
and out of the deep waters.

17 Let not the torrent of waters wash over me,
neither let the deep swallow me up; *
do not let the Pit shut its mouth upon me.

From Jeremiah,

I have become a laughingstock all day long;
everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"

For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

I hear many whispering:
"Terror is all around!"

From Paul's letter to the Romans....

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death

And even from the Gospel,

For I have come to set a man against his father, (Happy Father's Day!?)
and a daughter against her mother,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

I almost hope no one is listening who has never heard the Bible before – 'cuz it would be easy to think, "Wow....what a bummer!"

If you want a religion that's all rainbows and unicorns, the Bible and Christianity are not the place to look for that.

But....actually....there are times when we feel like David or Jeremiah – we feel terror all around, like we're stuck in the mud and the waters are up to our neck and getting higher by the minute, that we're at odds with friends and family members.

Today's Psalm was probably written by King David during one of the times he was a fugitive in the wilderness, hunted either by his mentor, King Saul, or by his own son Absalom.

David knew about sorrow, grief, loss, uncertainty, betrayal, terror.

He also knew and trusted in the goodness and faithfulness of God.

This is one of the amazing things about the Psalms – and why they have become the center of Christian worship for monks and nuns – they express in poignant terms the deepest depths of

human suffering, but then turn to divine praise and hope in God's saving grace.

They teach us that it's OK to be frightened, confused, angry, to voice these emotions to God, even to say "Where the heck are you? I need you to save me."

In a way, they teach us how to pray, how to talk with God about the deepest things in our hearts.

Jeremiah was known as the "weeping prophet".

Jeremiah warned Judah that Babylon would conquer them and destroy the temple because of their idolatry.

This did NOT make him popular.

He was put in the stocks, and later he was thrown into a well, where he was half-sunk in the mud, and in danger of drowning – or if not that, ultimately starving to death.

That language of sinking into the mire is also in today's Psalm.

I remember that as a child, one of the scariest things I saw in a movie was someone falling into quicksand. Somehow it just terrified me.

If you've never been in deep mud or silt, it feels like it's grabbing you, there's nothing solid to hold onto, it's hard to even move, and if you try to get out, you risk slipping and falling into it face-down and never getting up again.

Jeremiah could give David a run for his money in lamenting how bad things were. He even wrote a whole 'nother book called Lamentations.

But even Jeremiah was not all gloom and doom.

He prophesied that God would also bring Israel back from captivity in Babylon – and even put his money where his mouth was, purchasing a field as the Babylonian armies approached.

What an act of hope – you know your country is about to be invaded and go into exile – and you go buy some real estate! – as a sign of faith that God will bring the people back.

To be honest, there are times we feel like David, or like Jeremiah.

And I think that for many of us, this year has been one of those times.

I think a lot of us have had times these past months – perhaps ALL the time – when we could say things like:

Terror is all around

Violence and destruction!

I've become a stranger to my own kindred.

I feel like I'm in a pit, sinking into the mire – don't let the waters come over my head!

Nobody expected this year to be easy.

If you're like me, you went into 2020 expecting it to be a year of difficult political division, like 2016 – when many of us just turned off social media because people were being so nasty to each other.

But then came COVID – and with it,

- fear of disease,
- friends or relatives getting sick or dying,
- worrying about whether the next thing you touched or the next person who breathed near you might infect you – or you might infect them,
- going into public places in masks,
- peering over your masks at one another like we were all lepers or possible sources of contagion, and being careful not to get too close.

Not the way we want to live, or to see others, or have them see us.

And then there were all the effects of the response to COVID –

- the economic disaster,
- 30-40 million out of work,
- churches not open for worship,
- people isolated from each other,
- elder residences and nursing homes locked down for months and residents unable to see or hug their children or spouses with no end in sight,
- businesses closed perhaps never to open again,
- advice that was always changing,
- having to adapt our personal and professional lives in ways we were not prepared for.

And the uncertainties about the future:

- a second wave? (a third? A fourth? An every year event like the flu?)

- A vaccine rushed through testing?
- Contact tracking that keeps tabs on everywhere you go and who you are with?
- Am I eventually going to run out of toilet paper?

Scary, confusing times.

Too much going on, too many uncertainties for most of us to process.

People feel cooped up and pent up, anxious and angry.

It's no surprise that depression is up, suicides are up, domestic violence is up.

A priest friend who is deeply involved with 12-step wrote last week that, in that community, he is seeing more harmful effects from the social isolation and anxiety than from the disease itself.

Last month I watched a 95 year old woman who had tested positive, but never had any symptoms, go through three weeks of quarantine and isolation that nearly killed her – not because of the disease, but because of neglect and loneliness, not fully able to understand why her children were not visiting her, and even the staff came only a few times a day to provide meals, wearing plastic suits and masks.

And, for the past two weeks, COVID is – at least temporarily – “old news”.

Shocking images of a police killing disturbed us all.

The sort of thing that rightly inspires righteous indignation and protests.

But then some of those protests turned into riots and looting – or rather, rioters and looters took advantage of protests for their own purposes.

As our Presiding Bishop said, violence and mayhem cannot be the Christian way.

But it's hard to know what we're seeing.

Are the arsonists and looters just people so fed up and angry that they became violent?

Are they organized, would-be revolutionaries wanting to set up autonomous zones, like in Seattle?

Or even white supremacist groups coming in to try to incite a race war, as law enforcement officials were warning when it started.

My guess is, probably some of each.

But it's funny how people look at the same events and see very different things.

Maybe it's because of our own preconceptions – we see what we want or what we fear.

Maybe it's because we get our news from different sources that filter and spin things in different ways – and of course *mine* is the “real news” and *yours* is the “fake news”.

Maybe it's because things are so darned complicated and uncertain – and we crave something simple that we can wrap our minds around and hold onto, and people who share our perspective.

If the world is too unpredictable, or you don't have like-minded people to talk to, you *really* feel like Jeremiah, a lone voice crying out and an object of derision, and there's a real risk of falling apart.

But as what was hidden comes to light, we discover that some of the people close to us – maybe our own families or members of our church – have perspectives different from our own, and we feel like Jesus said in the Gospel – “one's foes will be members of one's own household”.

Sometimes, we have a hard time even understanding each other.

Certainly, talking about race is one of the hardest things to do in America, and it's hard because it's important and a lot is at stake and the history is so painful.

But it's not just when we talk about race.

I have a friend with emphysema. He views people who don't socially distance and wear masks as not caring whether they kill him.

He'd probably have a hard talking to those who want to open things up because they've lost their jobs, or can't attend an NA meeting, or worry that they'll never be able to hug their grandmother again.

The conflict can even be *internal* to any one of us. I have a diabetic friend who is terrified of COVID because she is immune compromised, but also is depressed and languishing because of the isolation.

Some days – some years – we feel like David in the wilderness, or Jeremiah in the pit.

How do we walk with God in such times?

How do we *talk* with God in such times?

Christians and Jews over the ages have looked to the Psalms in particular for a model of how to pray, and I'd like to suggest that we try it out.

I'd invite you to spend some time with the Psalms each day.

Find one that speaks to you and steep yourself in it.

Read it and meditate on it several times a day – maybe carry it around with you.

Maybe it speaks to you so directly that you can make it your own prayer.

Or maybe you can use it as a model for a prayer of your own devising.

I'm a professor, so think of this as your written assignment: *write your own lamentation and prayer*, expressing what you are feeling as honestly as David or Jeremiah, and also what you are asking God for.

Maybe it will pour out of your pen or your keyboard all at once, maybe it will come together slowly over days or weeks.

When you have it down – really *pray* it. See how you feel. Listen for what God might say in response.

Then (second step) look at how these psalms – and even the lamentations of Jeremiah – turn into something else.

Part of the “something else” is recollection of God's goodness in the past, which leads to faith and hope for his goodness in the future.

And we can do that too.

On the one hand, we can read and remember the *Biblical* promises, like Paul's reminder today that we will have a resurrection like Christ's.

On the other hand, we can also reflect back on other times in our own past when we felt God at work in our lives or felt close to God in ways we may not feel his presence at the moment.

But there is also another surprising part of these psalms: praise.

The passage from Jeremiah ends with the words “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.”

And the second half of today’s psalm – which we did not recite – contains these words, “I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving.....Let the heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves within them.”

Praise may be the form of prayer most of us are least familiar with.

If you don’t understand what it is to praise God, try to learn it from reading the Psalms, and pray to God to reveal it to you.

David and Jeremiah had hard times, and expressed deep anguish. But this was only part of a road to a deep – and ultimately joyous – relationship with God.

If you feel their anguish, you can feel their joy as well.

I’d like to conclude today by reading portions of another Psalm, Psalm 18, in a modern language translation called *The Message*.

The translator does a lot of interpretation of the text, but in this case I find it deeply and profoundly moving.

18¹

⁴⁻⁵ The hangman’s noose was tight at my throat;

 devil waters rushed over me.

Hell’s ropes cinched me tight;

 death traps barred every exit.

⁶ A hostile world! I call to God,

 I cry to God to help me.

From his palace he hears my call;

 my cry brings me right into his presence—

 a private audience!

⁷⁻¹⁵ Earth wobbles and lurches;

 huge mountains shake like leaves,

Quake like aspen leaves

He steps down;
under his feet an abyss opens up.

Now he's wrapped himself
in a trenchcoat of black-cloud darkness.
But his cloud-brightness bursts through,

The secret sources of ocean are exposed,
the hidden depths of earth lie uncovered

¹⁶⁻¹⁹ But me he caught—reached all the way
from sky to sea; he pulled me out
Of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos,
the void in which I was drowning.
They hit me when I was down,
but God stuck by me.
He stood me up on a wide-open field;
I stood there saved—surprised to be loved!
²⁰⁻²⁴ God made my life complete
when I placed all the pieces before him.

God rewrote the text of my life
when I opened the book of my heart to his eyes.

²⁸⁻²⁹ Suddenly, God, you floodlight my life;
I'm blazing with glory, God's glory!

So may it be for us as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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