

“Your People”
Job 40:1-14, Romans 8:12-24;
John 11:45-54; Psalm 79

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This psalm shifts a little bit from that complaint we heard last week of an individual, perhaps an individual lament. Here it feels like the lament of a people, wondering where God is, what God is doing, why God has allowed this to happen. The people feel like life has been laid bare and they are crying out to God. One of the wonderful things about the psalms is that sense that we are allowed to cry out, take our lament to God, and wonder about it. We can call for God to help us deal with the problems of our lives. This psalm does that. It starts out with:

*O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.
They have given the bodies of your servants
to the birds of the air for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.*

Kind of a gruesome picture, isn't it?

*They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.
They have become a taunt to our neighbors,
mocked and derided by those around us.

How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?*

It's kind of gruesome. It's a terrible image in my mind: the image they are painting of what happened to the people of Israel. The interesting thing is that it was probably written long after this actually happened. They are thinking back on what God allowed to happen and asking why, assuming that God is angry, his jealous wrath is burning.

When we begin to think about this, one of the first things we have to think about is what it means to think about God as having anger and jealous wrath. Do we think of God as mercurial, one moment full of anger and wrath and the next moment loving and kind? I think there is a struggle with that here. We have to think about that. Why do we use such human terms, attributing human feelings to God? God is the creator, the transcendent one, the one that's so other and yet God gives us this passage about wrath and anger.

There are two things I want to think about here. One is when we do think in terms of wrath, anger and God, one of the things it does is it points out to us the way that we are doing things that perhaps aren't right. So, ascribing those feelings to God helps us to understand when we are out of alignment, right relationship with God. That's one side of it. The second is, I do wonder a little bit if the psalmist isn't suggesting that we're full of anger and wrath, God, so you must be too. It must be towards us because we aren't

experiencing life the way we want to and terrible things have happened. So, there are two ways of thinking about it. One is that it helps us think about how we are out of alignment with God. But, it is also a little bit of a warning that maybe we ascribe to God the very feelings that we have and want God to have. It feels like in this psalm there is a lot of wanting God to have those feelings, to ascribe that to God.

It's interesting as they give us this incredibly terrible image, how much of it is described so graphically so that God will be riled up. It's not simply a lament. There is an undertone of getting God to do something. Indeed, what do they want to have done? They want God to avenge them. They want to turn God into the one who takes care of things for them. You know, there is a certain way of saying that today. When someone has a fair amount of money and they have a problem they want taken care of they say, "Well, I'll just call my people and they'll take care of it." It feels a little bit like what the psalmist is trying to do is say, "God, will you be 'my people' and take care of this for us?" Indeed, when it goes on:

*Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms that do not call of your name
For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.*

And then further on, verse 10&12:

*Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"
Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes.
Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors
the taunts with which they taunted you...*

See what the psalmist is doing? He is setting this up as, "I want this done. I feel all this. I want you to change your opinion of me. And, I want you not to change your opinion of them. I want you to get them. They have taunted you." Isn't that what the psalmist is doing? Taunting God? Again, it's one of those psalms that I look at and wonder, is part of what God is doing here recording what we do? Recording how we respond with God?

We want God to go and get 'em, take care of them. But, it goes on.

*Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.
Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and forgive our sins for your name's sake.
Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"
Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to your great power preserve those doomed to die.
Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors
the taunts with which they taunted you...
Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,*

*will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

There is almost a bargain in there, isn't there? If you do this for us God, then we'll praise you forever. Notice the contrast of the vehemence and the compassion, the revenge and the forgiveness, the taunting and the praise. Makes me wonder, can we really have it both ways? Do we want a God who is compassionate or a God that is vengeful? Do we expect God to be flipping around? I don't think so.

Which makes me think about what God said to Job in verse 2 [of today's reading]: "*Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?*" That's what the Psalmist seems to be doing. Is this a record of what we like to do with God? Do we split up into our groups and then want our group to be the one that God favors?

You know, my wife Helen just went to Costa Rica. And, she came home in the middle of the World Cup. So, all of a sudden, we became fans for Costa Rica. We became part of that group. Helen even asked me once, "Do you think that God hears all the prayers of people praying for the win?" Well, yeah, I think God hears all those prayers, but does God take sides?

What does God do? God seems to have a different way of bringing God's people together. That's why we read that scripture from John. When Caiaphas says that Christ is going to die for the nation, our scripture goes on and says that he prophesized and explains it this way: Jesus was about to die not only for the nation, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. God didn't come and wreak havoc and wasn't the great avenger of the people, destroying the rest of the nations so one could rise above. When you look back on that nation, what was it supposed to do? It was supposed to be a light on the hill, a beacon. It was supposed to show people the way. Christ comes not to avenge and destroy, but to heal and invite and even to die for us and for all. Kind of flips things around a little bit, doesn't it?

We are invited to follow the one who doesn't avenge but serves, doesn't kill but gives of himself to the point of being killed, the one who enables us to know the compassion of God and allows us to have that hope that Paul talks about, the hope that's not seen, allows us to know the wonder of God's grace that doesn't pit nation against nation but invites us all to be one through the One we follow, the Christ we know. Perhaps, then we will become those who are God's people, the flock of God's pasture, who will give thanks forever and from generation to generation and recount God's praise.

Will you pray with me? *Gracious God, it feels so easy to become the faultfinder, to put the blame elsewhere: on you, on our ancestors. You know the struggles of our lives and our world, even the gruesome realities. You invite us beyond those—not to simply ask for more gruesome realities, but to recognize your grace that calls us together. You have died for us and invite us to follow you, to serve one another and to serve you. And, to have a hope that never dies. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*