

“SUMMER PSALMS, part 5”

Psalm 57

August 28, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

The question comes early in most murder investigations, at least in the ones on TV or in fiction. The detective asks the spouse, the best friend, or a co-worker. “Did he have any enemies?” Once in a while, the answer is that no one liked the victim; but usually the detective is told everyone loved her. That’s what makes it a mystery: a dead body with no apparent suspects or motives.

There are some psalms that are a little like this. We read them without understanding them because they don’t reflect our experience. What should we make of those psalms that plea for rescue from one’s enemies, when you struggle to name even one of your own?

I know there are people who don’t like me, but none of them go out of their way to do me harm. So when I read, “I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey...” it’s a real struggle to step into the psalmist’s shoes. Frankly, I don’t usually bother. My eyes glaze over when I come across references to enemies, and I focus my thoughts on some other aspect of the psalm.

If you read the fine print, you will see that some editor tried to help us out with a note about the psalm’s context. We’re told that this is a psalm of David that he prayed in a cave when he fled from Saul. You may recall that as David went to battle on behalf of Israel, the people began to prefer him to Saul. “Saul killed his thousands,” they would say, “but David killed his ten thousands.” Being an insecure king, Saul became jealous, and put a price on David’s head. So, for a time, David hides out in a cave, and according to one editor, wrote this prayer.

Some biblical scholars see a much broader context for this psalm. They remind us that throughout Israel’s history, they faced many enemies: the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE, the Babylonians in the 6th century followed by the Medes, the Greeks, and then the Romans beginning just before the time of Jesus.

Either way, the enemies are political. Well, now here’s a problem and an opportunity. The problem raised here is the question of faith and politics. Many are eager to suggest that the two should not mix and yet some of these same people are just as eager when it comes to the struggles between nations to claim that God is on their side. A cursory look at the Old Testament would suggest that God does play favorites with the nations. Again and again, God acts to save Israel from Egypt, the Edomites, the Philistines, and the Midianites just to name a few. The threat of violence was constant for the nation, so we shouldn’t be surprised to find so many pleas for rescue from one’s enemies among the Psalms.

Much of the US support of the current nation of Israel is predicated on this superficial reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. Many transfer this loyalty of God to the US based on the common cultural consent that we are a Christian nation.

The problem with this is the not insignificant minority report from the OT. God doesn't always give Israel the victory over its enemies, but sometimes uses other nations to discipline them until they return to the path of faithfulness. David's great grandmother is a Moabite woman named Ruth. Jonah is sent to Israel's traditional enemy the Ninevites, to whom God extends mercy. There are more references to welcoming the stranger than to loving the neighbor. And the promise to Abraham is not only that he will have many descendants, but also that he will be a blessing to the nations. Despite the tribal character of parts of the scriptures, the clear witness of the Bible is that all people are children of one God.

One could take this as a reason to keep faith and politics separate. Since politics typically divides us and faith sees us all as children of the same God, the two don't mesh very well. Faith wants to make friends of the enemy. Politics wants to defeat the enemy. But again, God does get involved in the struggles between nations. It's complicated.

If we're going to push our way through this problem, we need to see the opportunity. The opportunity exists not just in the field of politics, but in all our connections to this life. The first part of the psalm is referred to by scholars as a lament. There is some trouble, in this case an enemy, which the individual or community is unable to resolve on its own. The lament is a cry for help. More often than not, God's involvement in life begins with this cry for help. God tells Moses, "I have heard the cries of my people." In the wilderness, the people cried out and God heard. Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. The psalmist cries out to God who then sends forth "steadfast love and faithfulness." God is willing to engage us in the trials of our lives.

Maybe it isn't an enemy. Maybe it's an illness, a grief, a failure, a loss of confidence, an injustice. God is ready to respond. God hears the cries of those in distress.

Now maybe this doesn't describe you. Maybe you belong to the company of the blessed. There's still an opportunity here for you, a chance to participate in the work of God. But you'll have to listen, pay attention to the cries of distress throughout the world. You can't respond to it all, but there are voices that capture your attention more than other, cries pitched a little louder. Maybe it's the victim of disasters, the floods in Louisiana, an earthquake in Italy. Maybe your heart is attuned to the cries of the hungry, to the injustices in the prison system, or to those who suffer the effects of violence from a family member or a stranger. Maybe you've been gifted to help those who grieve, those with chronic depression or anxiety, or those suffering from mental illness. Maybe your calling lies in the area of inequality addressing racism, sexism or countless other marginalized groups. There is no lack of opportunity for you to become engaged in the saving grace of God.

In fact, the opportunities seem so numerous as to be overwhelming. Some people have been talking about compassion fatigue as a growing problem. *Jesus Christ Superstar* gives us an image of an exhausted Jesus, overwhelmed by the needs of so many people. But this is not the image of the psalm we read this morning.

As I said, it opens with a lament, but as a lament, it's pretty lame. It opens with a plea for mercy, but quickly moves forward with confidence that God will hear his cry: God will send and save, will put to shame the enemy. Even the statement of the problem, that the enemy seeks to devour him moves quickly to resolution. "They dug a pit in my path," says the psalmist, "but they have fallen into it themselves." Just as an aside, I should say that this is typical of the way the Old Testament speaks about those who plot evil: that their own actions will do them in.

Between the problem and the resolution, the prayer inserts this which is repeated at the end: "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth." It's not unusual for praise or thanksgiving to follow lament. Most of the psalms that begin with a cry for help end with thanksgiving. But here the praise actually seeps into and through the lament. It is confident even in the midst of trouble. It is faith informing life, even life at its worst.

Notice also where the psalm begins: "in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge." This is an image that calls to mind the temple, a place where one finds relief from the struggle of life. It evokes a feeling common among the faithful today: that the sanctuary, the place of worship, refreshes us while the storms of life pass us by. Here we find confidence that God does hear and responds to our cries. We rediscover faith.

But faith doesn't exist for the sanctuary alone. The psalm moves out from there into the world, concluding with "Let your glory be over all the earth." The confidence we see in this psalm didn't happen overnight. I have to believe that such hope results from repeatedly moving from sanctuary into the world, from taking one's own experiences of God's saving grace and extending it into all areas of life. The psalmist's confidence is born of having been heard by God many times before and so coming to understand that God hears the cries of distress from all across the earth.

Faith informing life. This is the opportunity to be grasped. Its fruit is not compassion fatigue, but as the psalmist claims in verse 7, "a steadfast heart." Who can say that these days? I don't think much about enemies, but I see enough trouble to wear down the heart. But where I waver, God is steady. Where I doubt, God listens. Where I despair, God takes action. Confidence lies not in our own ability, but as the psalm says, in God's steadfast love that is "as high as the heavens" and God's faithfulness that "extends to the clouds."

There are so many reasons to give thanks to God not just for our own people, but among all peoples; not just for our own nation, but for all nations. Giving thanks is the foundation for praise, the basis of confidence in the grace of God. Giving thanks opens

our ears to the cries of distress, steadies our hearts, and gives motion to our limbs. Psalm 57 shows us a person whose faith has matured, whose practice is well-established, and whose confidence moves even into the struggles. It is a faith that is for us as well. As the psalmist says, "God will send forth steadfast love and faithfulness." And the earth and its people are the beneficiaries of this grace. Thanks be to God.

Amen.