

8-15-2021 SOUL SONG

HELP ME: A SOUL SONG OF LAMENT

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

Psalm 44; Matthew 27:45-54

August 15, 2021 - The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

Do you remember that moment when -if you are a parent- you sent your child off to elementary school or college or the military? It'd would be interesting this morning to hear what words of advice, what words of wisdom, you shared with your child as you released them into the world.

Some parents have told me they hoped to say something profound but finally, at that moment when the school bus arrived, the car was packed or unpacked, or it was time to go through the TSA line, the exhausted, distracted parent said something like "When you do your laundry, keep your whites and colors separate" or "Remember to floss" or "Don't lose your lunch money."

Moses, in much of the book of Deuteronomy, is sending the people of Israel off into Canaan. He's getting them ready to leave the wilderness behind as they settle into a new place...a new chapter...a new home.

Moses, if you remember the story, has led the people out of Egyptian slavery. He's gone through the sea with them and sweated out the lack of water and food in the wilderness of Sinai. He's argued with them. He's been ready to give up on them. Moses and the people have also had some amazing, holy moments with God.

Now, though, they are about to go on into Canaan. Moses tells them if they love God and follow all the rules, it's going to be good for them. Life is going to be good. It's going to be alright. Things are going to be fine.

In the middle of the 7th chapter of Deuteronomy (:12-ff), Moses tells the people if they will obey the laws of the LORD, "*he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you.*" The old shepherd promises the people they will "*be the most blessed of peoples, with neither sterility nor barrenness*" among them or their livestock. God will "*turn away*" from them every illness and all the dread illnesses that afflicted them in Egypt will be left behind. In fact, Moses says -getting pretty carried away in his effort to give the people confidence as they consider their future- God is going to show no pity to their enemies. While sparing the Israelites illness, God will inflict those illnesses on all the people who hate the Hebrews.

Moses is trying to help the people overcome their fear. The same way you try and encourage your child as they head off to elementary school or college or the military or to a new job: it's going to be okay. It's all going to be just fine. You're going to be included in every game at recess. You're going to ace every test. You're not going to fail. You're not going to get hurt.

Here's the thing: we may want to say those things to the people we love as they begin a new adventure, we may want to pour as much courage and confidence in them

as we can, but the truth is we can't promise that they're never going to experience what it is like to be shut out by other students. We can't promise them no one is ever going to tell them "we don't want to play with you." We can't promise that they're going to ace every test. We can't promise them that they're not going to fail.

Can we be honest?

The truth is that faithful people fail at things. Not everything they do or try or say works.

The truth is that faithful people go through times of exile when their world is turned upside-down by some crisis or outside force.

The truth is that faithful people hurt.

The truth is that faithful people sometimes get angry at God, and they wonder where God has gone.

The truth is that sometimes faithful people, who love God very much, hurt. Things don't go well for us.

Which brings us to the psalms of lament. We're in our series of messages on the Psalms titled **Soul Songs**, and today we're going to explore the Psalm 44 which is one of many psalms of lament.

Before we "dig" into Psalm 44, I need to say a couple things about how what we do with our hurt, our disappointed or broken hearts, in the church.

The first thing we often do with our hurt is we try and hide it. Often, that leads to a kind of emotional or spiritual double-life. And it can lead to all sorts of addictions. We deny our hurt, we bury our hurt, and we try to cover the pain with alcohol or drugs or material success or power or pornography.

A former lead pastor of this congregation used to deliver newspapers in the Philadelphia area as a young boy. It was a paper route that had him up and out of the house early in the morning. The boy's paper route took him by a donut shop, but the boy's mother always told him not to stop at the donut shop. She told him she didn't want him getting a donut before he came home for breakfast.

This boy would partner with another paper boy. They agreed they would stop by the donut shop, get a donut, and then make sure one another's face was clean as a whistle...with no evidence of sugar or powder. One day, the boy had a powdered donut and his friend thought it would be fun not to tell his colleague about the white powdered sugar all around his mouth.

The boy got home, after finishing his paper route. His mother took one look at him and asked, "Did you stop and get a donut?" The boy said, "No." The mother told him to wipe the powdered sugar off his face and go wash up for breakfast.

Sometimes we do our best to hide the hurt.

It doesn't work. It leads to more pain.

W. H. Auden expressed his grief in much the same way in his poem "Funeral Blues," which ends with these lines:

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the woods;*

For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The second thing we often do is look for easy answers.

I hear this all the time and it makes me cringe. My Mom heard this when my little brother was killed in an automobile accident at the age of 4. Some big city preacher tried to make sense of Eric's death and said, "God needed another angel and Eric was such a sweet boy so God chose him." I heard someone do the same thing not long ago. A couple had lost a child in childbirth, and some well-meaning person said, "You loved her so much that God decided to take her straight to heaven."

We look for answers. We look for explanations to make sense of our hurt and suffering.

Sometimes there is a connection between our actions and our suffering, but often stuff just happens. And we look for easy answers.

When we hurt, we look for easy answers to explain what is happening. But those easy answers raise more questions than they answer.

Back to the lament that is Psalm 44.

Psalm 44, according to some scholars, was a pre-exilic song written by or for a king who led the nation of Israel during a time of extraordinary crisis or defeat. This would have been before the nation was finally defeated by the Assyrian Army and the people were carried East into exile. Other scholars discuss how this pre-exilic lament might have been later re-worked another crisis. So this may be from the pre-exilic period or it may be from the period just over one hundred years before the birth of Christ when a Greek king -Antiochus Epiphanes- and his army swept into Judea. The despot and his troops captured Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple by slaughtering hogs in the Jewish holy of holies.

We don't know what the exact situation was but it was extreme.

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:

2

you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;

3

for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;
but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them.

The psalmist and the people, during this time of crisis, remember the faithfulness of God. Which is always a good thing to do when our world crashes in.

One of the challenges presented by crises is that in the middle of our pain, our panic, we lose a sense of perspective. We may think everything is hopeless and it has always been hopeless. But the psalmist begins by remembering other, better days when it was obvious God was with them. The psalmist refuses to let the present darkness erase the light of earlier days.

The psalmist, in this time of sorrow and crisis, remembers earlier days when God was clearly faithful and life was easier.

4

You are my King and my God;
you command victories for Jacob.

5

Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down our assailants.

6

For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.

7

But you have saved us from our foes,
and have put to confusion those who hate us.

8

In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever.

Even in the middle of this crisis, the psalmist wants to make clear that he still loves God. She still chooses God.

And, the psalmist is under no delusion that it is her strength and wisdom that has gotten her through tough times before. She knows God has the last word. She doesn't think it was her bow or her sword that was going to save her.

Behind every good thing in their life, they know, there is God. Ultimately, their salvation or deliverance or life doesn't depend on their strength or military weapons or strategic alliances or their wealth or their intelligence but it depends on the ultimate power of God.

We're thankful, she says to God. We're thankful for all you have done for us. We'll never stop being thankful. We don't take any of that for granted.

9

Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.

10

You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have gotten spoil.

11

You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.

12

You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.

13

You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

14

You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.

15

All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face

16

at the words of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

When things go wrong, when we hurt, when nothing we do seems to work, one of our first thoughts is almost always, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

Suffering can persuade us God is rejecting us.

Suffering can persuade us that God has turned God's back on us.

And that is how it feels for the psalmist.

The pain of the moment is one thing.

The deeper pain may be the belief that God has walked away from us. This sense of having been abandoned by God is pain on top of pain.

In our time of pain, we can feel rejected by God.

17

All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.

18

Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,

19

yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.

20

If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,

21

would not God discover this?

For he knows the secrets of the heart.

22

Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

The psalmist is honest and direct: he or she explains how they have done nothing to deserve what is happening. The nation doesn't deserve this kind of pain.

This week the psalmist has reminded me that one of the dangers of life crises, times of failure, is that we interpret them as confirmation that we are fatefully flawed. Many of us already have more than our share of self-doubt, many of us live with more than our share of shame, and then when we go through times of failure or pain or sadness we see that is proof that we are uniquely damaged. Uniquely unworthy.

"We wouldn't be going through this if there wasn't something wrong with us," we tell ourselves over and over again.

But the psalmist says, "Oh, no! Not me! Not us! You're not going to get off the hook, God, and try to make us think that if we had just been a little stronger, a little smarter, a little more faithful, this wouldn't be happening to us. There is no way on this good earth that we deserve what is happening to us. We've been faithful and we are suffering: how does that make sense?"

Sometimes we are rascals, sometimes we are mean, selfish, out-of-control wrecking balls going through life. But often we are doing our best, doing our best to love God and the people around us, and the roof caves in. Stuff happens. And that stuff, that trauma, that crisis, isn't allowed to have the final say over our value!

The psalmist says, "I don't know what is going on but you can't lay this at our feet. We've been playing life straight. We've been doing the right things."

23

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off forever!

24

Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

25

For we sink down to the dust;

our bodies cling to the ground.

I can't speak for you, but when I have been at the end of my rope, when I have received heart-breaking news, I have ended up on the floor. I have ended up on the ground. Literally.

The psalmist fires questions at God. The psalmist attempts to get God. Because they are about done. They are about finished. They have come to the end of their rope.

Rise up, come to our help.

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

At the end of the psalm, the psalmist goes back to the beginning: the psalmist remembers the faithfulness of God.

Sometimes, when you've lost all hope, when nothing seems to make sense, you throw yourself into the deep truth that God is faithful. God's love is unwavering.

This is, I believe, what faith is when you come right down to it: trusting that at the center of all things there is this love that is steadfast. That never wavers.

When I was on the island of Hawaii, I went out to the part of the island where the lava was flowing across the ground. In fact, I stood and watched the lava move down a two-lane, country blacktop road and consume, one by one, the trees in the woods along the highway.

Then, I walked out on the lava that had cooled, that had hardened, and I saw the lava flowing into the sea.

What I realized was that the lava -the magma- was beneath our feet. We were standing on it. Whether we could see it or not. That's the way it is with God's love: we're always standing on it. Whether we see it or not. Whether we feel it or not.

One of the toughest things in life is to love someone and have them not really understand how deep that love goes.

Years ago, someone I love very much was going through an awful time. I knew that. I knew the person I loved wasn't seeing straight because the pain in her life at that moment kept her from seeing straight. I knew she was having a difficult time seeing things accurately. *(Remember that, okay, if someone you know is in a painful, dark place and they don't seem to be able to see you or trust your love?)*

We talked on the phone. We texted. We exchanged gifts. But now, in this particular, dark moment, she was pushing me away. The line between us went down. She went silent. And she didn't trust my love for her.

So I got in my car and I drove 560 miles. I sat outside her house and called her. I was told she couldn't see me. So I sat outside her house for an hour or two. I left a gift on her doorstep. The thing about love is that, sometimes, you have to respect someone else's doubt about your love even when your love is true. So, I started my car and drove the 560 miles back to Indiana. I didn't want her to feel pushed or uncomfortable,

I wanted her to know she was loved. But the pain in her life made it difficult for her to see it or believe it.

On this day when we are exploring a psalm of lament, I thought it would be a good thing to hear again the story of Christ's passion. I wanted us to hear again how he chose the cross because of his love for us. I wanted us to hear again how he was marched through the city. I wanted us to hear again how he chose the nails rather than the safety of Galilee. I wanted us to hear again how he chose to speak the truth rather than embrace the safety that silence would have brought him. I wanted us to hear again how he loves the world, how he loves us, even when the crowds laughed at him. I wanted us to hear again that the moment when he breathed his last wasn't his last

moment, but that God had refused to let the pain, the ugliness, the death have the last word.

Frederick Buechner writes: *“The worst isn’t the last thing about the world. It’s the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It’s the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.”*

In another place, Buechner says, *“Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing.”*

We don’t have to hide our pain. It is okay not to be okay.

We can be honest.

Maybe it helps to know we always stand, even when life is tough beyond words, on a love that will not let us go.