

Psalms in the Night
Sermon on Psalm 77
Sunday July 1, 2007
Trinity United, Ottawa
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*“In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.” NRSV Psalm 77:2*

How often do you lie awake through the night thinking happy thoughts and giving thanks to God? Not too often, eh?

Our insomniac hours in the dark tend to be reserved for fears and worries, self doubt and depressed thoughts. And if God even enters our minds at these times, we tend to doubt and distrust God’s loving Presence. It is out of this common experience that St John of the Cross gave us the term for a Christian’s crisis of faith - “the dark night of the soul.”

Reading Psalm 77 this time, it was this yearning of one who prayed all night without comfort that captured my compassion - my gut ‘feeling with.’ I recognized the dilemma that we hear so often, and I have shared myself - that relentless ticking through the hours of night feeling swamped by worry and so alone. You’ve been there?

Reading on through this Psalm in my Bible, I encounter significant verses left out by our lectionary reading and the version we read in Voices United, but not excised from the raw contemporary version in the Message that you heard as well. Rather than leaping incomprehensibly from verse 2 to 11, from insomnia to praise, in the *whole* Psalm 77 we move with the psalmist through his feelings of anger and resentment, his self pity and dark thoughts of abandonment by God, “Just my luck...the High God goes out of business the moment I need him.” Reading this prayer poem aloud, I am struck by the psalmist’s real fear that God’s love has run out for him or that God isn’t there at all.

Our lectionary is guilty of “cleaning up our prayers before God” - removing the railing at God that is the human shadow side of any honest and intimate relationship with the Creator. A pastoral mistake, many would agree. Maybe it isn't nice or polite to doubt God or rage at God - or even curse God for not cursing our enemies, but those responses are part of almost anyone's journey of faith. In life, we will all inevitably have to cross some deserts of loss and disappointment and despair...where the 'living water' seems more of a mirage than an oasis. We will naturally be angry. And that is no time to stop talking honestly about our feelings with God in prayer!

The beauty of praying the psalms and saying the psalms, alone and especially together, is that they draw us together in our common humanity and model for us how to talk to God without self-censorship. Psalms demonstrate that since ancient times genuine prayer has meant not trying to hide our extreme or irrational thoughts and our negative feelings from God - or ourselves! The Psalms are anything but 'best behaviour' prayers, teeter-tottering as they do between complaints to God and confidence in God, between feelings of intimacy and abandonment.

Perhaps the lectionary removes the unsettling parts of the poems because they fear that the psalmists' emotional railings about a God who is seen as a vengeful judge, a smiter of enemies or a punishing parent will pollute our understanding of who Jesus' God of love and forgiveness really is. But surely we can recognize a person's *misunderstandings* of God in the Bible and in life? As one comentator noted: “Our scriptures include lots of accurate records about peoples' misguided thinking about God.” We can handle hearing the unfair things a very hurt person spews from their wound - because it isn't aimed at us? God, be assured, can handle our worst and knows our best.

The psalms reassure us that even in our angriest moments and darkest doubts, we are just like other faithful people. Psalmists spew expressions of meanness and

vengefulness, curse and blame like a hurting, angry teenager shouting “I hate you!” at the parent he knows will love him, no matter what. The Psalms are awfully real! They do not theologize and describe God. They reveal humans relating to God - for better and for worse.

Psalms are like uncut spiritual journals where the faithful have let it all out - in a way that doesn't hurt anybody. God, like a good parent or therapist, can listen to our most irrational rage and blame. And in listening and still loving us, God proves our worst fears and doubts are wrong.

The balm of the psalms is how they lead us through this process of healing our hurt and renewing our hope in God. We can follow the path of Psalm 77 and many others. The Psalmist vents feelings and voices doubts and disappointments directly to God. Once all that is emptied out, the heart and mind naturally begin to float other more hopeful possibilities. We begin to understand our life in a different light. Even in the night!

Memories of God's steadfast support in the past begin to surface...the story of deliverance in the Exodus. Evidence of God's creative presence in the world begins to balance out our blame. The presence of the loving faithful around us and over time who have prayed these same psalms, begin to buoy us up. Gradually the psalmist moves from preoccupation with his personal misery to a wider 'we' perspective on life...and the light begins to dawn.

In Philip Yancy's book “The Bible Jesus Read” he quotes a letter from the chess master Anatoly Sharansky in his prison cell in the Soviet Gulag, where for 13 years he read and studied all 150 Psalms. “What does this give me?” Sharansky wrote. “Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of great hopes.”

The Psalms show us how humans struggle to believe in the face of real evil. How other people have moved from a sad bad place in the night to positive thinking. They

are soul therapy, diving deep with us into the dark night, and helping us discover there the surprising bouyancy of our faith. They lead us to re-member - to put ourselves back together again - with our loving Creator, to see ourselves as one among many, lifted by our community of hope.

“Your way was through the sea. Your path through mighty waters. Your footprints could not be seen, but by the hand of Moses and Aaron you led your people.”

Maybe we could all choose a psalm that resonates with our darkest moments to keep by our bedsides? Its words can serve as concrete evidence that in our misery we are not alone. And reading or reciting that psalm, we too may find that we can get to a good place where we once again feel assured of a God with us

The act of praying, even in anger and doubt, is evidence that we do still hope and believe there is a divine listener, so praying the psalms helps our unbelief. When we read every verse with feeling, we do feel differently. We find that we have survived another dark night - ready with new thoughts to greet the new dawn.