

# *Preaching the Prayers of the Old Testament*

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When the community of faith gathers for worship, the sanctuary fills with persons who bring a myriad of hurts and hopes before the altar. The strong and the weak are there, each bearing their victories and their defeats; the lovely and the lonely are there, each seeking a place in the fellowship of God; those brimming with faith are there, sharing a pew with someone broken by doubts and fears. The preacher who commits to sharing fully in life of the congregation will commit, therefore, to a ministry of proclamation that invites the whole body to hear their names being called.<sup>1</sup> To each and all the message will regularly extend both permission and invitation: permission to be fully human before God; invitation to yield both the celebration and the sorrow of life to the transforming graces of God. This message is especially appropriate for the Lenten season as Christians gather to reflect on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The passion narratives of course provide the distinctive Christian emphases for the Lenten season. But close attention to the Gospels' presentation of Jesus makes clear that Jesus himself understood his passion in the context of a larger story which is indispensable for the church's message. Jesus' cry from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—is a quotation from Psalm 22 (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). It is a quotation that signals more than simply Jesus' knowledge of a particular psalm. With his use of a typical prayer from the Old Testament lament tradition, Jesus enters fully into both the life and liturgy of his Jewish forebears. Jesus' entry into this world, especially as modelled by his appropriation of Psalm 22, may serve as an important paradigm for preaching the prayers of the Old Testament during the Lenten season.<sup>2</sup>

## *I. Psalm 22 as Paradigm for the Lenten Journey*

Lent summons the church to a special season of reflection and proclamation. It is a summons to prepare not only for Easter but also for Holy Week; to appropriate not only the "Hallelujah!" that reverberates off the walls of an empty tomb, but also the anguished cry "My God, my God why?" that sunders the darkness of Golgotha. During Lent a primary responsibility of the church is to proclaim the truth that both the celebration and the cry are authentic and faithful responses to life in the shadows of the cross.

The prayers of the Old Testament represent an important, though much neglected, resource for both the theology and the proclamation of Lent.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most cultivated biblical resources for our preaching during this season, the prophets and the evangelists, convey God's intentions for humanity through authoritative exhortations and admonitions. Prayers offer a different vantage point. As human discourse directed to God, prayers are revealing of what it means to be in relationship with God *from the human perspective*. Particularly during the Lenten season, when liturgical emphases encourage reflection on the place of suffering and joy in the life of faith, Old Testament prayers of lament and praise, the two principal types of prayer attested in the Old Testament, can play a vital role in gathering the community. These prayers assert that both the blessed and the broken have a voice before God.

One entry into these prayers is through Psalm 22, a psalm that combines in one prayer an extended lamentation (vv.1- 21) and a song of praise (vv.22-31). Although the psalm's opening cry of distress, quoted by Jesus on the cross, is traditionally included in the lectionary readings for Good Friday, the structure of the psalm suggests that the language of lament and praise are not to be understood apart from one another. This joining of lament and praise in a single offering of public worship is a peculiarly appropriate paradigm for proclamation that seeks to gather both the broken and the blessed in a common celebration.

The preacher searching for a textual focal point for a series of Lenten sermons could do no better than to return again and again to the shrill question that introduces and informs the lamentation of Psalm 22:1-21: "My God, my God why...?" At the outset a word about the psalm's movement towards praise in vv. 22-31 will be instructive, for this will help orient listeners to the truth that lamentation is a journey towards God, not a final destination. But it can be equally comforting to proclaim that lamentation is important in itself as part of the dialogue with God. A suggestive signal of lament's importance is the fact that the cry of distress in Psalm 22 is sustained through 21 verses. This portrait of suffering *in extremis* invites both preacher and parish to reflect on the truth that the root causes of lamentation can rarely, if ever, be easily dismissed or glibly resolved. Some life experiences simply do not permit a quick move to praise: their disruption of our stability is too extensive; their assault on what is precious to us is too threatening; the doubt and the anger that follows in their wake is too overwhelming. Neither life nor liturgy can continue with business as usual.

Psalm 22 explores this deep and threatening realm of suffering, in typical Hebraic fashion, by linking the suppliant's cry for help to three interrelated causes: God is negligent (vv.1-2); others have ridiculed and attacked without mercy (vv.6-8, 12-13, 16-18); and the suffering one, in the face of God's abandonment and public humiliation, disintegrates from life to death (vv.14-15).<sup>4</sup> Each of these sources of despair for the community of faith—God's absence, society's abuse and abandonment, and personal anguish—may invite a sermon in itself, each one prefaced by the relentless question of the psalmist, "My God, my God, why?"

Indeed, the preacher may find it instructive to show that the cry for help in Psalm 22 is but one example of the larger genre of lament in the Old Testament. A great number of prayers in the Old Testament proclaim the truth that even the worst in life can be held up to God. One might turn to the numerous prayers that raise hard questions about God's absence from the community of faith (e.g., Exod. 32:11-14; Jer. 14:7-9; Job 23:1-17; Psalm 74; Lam. 1; especially vv. 2, 7, 17, 21; 5:20-24).<sup>5</sup> One might explore the sense of persecution and alienation that finds expression in prayers such as Num. 11:11-15, Jer. 11:18-21, 15:15-18, Job 10:1-22, or Psalms 69 and 109. Or one might track the ebb and flow of human anguish before God with commentary provided by prayers such as Psalms 9-10, 42-43, and 88.

Each of these extended probes into the "Why?" questions generated by Psalm 22 needs to be mindful of two things. First, such laments are typically interlaced with petitions.<sup>6</sup> The cry of distress that sustains Ps. 22:1-21, for example, contains two petitions, v.11 and vv.19-21, both reiterating the suppliant's need of and trust in God's abiding presence. In the midst of proclaiming the truth of lamentation, the minister will strive not to plunge either the weak or the strong recklessly into despair. It is the petition that links lament with the resolute hope that God will hear and act. The preacher who stays closest to the biblical witness is the one who guides the congrega-

tion gathered in lament to pray without ceasing “O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!” (Ps. 22:19).

At the same time, if our proclamation of lament is to be true to the biblical pattern, we must resist the easy exit from sorrow to joy. Again Psalm 22 is instructive. Lament persists throughout vv.1-21. Praise sounds forth in vv.22-31. It is suggestive to consider, however, that at the critical juncture between v.21 and v.22<sup>7</sup> lament enters into what E. Davis has aptly called “a space empty of meaningful language.”<sup>8</sup> Petitions have been laid at the altar, the cry of pain has gone forth. Will there be new words or only sustained silence?<sup>9</sup>

The season of Lent is a time for pondering the interval represented in the space between v.21 and v.22. We should not glibly proclaim that the transition from lament to praise is either automatic or immediate. As part of the preparation for Good Friday, the minister may find it instructive to lead the congregation more deeply into the dark recesses of the passage from lament to praise.

Psalm 88, a lament that focuses unrelentingly on the silence of God and the darkness of the journey of faith, is a good text for inviting entry fully into the anguish of Golgotha. It insists that the world of faith can be a world where there are no answers; that sometimes life feels more like death, and God seems more absent than present. Those who have cried out to God (v.1) only to be enveloped in darkness (v.18), will need little more to hear their names being called than the vivid description that comes in Ps. 88:4-5:

I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am like those who have no help,  
like those forsaken among the dead,  
like the slain that lie in the grave,  
like those whom you remember no more,  
for they are cut off from your hand.

Those who may be gathered up by this lamentation, however, will also be able to identify with this prayer’s insistence that even in the depths of silence and darkness, the cry for help is a resolute act of faith (cf. vv.1-2, 9, 13).<sup>10</sup>

Psalm 22 is a good text for Lent because it insists that lament is a persistent and necessary practice of faith in the journey with God. But this prayer is equally important as a paradigm for our preaching because it does not end with lament. Verses 22-31 trace the transition out of lament into praise. The movement is accomplished in two stages. First the afflicted one celebrates deliverance by offering thanksgiving in the midst of the community of faith (vv.22-26). This one has travelled the hard path that moves from the silence of God (v.2) to dialogue with God (v.24); from public scorn and humiliation (v.6) to fellowship and fraternity in the body of faith (v.22); and from the fear of death (vv.14-18) to the hope for an enduring life (v.26).

Verses 27-31 signal a second move in the journey from lament to praise. Thanksgiving is never a private affair, never a celebration restricted to the “brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation” (v.22). Rather, it is an assertion of faith in the abiding presence of God that provides the basis and the substance for praise that extends to the “ends of the earth” (v.27). Such praise serves as proclamation, not only for those who have directly experienced its antecedent causes, but also for future generations yet unborn (v.30), for whom memory will serve as testimony. To all who are tempted by the hard realities of life to end their journey in lamentation, Psalm 22

marshalls the case for the most important confession and the most fervent hope of all: “the Lord has acted” (v.31).

Just as it is useful to show that the cry for help in Ps. 22:1-21 is an example of the larger genre of lament in the Old Testament, so it can be instructive to relate vv.22-31 to the wider context of Old Testament thanksgiving and praise. Verses 22-26 comprise a typical thanksgiving prayer. These verses assume a setting in which an individual or a community comes to the sanctuary to offer thanks because God has answered a cry for help. A number of thanksgiving psalms expand on the poetic imagery of Psalm 22, (e.g., Psalms 30, 34, 65).

It is helpful to remember, however, that in Israel thanksgiving is almost always particularized in a human face and a specific life situation. Thus in providing commentary on Psalm 22:22-26, the preacher may wish to refer to texts which illustrate how this standard liturgical rhetoric can be appropriated by specific individuals in their own life circumstances. For example, for Hannah (I Sam. 2:1-10) the fulfillment of motherhood is cause to give thanks; for Hezekiah (Isa. 38:9-20; cf. II Kings 20) it is the restoration of health; for Jonah (Jonah 2:1-9) it is deliverance from the snares of death. When the minister summons the congregation to offer thanks for God’s gracious acts, these Old Testament models can constructively shape the worship experience by inviting the community to search their own stories for concrete reasons to rejoice.<sup>11</sup>

While verses 22-26 comprise a typical song of thanksgiving, verses 27-31 expand to a hymn of praise that is also typical in Hebraic prayer. Praise may begin with thanksgiving for specific experiences of God’s grace, but in the Old Testament praise can rarely, if ever, be contained by such limited preoccupations. Praise is adoration of God. It is occasioned not by the satisfaction of human needs but by the recognition of divine character. It is a response to God that can neither be confined by a set liturgical practice nor fully expressed by a standardized rhetoric. In Psalm 22, the compulsion to praise is portrayed as being so great as to extend even to the realm of the dead (v.29). Although such a statement flies in the face of most Hebrew thinking about life after death, it is nevertheless a splendid example of the exuberance of praise that inevitably explodes all traditional boundaries.

Outside Psalm 22 such extravagance informs the poetic vision of a number of prayers of praise. In Psalm 136, for example, Israel’s narration of world history from creation to settlement in Canaan is interrupted 26 times by the repeating doxology “for his steadfast love endures forever,” as if to suggest that not one incident can be reported without pausing to offer praise to God; in Psalm 146 a series of participial clauses (vv.6-9) heap divine attribute upon attribute in explication of the single summons “Hallelujah!” that governs the beginning and the ending of the prayer; in Psalm 150 the summons to shout “Hallelujah!” which repeats 12 times in the space of six verses, proclaims in itself the preoccupation of “everything that breathes” (v.6).

I have suggested that Psalm 22 may serve as an important paradigm for our Lenten preaching. It bears witness to both the persistence and necessity of lament (v.1: “My God, my God, why?”) and the authentic basis for thanksgiving (v.24: “he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him”). It summons the community beyond private gratitude to the proclamation of praise that invites all the world to “turn to the Lord,” not only with the adoration of worship (v. 27), but also with a ministry of service (v.30). The pedagogical dividend of focusing on Psalm 22 is this prayer’s assertion, in keeping with the larger biblical story which it reflects, that both lament and praise define the journey towards God. The journey is not marked exclusively either by the

one or the other, but rather reaches its most critical and important juncture at the pained yet expectant intersection of lament and praise. Neither lamentation that cannot persist in hope, nor hope that is uninformed by despair sufficiently embody the biblical witness to life in relationship with God.

## II. *Proclaiming the Truth of Lament and Praise*

Jesus' self-identification with the words of Psalm 22 invites us to view the Hebraic tradition of prayer as the context for interpreting his life and death. By entering fully into Israel's world of lament and praise, Jesus shows anew that God knows the human experiences of joy and suffering from the inside. As J. Barton has put it in his Lenten meditations, God

knows what it is like to hang between these two poles, and  
to experience joy not as infinite serenity but as a fierce  
happiness snatched from the jaws of darkness and despair.<sup>12</sup>

Faith's suspension between the two poles of suffering and joy is both the summons and the celebration of the Lenten proclamation. It is a proclamation rooted in the life and faith of Israel, a proclamation embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus.

I know of no more compelling commentary on the central truth of this proclamation than that construed by Wallace Stegner in *Crossing to Safety*. In a scene from near the end of the book, Sally is in the tiny chapel in Borgo San Sepolcro, staring at Piero della Francesca's painting of the resurrected Christ. On the left the painting depicts a barren landscape with naked trees reaching toward a darkening sky. To the right the landscape is alive with foliage, human dwellings, and bursts of sunlight. Between these scenes of life and death Francesca places the resurrected Christ, with one foot still in the tomb, as if still in the act of stepping out. In Christ's right hand is a staff holding a flag of victory. On his left hand and left foot are the stigmata. His side shows the wound from the soldier's spear, still dripping drops of blood.

Sally's husband and the friends with whom they are sharing their Italian vacation, have looked casually at the painting and moved on. Sally, however, lingers behind, transfixed by the face of Francesca's Christ. Despite the golden halo over Christ's head and the flag of victory in his hand, his eyes stare into the foreground with a memory of pain, as if to suggest that "if resurrection had taken place, it had not yet been comprehended."<sup>13</sup> Sally's husband wondered at first what it was about this painting that claimed his wife's attention. Gazing at her, probed up before this painting on the crutches that had supported her since the childhood bout with polio, his eyes returned again to this face of Christ. Gradually, but with increasing clarity, he saw with Sally the truth that stared at them both in the eyes of this one who until moments ago had been horribly dead. The truth and the promise of the resurrected Christ, he now could see, is that "those who have been dead understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived."<sup>14</sup>

Such is the substance and the summons of Lenten preaching, the truth about joy and suffering in the life of faith. Only those who have died can understand the fullest dimensions of living. In the life and liturgy of Israel and in the passion of Jesus, the cry of distress and the doxology of praise constitute both the worship of God and the proclamation that extends to the ends of the earth.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On preaching that seeks to gather and name the whole congregation, especially the wounded, see Paul D. Duke, "The Pastoral-Liturgical Context of Preaching to Pain: The Preacher as Shepherd," David Nelson Duke, Paul D. Duke, *Anguish and the Word. Preaching That Touches Pain* (Greenville, SC: Smyth and Helwys, 1992), 3-20.
- <sup>2</sup> A number of very helpful studies explore the importance of Psalm 22 as hermeneutical context for the passion of Jesus. Particularly instructive are J. Reumann, "Psalm 22 at the Cross: Lament and Thanksgiving for Jesus Christ," *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 39-58; J.L. Mays, "Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion," *Theology Today* 42 (1985), 322-331; P.D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 100-111.
- <sup>3</sup> On the theology of Old Testament prayer and its importance for the church see S.E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 260-295.
- <sup>4</sup> C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 169-172, has shown that in the Old Testament the act of lamentation is characterized typically by three subjects: God, others, and self.
- <sup>5</sup> On God's absence and its consequences for faith see S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), S.E. Balentine, *The Hidden God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), G.T. Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence. Suffering, Death, and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> For the structural and theological significance of petition in the movement from lament to praise see especially the seminal work of C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 259-280.
- <sup>7</sup> The shift from lament to praise likely begins in the second half of v. 21, which in the Hebrew text (v. 22) finishes with a verb that normally means "you have answered me." This text suggests that a change has occurred in the suppliant's condition as a result of having received (or having been assured of receiving) an answer from God. Most modern translations, however, follow the Septuagint and emend the Hebrew verb to a noun form meaning "my poor afflicted being" (e.g., REB: "Save me from the lion's mouth, *this poor body* from the horns of the wild ox").
- <sup>8</sup> E. Davis, "Exploring the Limits: Form and Function in Psalm 22," *JSOT* 53 (1992), 99.
- <sup>9</sup> It is both commonplace and judicious to focus on repentance during the season of Lent. Although I would not wish to minimize the importance of the confession of sin for this or any other season, it is instructive to note that in Psalm 22 there is no mention of sin as being the cause of distress. Instead of confession, this prayer shifts responsibility for suffering to God: "you (God) have laid me in the dust of death" (v. 15). The occasion for the lament is the question "Why?" (v. 1, *lamah*), a question which in the Old Testament is characteristically loaded with protest and accusation. If indeed we are to know Jesus as one who enters fully into the human experience, then Jesus' use of lament should not be regarded by us as inappropriate.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf., W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 78-81.
- <sup>11</sup> On the importance of the link between praise and human story see Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 199-224; cf., W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).
- <sup>12</sup> J. Barton, *Love Unknown. Meditations on the Death and Resurrection of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 5.
- <sup>13</sup> W. Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (New York: Random House, 1987); 221.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.