

Get Lost, God! A Sermon on Psalm 39

J. Clinton McCann, Jr.

Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Over one hundred of the Psalms show up at least once in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, but Psalm 39 is not among them. Apparently, the framers of the lectionary agree with the psalmist's originally stated intent – that is, he should have kept his big mouth shut!

But he didn't; he couldn't. A "fire burned" (v. 3) within him, and so he did what he said he wouldn't do. The words came pouring out, and some of them weren't very nice. According to Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, most churches are places of "suffocating niceness";¹ and in a context that is suffocatingly nice, words like the psalmist's just won't do. There is no slot in the lectionary for Psalm 39!

Actually, the psalmist's words are fairly mild at first and even rather polite: "Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days" (v. 4). It sounds like the famous verse from Psalm 90, "So teach us to count our days/that we may gain a wise heart" (v. 12). And the psalmist's subsequent musings in vv. 4-6 and 11 on the transience of human life also sound a lot like Psalm 90 which appears in the lectionary three times. This must not be the problem for the framers of the lectionary.

Nor does the problem seem to be the psalmist's request for deliverance and relief in vv. 8-10 and 12, nor his affirmation in v. 11 that God punishes sin. All this is fairly standard biblical fare. And along the way, the psalmist even says at least one thing which is downright positive. It's v. 7, which happens to be precisely the central line of the psalm: "My hope is in you." But, as it turns out, this powerful affirmation at the heart of the psalm cannot compensate for what the framers of the lectionary clearly found unacceptable – the psalmist's final words in v. 13: "Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more." In other words, "Get lost, God!"

"Get lost!" of course, is not a very nice thing to say, especially to God! But let's be honest; after all, that's what the psalmist was doing. Haven't you ever felt like telling God to "Get lost"? Or maybe you *have told* God to "Get lost!" Or maybe you are a little more polite than the psalmist, so you express your doubts and feelings of despair in the form of a question – How could you, God? Where were you, God? Why didn't you, God? How could you, God, let a gunman kill thirty-two innocent people on a peaceful college campus? Where were you, God, when my mother died of cancer? Why didn't you do something, God, before that tsunami swept away thousands of unsuspecting people? Come to think of it, God, why didn't you design a world where our days weren't like "a few handbreadths" (v. 3) and where things turned out like they were supposed to?

Haven't you ever felt like asking such impertinent questions and maybe even telling God to "Get lost"? The psalmists do it all the time in these prayers which are often known as laments or complaints – laments or complaints, because the psalmists are boldly and brutally honest with God in articulating the rough places and the jagged edges of their lives and of human life in general. And these laments or complaints are certainly among the foremost biblical examples of prayer. Biblically speaking, you

see, it is OK to ask God difficult, impertinent questions, and even to tell God, amid life's seemingly unbearable difficulties, to "Get lost!" As Walter Brueggemann puts it, "How wondrous that these Psalms make it clear that precisely such dimensions of our life are the stuff of prayer."²

Jesus too asked God some impertinent questions. Remember his words from the cross (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which he borrowed from the opening line of Psalm 22. We probably cannot imagine very easily that Jesus would have told God to "Get lost!" but he comes pretty close! John Goldingay even suggests that "Ps. 39 is a prayer Jesus might have prayed . . . [in Gethsemane], and one that believers on the way to resurrection still pray."³

It's OK – indeed, it's desirable and Christ-like – to pray Psalm 39, with all its doubts and expressions of disappointment and despair, and even its "Get lost, God!" Remember that the psalm's central verse, surrounded by all the doubt and despair, is an incredible affirmation spoken directly to God: "My hope is in you." It's not that the psalmist was confused or inconsistent. Rather, he was simply being true-to-life. Reflecting upon another of the prayers of lament or complaint in the Psalter and recalling Martin Luther's description of the psalmist's mood as "the state in which hope despairs, and yet despair hopes at the same time," James L. Mays says that what we learn from psalms like 13, 22, and 39 is this: "The agony and the ecstasy belong together as the secret of our identity."⁴

The agony and the ecstasy belong together! Human life is, our lives are, not only maddeningly short and sometimes almost unbearably frustrating, but also and simultaneously, they are incredibly and mysteriously wonderful. Death would not be so painful if life were not so wonderful! Despair and hope, suffering and glory, the agony and the ecstasy, belong together. Or, we Christians might want to put it this way – the cross and the resurrection belong together as the secret of our identity.

One word of caution is in order here – some of you may be uncomfortable, as I am, that the prayers of lament or complaint seem to portray God as a cosmic scorekeeper—"Remove your stroke from me;/ I am worn down by the blows of your hands" (v, 10) – and a divine micro-manager of the world (in which case, it would seem, God is not doing too well!). In terms of the questions I mentioned earlier, I don't believe that God could have magically stopped the shooter at Virginia Tech; I don't think that God willed or caused my mother to die of cancer at an all-too-young age; and I don't understand God to be in the business of causing earthquakes. But at the same time, I simply cannot conceive of any of these events apart from God's involvement in the world. So, when I pray these psalmic prayers, I do so not to accuse or blame God, but rather to protest that things are not right and that life can and does hurt so badly. Psalm 39 and the other laments or complaints in the Book of Psalms invite us and enable us to take our pain and the pain of the world to God in prayer; and ultimately, we trust, God also feels that pain, and God shares it. For God, as well as for us human beings, the agony and the ecstasy belong together, as the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ so clearly reveal.

Friends, the psalmist was right. Our days are "a few handbreadths." Like a "passing guest," we won't be here long. And that is sad, as even my four-year-old daughter recognizes and poignantly articulates when she says, "Daddy, I don't want to die." I don't either! But I will and she will and you will. In John Goldingay's words again, Psalm 39 "invites us to live life in light of the fact that we are on our way to death";

but, he continues, this “does not imply living in gloom and fear, but making the most of every day because we know our days will not last for long.”⁵

Friends, the psalmist was right—our hope is in God! So, live life urgently and fully. Revel in life’s incredible wonder and indescribable ecstasy. Protest its innumerable injustices and abysmal agony. And pray! Pray honestly and boldly; and it’s OK if every now and then, you find yourself telling God to “Get lost!”

Notes

- 1 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 149.
- 2 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary’s Press, 1988), 31.
- 3 John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 565.
- 4 James L. Mays, “Psalm 13,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980):281-282.
- 5 Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 565.