

Preaching Psalms in Lent

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During Lent two years ago, my colleague and I began talking about a sermon series for the following Lent. We find talking about next year's liturgical season during the current season serves as real time corrective to our more unruly ideas. We thought about a series on Parables, a focus on the text of Holy Week throughout Lent, and then we briefly touched on Psalms – should we preach a series of Psalms? We came to no conclusion. A few weeks later, I was attending a preaching conference where Tom Long began his lecture saying, “I want to offer you a modest proposal to consider preaching a sermon series on the Psalms.” I didn't think it was quite a Road to Damascus moment, but it was telling that he addressed some of our initial points of resistance to preaching the psalms. Are the Psalms even meant to be preached? Can we navigate our way through Psalms that have less than uplifting parts that we usually conveniently ignore?

In response to this, we set the series with a few ground rules. We chose some that were not the usual “top ten” popular Psalms. We ended up choosing Psalms 1, 19, 77, 107, and 137. Each of these has challenges in structure and/or content. We also committed to preaching the whole Psalm, even the uncomfortable and unsettling portions. The sermon that follows uses Psalm 107 as its text. Psalm 107 has 43 verses about deliverance from trouble. The stanzas each describe a different situation of peril. In worship, we printed the entire Psalm and then had different parts of the sanctuary—choir, one side of the pews, then the other, then the balcony—read each particular “deliverance from distress” for which the Psalmist is giving thanks.

One final note is that our congregation suffered a devastating loss days before the beginning of Lent with the death of a young, beloved former pastor. Her colleagues, our congregation, and our community were still reeling from that loss, and these Psalms of lament, complaint, thanksgiving, praise, and prayer seemed to provide vocabulary and theological undergirding for expressions of our individual and communal grief.

“Particular” Psalm 107

The late, great Tryon, North Carolina-born jazz, blues, and R&B singer Nina Simone used to perform to some of the most eclectic audiences anyone could gather. Some came drawn by her civil rights activism, others for the blues or jazz, and still others because she was a classically trained pianist and composer. But, inevitably in her concerts, Nina Simone would say to the assembled, right before performing the gospel song *Children, Go Where I Send You*, “Y'all ever been to a revival meeting? You don't know what I'm talking about, do ya? Well, you in one now.”

Psalm 107 plunks us right down in the middle of a revival. Testimony is being given. The Psalmist asks, “Can I get a witness?!” And folks from the balcony and the choir, from front and back, young and old, strong and weak, one after another after another cries out: “Let me tell you about my life of trouble...and about the steadfast love of God!”

However, as Nina Simone knew in her life, as you and I know in our lives, as the Bible shows and tells, it's a *long* journey in any life to that moment of revival

and testimony. This Psalm reminds us that God's steadfast love is proven and experienced in moments of desperation, peril, loss, anger, and disorientation. That is the real trouble with Psalm 107: we don't like to think about it. We do not want to think of ourselves as suffering, even when we are. Suffering seems like failure, and we want to succeed. When someone is in distress and is offered help, what is often our refrain? "Oh, it is not that bad. I will get through this on my own." Did we cry out to the Lord in our distress? Not so much.

Psalm 107 is a full-throated cry of those who need, want, and expect God to come into their lives and put them back on solid ground. Can we believe that God is really present, capable of providing help in times of trouble? American society is addicted to the myth of personal responsibility and self-reliance. We trust in our own resources and put little faith in God's capacity for deliverance. A colleague tells about a contentious church finance committee meeting a couple of years ago. They were discussing what to do with an unexpected gift of \$25,000. She remembered,

Most of the committee members wanted the money to go toward mission, but our vice-chair was adamant about putting the money into our "rainy day" fund just in case our giving fell short. Another member countered, "Jesus did not say anything about storing up money for a rainy day. He calls us to sell the second coat and give the money to the poor." The vice-chair turned and said, "Jesus does not pay our gas bills." The other member looked at him for a moment and said, "Actually, he does." Sometimes, this is where we are: faith is all well and good, but when it comes to the real issues of life, we are on our own.¹

The New York Times reported that Gallup called 1,000 randomly selected American adults and asked them about happiness. Gallup inquired about their emotional status, work satisfaction, eating habits, illnesses, stress levels, and other indicators of their quality of life. The responses were plugged into a formula, and voila, they came up with a statistical composite for the happiest person in America. Gallup's answer: a tall Asian-American male, an observant Jew who is at least 65 and married, has children, lives in Hawaii, runs his own business, and has \$120,000 in household income.² Alas, happiness—or better said, well-being—is never a matter of formula, is rarely influenced by demographics, and is *not* built on avoiding low places, dark nights of the soul, or jarring events.

The movie *Up in the Air* features George Clooney working for a company that other companies hire when the company doing the hiring doesn't want to do the firing. In other words, Clooney's job is to fire people he's never met. When making the film, director Jason Reitman put out an ad for people who really had been fired in Detroit, in St. Louis, in Omaha to play parts of people being fired in the movie. And the response was larger than he had imagined. Using untrained actors in those roles, one of the things that stood out to Reitman was how honest and forthcoming the real-life characters were. According to Reitman, these folks found it somewhat "cathartic" to be able to say on camera in a movie that thousands of people would see exactly what it felt like to have their jobs taken from them.³

Real life is hard and unpredictable and perilous, carrying with it capacity for sadness and for joy, for despair and for hope. Psalm 107 is a psalm of hope and trust

and faith, but it traverses authentically rough terrain to get there. Those who do not know what suffering is cannot appreciate the truth of Psalm 107. Then again, we all suffer to some degree. We heard it around the room as we read the Psalm together; we *all* can give testimony, every single one of us. The lectionary, the list of scheduled readings for every Sunday, guts the power of this psalm by giving us just one example of suffering: physical hunger. But we just read all forty-three verses—you heard it. Here is suffering of every kind: those who suffer imprisonment, literally and figuratively; those who suffer physical and spiritual sickness; those who are nearly lost in a storm; those whose suffering is caused by nature and others by sin. Yet all of these people in great distress cry out to God and are delivered.

This psalm, the “lectionary part,” starts out general and poetic, but the rest of it gets very specific. Testimony is like that. This Psalm names names and situations and perils and fears; it names our broken places. Somewhere in this we all find ourselves, like it or not.⁴

Richard Lischer has taught at Duke Divinity School for 30 years. He just wrote a book about the death of his son. He begins the account this way:

Seven years ago, on the thirteenth day of April, my son called to tell me his cancer had returned. He was a grown man, but he told me his news like a boy. He said, “Hey, Dad, where’s Mom?” You would have thought he had just put a dent in the family’s new car or failed a final exam. He might have been in a little trouble and wanted his mother to buffer the rough edges. He said they had found tumors in quite a few places....Then he asked me to come to him. And that was all. I was not expecting the call. But then you never are. You are never adequately braced with feet planted and stomach muscles clenched. A phone call from your son. A familiar voice emerges from a piece of inexpensive black plastic. The voice has no body, and yet it makes a claim as firm and authoritative as flesh. It says “Hey, Dad” with an end stress on Dad that has always and in every circumstance meant trouble. “Hey, Dad,” and ordinary time stands still and the room begins to turn while you wait for the rest of the sentence to do its work.

“Why don’t you come over,” it says. The ruin in his voice becomes the new truth in your life, and your old life, the only one you’ve ever known or wanted, simply vanishes.⁵

If God’s steadfast love is to be trusted, if it is worthy of being called upon in this world, then God’s steadfast love needs to show up here. There has to be a voice of love that overcomes the voice of fear. What testimony can we give to the steadfast love of God in times of peril?

I was in Los Angeles not long ago and had the opportunity to visit Homeboy Industries, the amazing ministry founded by Fr. Greg Boyle to help young women and men escape gang life and establish themselves free from that peril. I had lunch at “Home Girl Café,” the breakfast and lunch spot using only former gang members and those trying to be former gang members as staff. We were led to our table by a woman whose neck was bandaged, covering the painful and slow work of removing gang tattoos. Later I heard her talking with a colleague about how grateful she was to have that job and not, as she said, “to be working the streets.” The man who brought

our order still had gang tattoos everywhere we could see and whose smile and direct eye contact seemed newly learned, but quite steady. “Is everything okay?” he asked before departing. He seemed to be asking himself as much as asking us. Finally, we left after lunch by way of the store where they sold t-shirts and hats to support the ministry. The cashier was a young woman, again bearing the signs of a former life in a gang. She said to me and to everyone around, “If you have questions, ask me anything. Ask me about the shirts, ask me about the hats, ask me about the Home Boy, ask me about my life...Really, ask me about anything. I’m telling you, I was gone, but I’m here....” In that place, for those young women and men, those jobs represented the particularity of God’s love to them. What testimony can we give to the steadfast love of God in times of peril?

Many remember “Mr. Rogers,” who had a children’s TV show for years until he died in 2003. Some years ago, Fred Rogers, who was an ordained Presbyterian minister, was invited to Hollywood to receive a special Emmy honoring his lifetime of work. When Fred Rogers stood up to speak, he said that he knew the room was filled with so many stars and celebrities, men and women who had achieved much. Rogers then took out a pocket watch and announced that he was going to keep thirty seconds of silence, and he invited everybody in the room to remember people in their past—parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others—who had helped them along the way, who had paid the price for their success, who had made them into the people they were today. It was a call to a particular testimony of steadfast love. And then Mister Rogers stood there looking at his watch and saying nothing. The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away, and before Fred Rogers tucked away his watch, one could hear all around the room people sniffing as they were moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf and who had given each of them many gifts.⁶ And in that glittering Hollywood setting built on so many false hopes and fake appearances, in their desert of hunger and thirst, they were filled. And in their gloom of self-promotion, they were freed. And in their storm of striving, everything was hushed as their silence gave testimony to their memory of a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. What testimony can we give to the steadfast love of God in times of peril?

God’s promises are rarely offered to us in the abstract. They are particular. God’s steadfast love doesn’t come sometime, somewhere. God’s steadfast love shows itself when you are in the desert of hunger, when you are parched with thirst for living water, when we sit in darkness and gloom, when something has imprisoned us, when we are sick, when we have made our life a mess, when our life has broken us, when we are caught in a storm, when the waters are about to overwhelm us. In these particular times, particular places, particular circumstances, particular relationships, we give thanks to the Lord for God’s steadfast love which shows up right there, right then, and does not leave us lost and wanting.

It’s like how we come for communion. We don’t just receive the idea of sustenance; we receive this bread and this cup, at this table, with these people, on this day, in this hour, bringing with us all our particular hopes and tears. Into our particular circumstance, God’s steadfast love delivers us. We live in this particular today, and we live into the promise of God’s steadfast love today, which will carry us to tomorrow.

A colleague wrote recently that his wife’s father had died several years ago at

this time of year, deep into Lent. She sat by his bedside on the last night, holding his hand. “What did you do all night long?” he asked. “What did you say?” “I ran out of things to say,” she explained, “so I sang all the Easter hymns I could remember and said, ‘Easter’s coming, Daddy, Easter’s coming.’”⁷

We live in this particular today. We live into the promise of God’s steadfast love today, and the truest word I can say to you by way of testimony is that love will carry us to tomorrow. Easter is coming.

Notes

1 Shawnthea Monroe, *Feasting on the Word – Year A*, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost, ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (WJK, 2011), 342-344.

2 Catherine Rampell, “America’s Happiest Man,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011.

3 Anthony Kauffman, “Toronto Film Festival: George Clooney’s ‘Up in the Air’ Spotlights Economic Trouble,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2009.

4 Shawnthea Monroe, *Feasting on the Word*, 344.

5 Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, (New York: Knopf, 2013), 88.

6 Tom Junod, “Can You Say... ‘Hero,’” *Esquire Magazine*, October, 1998.

7 John Buchanan, “Easter’s Coming,” *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2013.