

Mark 7:24-30

Psalm 146

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

September 5, 2021

Let us pray. O, God, when it seems like life is falling apart, be our refuge and our strength. Silence in us any voice but your own now, so that we may hear the word you have for us this day. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Our Psalm”

Many of you know that I was born and raised in the Christian faith – a lifelong Presbyterian – the kind where we went to church every single Sunday, no matter what. I know my life was the kind that was covered in prayer because one, Korean church prayer services are serious business, and two, because my parents loved God and loved us. As my own natural curiosity in faith became more developed as a young teenager, I remember one time asking my Appa, my dad, what his favorite book in the Bible was. He told me it was the psalms. I remember being surprised by that because my 12-year-old self thought the psalms were kind of boring, so I asked him why. He told me because the psalms gave him words to a range of prayers that he did not always have or know how to say ... but that there was always a psalm that could articulate it for him.

This memory came up for me recently as I’ve been feeling the weight and heaviness of the world again. I’m guessing you’ve been feeling it too. And in light of Sharon’s charge last week to make time to pray, I’ll be honest, I’ve been struggling to find the words to pray. And then I remembered my dad’s comment about the psalms and how they can offer us those words. And so as I was thinking ahead to my message for us today, I realized that if you’re like me, maybe along with the absence of the words to pray is the also the lack of space or time to just sit with the realities of our own emotions and reflections of all that is swirling around us. And so, since worship is a time where if we have come, we are trying to make space for the holy, I thought I would try something today and make space for that in this time together. I asked Pam if she’d be willing to assist me today through music as a way to give us space for prayer. And so interwoven through the word proclaimed will also be time to listen-to receive the prayer gifted to us through song-so we can have some intentional time to allow ourselves to hold the realities of our lives, maybe even to pray.

And so as the psalmist begins in our lectionary reading today, Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul-I will sing praises all my life long. Friends, let us begin by making space to recognize the real presence of our incredible God and give thanks

to the one who is in the midst of whatever we are holding and facing. Let us begin with acknowledging the one who loves us and will never let us go in gratitude and praise. Make some time to do that right now. (*Piano interlude on the theme of "praise"*)

Walter Brueggemann, theologian and a scholar of the psalms, says that some psalms were written for good times, when all is well and the world is sane and safe and orderly. He calls them psalms of orientation. I don't know about you, but making some time to sit in praise and gratitude of God helped me to orient myself.

The trouble, of course, is that life is not always like that, even though we wish that it were. And so, Brueggemann says, there are psalms of disorientation, written for times when things look bleak and people are feeling weak and anxious, times when we experience the world "falling apart," times of radical change when old certainties no longer hold.

There are actually more psalms of lament than any other kind throughout the 150 psalms, and so if you've ever been looking for words to pray in lament, in anger or angst or in sorrow, there is probably a psalm for it. The thing is, with the long list I could give you about everything that is wrong in our world right now, no one wants to hear it because no one likes to feel heavy or deep in grief about anything. In fact, we are a people who would rather become numb or desensitized to deal with the realities of sorrow. People will go to great lengths to avoid pain.

And yet, I have found that sometimes in our deepest grief, in our cries and lament and naming those realities honestly, that truth and glimmers can be found. In these days we are living in, of fires, floods, war, violence, climate change and fighting for safe health care for all people, especially women, we may feel like we are pleading and arguing with our God, our neighbor, our world to be better, to do better, to act with love. Like the Syrophenician woman who pleads with Jesus and gives him the analogy of the dogs even eating the crumbs under the table, it might even feel like we are asking for scraps of hope, awareness, justice, and joy.

Grief and lament is usually associated with the death of a loved one, but it can also be for friendships that have ended, losing your community, missing the certainty you once had, questioning your judgment, releasing who you once were, feeling lost and unanchored or losing traditions that you loved. And so, friends, I want us to take a few minutes to reflect on the heaviness and grief we may be holding right now, remembering that God can hear the prayers we do not have the words for. "*Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.*" (Piano interlude on the theme of "grief")

“Tears: You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. A horse cantering across a meadow, the high school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.

They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next.”

That quote was written by Frederick Buechner in his book “Whistling in the Dark”. I read it this week and it gave me a flicker of hope in the midst of the heaviness and grief I have been feeling. We all felt it earlier this spring, didn't we? That flicker of hope? I know I felt it as vaccines were developed for this ongoing pandemic, death rates and hospitalizations were finally going down and we were making plans to travel and see family we had not seen in over a year. We booked vacations, you know, well into the fall, so we could “play it safe” and make sure things were really safe. I was getting excited to see you all again live and in person in this space...and then, well, you know. The delta variant hit and vaccinations somehow became politicized and now with every runny nose, my 3-year-old is getting a “nose test”. Hospitals are filling up again and even a dear colleague of mine who is fully vaccinated is in the hospital fighting for breath.

Where should we go next? Where do our tears take us? How do we move from the lament and grief?

Again, if we are to use the psalms to pray, Walter Brueggemann provides an insightful perspective and a structured overview of the Psalms using three categories: **orientation, disorientation, and new orientation**. So what is that new orientation?

In several psalms along with the one we read today, the psalmist's bold suggestion is that God is stable when all else is not, that God is in the new reality as well as the old. I think this is important news for all of us. We are to live into hope-to structure our lives and to build it upon hope.

This can be frustrating because as scripture tells us, hope is that which is unseen. We dream of a different reality and build into a new hope, knowing that God is already there. Again the psalmist tells us here that happy are those whose help is the

God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God...and then names a litany of the actions and hope that God abides in. Justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, lifting up those who are bowed down and upholding the orphan and the widow.

Friends, we are a resurrection people, and we are called to practice living into hope again and again and again. Do not dismiss the grief, but do not dismiss the hope. And so Church, today I want you to try something new. I want to challenge you to make some time this week to actually write your own psalm. Mary Jo shared one that used one of the psalms as the framework and changed some of the words, so if you find that easiest for you to do, do that. If you want to write and create your own, you can use the framework that Brueggemann suggests of orientation, disorientation and a new orientation. Name the praise, the lament, and the hope.

And then, if you decide to participate in this, send your psalm to me. Really, send it to me. My e-mail is at the bottom of the bulletin. If you give me permission, I'd love to share these in some kind of format as "Our Psalm." I believe we can be strengthened by the prayers, the psalms of one another, of community, this community. Even if you don't have the "right" words, it's okay. Give it a try.

And so friends, let us build our hope, our psalm and our prayers relying on the One who abides with us through it all. May we rejoice in that kind of hope today...the kind that goes hand in hand with the need to be patient in suffering and persevering in prayer. *(Play piano interlude on hope)*

Amen.