

Tasting the Tears of God
Psalm 88
Psalm Series, Sermon #3
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Hmmm...another one of those texts where instead of saying "This is the word of the Lord" we ask "THIS is the word of the Lord?" But, let's have a little bit of the faith that seems to have escaped the psalmist. Friends, this is the word of the Lord.

It was one of the jewels of Northern Europe, the metropolitan city of Kaunas, founded in the 12th century. It is still there in Lithuania today but don't visit there this month. July in Kaunas is tough; July in Kaunas is a Psalm 88 kind of time.

It was the largest city in Lithuania at the close of the First World War. While a part of the Old Russian Empire, it had been the only city where the rails of the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire met in northern Europe. With 170,000 citizens, it was a thriving center of commerce, trade, arts and letters. A little less than 1/3 of the population, around 35-40,000, was Jewish and the greatest Yeshiva of the Baltics was found in the heart of the city. It was a city where remarkably, Jews and Orthodox and Catholics and Protestants, after centuries of struggle, had found a way to live together in some degree of peace and harmony.

And then it all went terribly wrong. In June and July of 1940, the Soviet Union was attempting to solidify power in the Balkans to deny Hitler the use of the Baltic Sea as a supply line. So they invaded and to consolidate power, they began to issue propaganda against capitalist Jews, seizing property, deporting many, and killing hundreds who protested.

At the same time, nationalist Lithuanians were cooperating with Hitler and began creating propaganda of their own, blaming the Jews for the invasion by the Soviets. Then, in late spring of 1941, the Soviets abandoned the Baltic States and Hitler's forces overran Lithuania, including beautiful Kaunas. One of the first things they began to do was to round up the Jews. And in the second week of July, 76 years ago, beginning at about 10 in the morning, the killing began.

Jews had been rounded up and taken to four towers originally built by the Russian tsars 100 years before as guard towers for the Old City. And they became killing towers. By sunset on that warm July day, more than 5,000 men, women, children and infants-in-arms were dead. All remaining Jews were either deported to death or labor camps, or put to work in slave labor conditions.

Time and again the Jewish ghetto was made smaller. Eventually it was converted into a concentration camp. Over the course of three short years, over 10,000 additional Jewish residents were killed in Kaunas

As the Russian military closed in on Lithuania, exactly three years later, on another steamy July afternoon, the Germans set off explosions throughout the camp, killing over 2000 women and children in their locked barracks. Upon liberation, 2,000 Kaunas residents were found to have survived at other camps. But the Jewish population alive in and around Kaunas

was now less than 500, most of them young men who survived in the woods surrounding the city. In total, the Jewish population went from 40,000 to 500.

There is a reason that Psalm 88 is sometimes called the Holocaust Psalm. It is unique among the over six dozen or so lament Psalms in the Bible, for it is a psalm devoid of words of hope. You may remember the way most of the lament psalms work. Something like: "Oh God, you are so good and gracious. You have been so good to us in the past. But now, oh God, things are really rotten. It seems like you don't care for us anymore. It's bad, really, really bad oh, God. So, like you've done in the past, come, Lord, come and heal us; rescue us; save us. Kick some butt against our enemies who are oppressing us, oh, God, because you are great; you are awesome and wonderful. Be wonderful to us again, please!"

But not this psalm:

Hear me God because it's as if I'm dead.
I'm alone; I'm bereft because you have abandoned me, God.
You have made everyone abandon me.
Can your love reach to those who live in the place of death like me, O God?
Why won't you hear me? Why do you ignore me?
Why have you left me alone in my darkness?

That's it; no hope, no reminding God of the past, just honest, painful complaint.

As Walter Brueggemann says, "Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith." Marvin Tate comments, "...Psalm 88 stands as a witness to the intent of the Psalms to speak to all of life, to remind us that life does not always have happy endings. Long trails of suffering and loss traverse the landscape of human existence, even for the devoted people of God. There are cold, wintry nights of the soul, when bleakness fills every horizon, and darkness seems nearly complete."

Scholar Coleen Mandolfo suggests that the refusal to white-wash life — the refusal to try and put a positive spin on the situation the Psalmist faces — is so much more helpful to us in the post-modern world, where, because we have seen our inhumanity to one another time and again — as close as our phones and the 24-hours new cycle. We know so much more about why things happen and what the scientific and human causes of things are. We can see the terrible truth about how bad some situations are — the long, slow painful death of a child stricken with disease, the torment of mental illness that leads thousands to seek what appears to the relative peace of suicide, the jarring reality of poverty and preventable disease in a world where some wealthy communities average throwing away 500 pounds of wasted and uneaten foods per person per year, and others starve for lack of a cup of rice and a clean pint of water.

There are some places where it is hard to find hope. And in those places, so much of the typical language of faith is inadequate or insulting. When the neighbor holding his daughter on his hip, hoping to be helpful, says to the neighbor whose child has just died, "Well, Heaven needed another angel."

It's times when almost anything we can say that seeks to be positive or hopeful is insulting. Into those moments Psalm 88 steps forward and says, "No, THIS is faithful too."

As Brueggemann puts it: "This 'psalm of darkness' may be judged by the world to be [an] act of unfaith and failure, but for the trusting community, [it] is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith." He continues: "It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God."

It's not just proper, it's essential. As Walter notes, this psalm proves that "to withhold parts of life from that [Divine] conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God." In other words, who else can we have this conversation with, if not God?

This psalm makes the essential connection — that we are invited, no, made to, articulate EVERYTHING we are experiencing in our relationship with the power who made us, with the love that breathed us into being. For God is "the final reference for all of life."

This bitter, angry, sad psalm has good news at its heart. It is faithful because it continues the divine conversation, even if and when it appears to only be one sided. Four times in this lament the Psalmist cries out: "O Yahweh," almost defiantly using the name for God that cannot be spoken. The Psalmist insists on getting in God's face and saying: "This is wrong, indeed this is all your fault, God, and you are doing nothing."

Does this reflect what the psalmist really believes? When she is calm and things are not closing in on her, does she really think, "God hates me!" Probably not. But right now, this is the only language she has. Stripped of her hope, she has only her rage. And rage can be terribly destructive. But this is not rage directed at herself or at any other person, it's rage directed at God. And I would submit that God is the only safe party to whom we can direct our rage, for God can take it — God, who created the universe, who created life in such a way that this event was possible.

With all due respect to those who say that everything that happens in the world is part of some divine plan, a view that for me — the Holocaust and childhood cancer — make ridiculous, I don't believe that God wills evil, horrible things to happen. But this world has been created in such a way where we have so much free will and the consequences of our actions are often unknown and extend to generations far beyond ourselves — it's a world where natural forces must be respected and cannot be tamed, no matter how much we might try. And it's not unfaithful to rage because God COULD have made a world where none of this is possible. Of course, it wouldn't be much of a life, a world where there is no vulnerability, no choice, no independent thought; a world where every creature is just a cog in some divine wind-up toy.

But it appears that whatever force breathed life into this world didn't want us to be pets or be like those animatronic figures at Disneyworld, lifelike, but not really flesh and blood. We were made to be vulnerable, to know the value of life, to know the great comfort that comes from being loved and choosing to live in that love and the great loss of losing that love or having our dreams crumble.

I've always thought that was what it meant to be made in the image of God, not that God looks male or female, is tall or short — no, we are made in the image of God because we know what it is to love and to lose; to make ourselves vulnerable; to have hopes for how a

situation will go; to hope that others will make choices that will be healing or helpful and to have those hopes dashed.

How does God know that, when God is eternal? Because God made you, loves you and me, and your great-great grandfather, and my mother, and those 40,000 daughters and sons of Abraham who perished in Kaunas in just four years, and the eight children of God who died violently in Chicagoland from 5 p.m. Friday until 5 p.m. yesterday. God's hopes for us are shown in the teachings of the prophets and in the life and ministry of Jesus. And time and again, civilization after civilization, we have chosen paths that break God's heart. And so our bitterness of dashed hopes is a moment when we taste even for a moment the almost endless tears of God.

We know that all of the ways that we can be hurt are made possible because that's what it means to be alive, to be vulnerable, and sometimes it is too painful to remain silent. Sometimes, we need to rage against senseless loss and seeming hopelessness. And we rage in the darkness; raging on until there is a hint of light again.

And here's one of the most important things that it is easy to overlook. When we rage, when we feel most abandoned and let down, we are not alone. The inclusion of a lament of this type in the Bible is the ultimate declaration that when we are in these dark nights of the soul, we can know that millions have been here before — so many that our holiest book is not complete without this psalm, without these feelings being expressed. In the current hit musical *Dear Evan Hanson*, in the most emotional song of the production, at one point a chorus begins softly and builds to a huge crescendo singing just four words over and over: "You are not alone, you are not alone." They repeat it ten times. Psalm 88 is yet another reminder of that.

Psalm 88 also reminds us that the dawn doesn't come on our timetable; it doesn't come at our bidding; God is not our puppet. Remember, even Christ, in the depth of human suffering, cried out from the Cross: "Why have you forsaken me?" Words he remembered; words he was taught from Psalm 22, another lament psalm.

The purpose of lament is to let it out; to cry out to the very source of life that this is not how things should be. We know it's not because we have seen glimpses of life as it should be, as it can be. In the moments when we have experienced love, have encountered the divine image in ourselves and others and known the gift that is community and discovery and celebration — it is our very knowledge of how things can be that creates the pain of the moment when they are not as they should be; the fact that we know what it means to stand in the light is the very reason we rage against the dying of that light.

So can our encounter with this Psalm be all tied up nicely and neatly? Not hardly. And that's the point. So let us continue to rage when life demands it, knowing that God is not simply listening. God can empathize and will journey with us until the faintest dawn awakens around us.