

For the Night  
Psalm 40: 1-5  
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Working on this sermon, I was reminded of my favorite nightmare about preaching. It comes from an article I read a long time ago about John Cleese, who was a member of The Monty Python Flying Circus and who also played Basil Fawlty, the demented proprietor of a rundown British resort, in the BBC comedy series Fawlty Towers. In the article Basil is described as being engaged in a life and death struggle with things nobody else cared about.

Preachers do that kind of thing. I've done that kind of thing, but not today. Though this sermon is going to start out kind of dry with a lot of details about the psalms, it will move toward questions that we all do care about. I will try to show how valuable the psalms can be for us in our lives, especially for times when our lives are not going well, and we wonder if they ever are going to get better.

Traditionally the 150 psalms that compose the Book of Psalms are ascribed to King David. This is understandable, as he was a musician and many of the psalms have suggested musical accompaniment. Still he could not have been the author, as many of them are written as responses to historical situations that arose long after his death. He could certainly have inspired some of the psalms, but he did not write them. Most likely they were written by many different men and women over their centuries before their final compilation over 2500 years ago.

Another important fact about the psalms, they are extremely diverse in their forms and subject matter. For example, there are psalms of trust like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which describes God as the good shepherd who watches over us and protects us. There are psalms of praise and celebration, which express the joy and delight that life sometimes brings to us. There are teaching psalms, which seek to instruct the listeners in the ways of God. The longest psalm in the Bible, Psalm 119, is such a psalm. I had a liturgist once who read some verses from this psalm and then extemporized, "And the psalm continues in this vain for another dreary 153 verses." Admittedly the psalm is a little dry, but it's not that bad

About a third of the psalms, fifty or so of them, are what scholars call laments. They can be communal or individual. Most familiar of the laments is Psalm 22. Most of us know the opening of this psalm, even if we think we don't. It begins, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" words of Jesus from the cross. These are the psalms that I will be focusing on

this morning. I hope to show how they have the power to sustain one's spiritual life, indeed life itself, in the most difficult of times.

In his book Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky, a noted Russian Jewish dissident, experienced the power of these psalms during his nine year imprisonment by the Soviet secret police:

His sole possession and constant companion during those hard years was a book of Psalms given to him by his wife. Their prayers of lament became his own, and their hope of deliverance became a gleam of light in his cell. After nine grueling years, several confiscations and reluctant returns of his book of Psalms, he was finally transported to an airport outside Moscow for his trip to freedom.

It is said that while most of the Bible speaks to us, the psalms speak for us. Sharansky found that this is especially true of the laments. Much of their power comes from their ability to give us words for the worst times in our lives. In their words of pain and despair, these psalms can be hard to hear, but in the experience of many, including myself, they are also a great gift.

Instead of keeping our pain hidden, where it festers, these psalms help us to bring it out into the open, a prerequisite for healing. We can hear this in Psalm 6:

I am weary with my moaning;  
Every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.  
My eyes waste away because of my grief.  
I grow weak because of all my foes.

Or these words from Psalm 102:

For my days pass away like smoke,  
and my bones burn like a furnace.  
My heart is stricken and withered like grass;  
I forget to eat my bread.

I didn't hear much about psalms like these when I was in seminary, and they don't appear very frequently in the scriptures for church. I suspect many people are looking for scriptures that are a little more cheerful. But in my experience, neglecting these more fraught psalms is a mistake. They are essential for certain times in one's life. I first encountered them twelve years ago when I was hospitalized for major depression and an anxiety disorder. As the result of my illness, I needed to leave the church that I had served for twenty-six years.

The fact that I'm standing here now is an indication of how far my recovery has gone. As for many, my recovery involved medication, various therapies, and time. It also involved the fact that I am middle class with good medical insurance and with a spouse who's an RN and skilled in navigating the healthcare system. In the hospital and in group therapy, I met many people who did not have good or even any medical insurance, who did not have anyone to help them navigate the system, who had no

choice but to return to the very situation that precipitated their illness. The justice issues here are enormous.

Also, for the last several years I've been working with a group of people living with mental illness, helping them with their own recoveries. For many of these folks, who've patched together the best lives they can with the help of various government programs, the current threat that these programs may be diminished or disappear is simply terrifying, a cause of yet more pain for an already vulnerable population. This has to be a concern for us, given our call as people of faith to seek justice and to stand with those of the margins of our society.

When it comes to mental illness, I'm one of the lucky ones. Still it was a very difficult time for me. I felt like the psalmist felt who wrote. "I have sunk into deep mud. My feet can't touch the bottom. I am overwhelmed by life, pushed beyond endurance, and on the verge of giving up. For me the laments tell the truth about the hard times of life, including times of mental illness and have been an important part of my recovery.

I owe my discovery of the laments as a tool for recovery to a minister who was serving on the staff of the Minnesota Conference at that time. He gave me a huge amount of time immediately after my hospitalization. We talked about what it was like to be a minister with depression, which for me held the irony of being a depressed preacher of good news. He suggested I try a spiritual practice, which had been of great help to him: the daily reading of the Morning Office from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. So I went out and bought a copy of the book, which at that time felt like a financial risk since I didn't know if I'd ever work again. I even bought a new Bible at the Half Price Book Store.

I started reading the morning office - I had lots of free time - and immediately gravitated to the psalms, particularly the laments. Like Sharansky and many others, they spoke for me. I wrote about this

In their absolute honesty, the writers of the psalms give hard truth about pain. Their laments are like the huge boulders one sees along the ridge that cuts across southwestern Minnesota. The boulders have been scraped and grooved by the grinding of the glaciers. In a similar way, pain scraped away every defense and evasion of those who wrote the laments and then they brought their pain to God. Their honesty and courage is a rock solid foundation for building a relationship with God. I trust the laments because of their honesty - there's no holding back, no prevaricating, only hard truth. Because these psalms are so honest and true to the pain that I have experienced, I also trust them when they speak of the end of pain, the recovery of pleasure, and the beginning of hope.

Like life the laments are not static. They start by giving full voice to pain, letting it all out. And then they go somewhere. They are not spoken into a void or cried out toward a nothing. They are addressed to God. This is the way the laments work. They give words to speak one's hurt and then carry it to God. This makes all the difference. Beyond what seems possible, these psalms start with pain and end up with words of new life and new hope. As in the words of the psalm that is also our call to worship, "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning." And there are the words from Psalm 40:

I waited patiently for the Lord;  
who inclined to me and heard my cry.  
The Lord drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.  
The Lord put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.

My experience with this movement of these psalms is twofold. As I wrote, because they are so honest about the reality of pain, I am willing to trust them when they speak about hope. And in my own practice, as I have read and tried to absorb these psalms, they have helped my own life to move from pain to hope. I am utterly pragmatic about this. I keep reading the psalms, especially the laments, because they work for me in my recovery, especially my recovery of faith. The thing is, that's why they were written. That's what they're supposed to do.

The laments also let us know that we are not alone. As I said they are addressed to God. But there is something else: they were written by people long ago who had been in the depths and who had felt themselves sinking into the miry bog. Others had been there before you. They had experienced what you are feeling, had survived, and ultimately found a way back to life worth living. The psalms are a way to join them on a journey out of the pit toward the joy that comes in the morning.

I invite you to read these psalms, to get to know them. When there's pain in your life, the laments help you to say it and to bring it to God. They bring you into a community honest about the difficult times of life. They bring you to hope. They tell the truth.

Amen.