

“Finding the Courage to Pray”

Psalm 27:1, 4-9, 13-14

The thing about the book of Psalms is that each psalm is indeed, “The Word of God for the People of God,” (*thanks be to God!*), but each psalm is also the words of God’s people offered back to the God of all peoples!

Most of our Scriptures talk to us about God and tell us the stories of God’s people, but the Psalter is God’s people talking to God and telling God just exactly how they feel about these stories...and these stories are, for the Israelites, their *real* lives...not just stories. This is the stuff of their days and their nights. This is their reality.

The Psalms are the real deal. And anyone who says they can’t relate to the Bible or that it’s too hard to understand or that the Bible has nothing to say to us today --- well, I would assume that they haven’t read the Psalms. I mean, *really* read them.

Most of us know Psalm 23...the King James Version: “*The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...*”

Many of us know phrases from the psalms, like “*My God, My God Why have you forsaken me,*” even if we never knew those words were first in

Psalm 22 before they were ever in the mouth of Jesus.

A good number of us know phrases like “*Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere,*” because of Matt Redman’s popular praise song based on Psalm 84.

But not as many of us spend time dwelling on psalms like 88: “*You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you...O Lord, why do you cast me off?*” (Psalm 88:8-9, 14).

We don’t spend time dwelling on Psalms like this one...but we should. Because Psalm 88 gives words to the otherwise unspeakable pain of the experience so many dwell in...day after day. We love Psalms like 100, “*Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing!*” But not all of us who enter worship each Sunday have a song on our lips...sometimes we come into the presence of the Lord not singing...but wondering whether the Lord is even present at all.

Of the 150 Psalms we have in our Scriptures...over half of them are laments. And they are beautiful. Just as beautiful as the psalms of praise and comfort. Their beauty is rooted in the rawness of the emotion, rather than in the eloquent expression of it.

I am just at the cusp of understanding how much the Psalms have to teach me about prayer: about how to be vulnerable before God and speak to God with courage and conviction and clarity.

Many of you have sat with the psalms for years longer than I have...and they have become the pulse of your own prayer life. And so you know that reading the Psalms forever changes how you pray.

We have before us today Psalm 27, which ends with four phrases: “*Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord,*” (v14).

It’s almost as if the Psalmist is trying to give himself this advice...trying to convince himself that God will pull through for him...because up until this point he’s been talking in the 1st person and now he switches to talking in the 3rd person...like we might do in our own heads in a stressful situation, “*Just relax, Anne. It’s no big deal. You can get through this.*”

And at the beginning of Psalm 27, the psalmist is doing a similar thing...he’s repeating to himself truths he knows based on past experience: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation...the stronghold of my life...what do I have to be afraid of?*” (v1)

Well, just by him asking that question (“*What do I have to be afraid of?*”)...twice...we know that he must be afraid of something or someone. In this case...it seems to be his enemies...from whom he desperately wants to be delivered. He could be speaking about his own personal experience...or he could be speaking on behalf of his entire country and people – Israel. Either way – his prayer tells us a lot about how he is *experiencing* God...which is to say, he is not experiencing God’s presence like he wants to and he’s letting God know about it.

He reassures himself a lot, “*God will hide me in his shelter, God will conceal me in his tent, God will set me high on a rock...*” (v5) and then when those hopes become reality again for him, he says he will “*give shouts of joy, singing and praising God,*” (v6).

His true emotion and spiritual situation emerges when you read between the lines. You could make a case that this guy is bargaining with God. If God helps him out, then he is

vowing that he will praise God again. But for now...he's not really praising God at all...he's pleading to God, "*Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me...Do not hide your face from me. Do not cast me off. Do not forsake me,*" (v7, 9).

He goes on...asking God to lead him through this difficult time...he tells God that his enemies are "*breathing out violence*" (v12) on him. As if God didn't know this already??

And again – he ends his song, his prayer – with a reassurance of what he has known in the past to be true about God and what he chooses to believe will be true about God again for him: that he "*will see the goodness of the Lord,*" (v13) – if - he stays strong. And courageous. And. If he waits.

If one of my favorite singer songwriter/bands, *Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers*, were around they might sing the chorus of their song, *The Waiting*, right back to this psalmist:

The waiting is the hardest part.
Every day you see one more card.
You take it on faith, you take it to the heart.
The waiting is the hardest part.

It is precisely because waiting is hard...that prayer is so vital to our faith. And the psalms teach us that we have to keep on praying even when

we feel like God is way past due on giving us some kind of answer.

This is why it takes courage to pray:
When you pray...you make yourself vulnerable...first and foremost to God...but also to yourself. And if you have no idea what I'm talking about and you don't feel any vulnerability when you pray...then I wonder if you're being courageous enough in your prayers...I know I that I rarely am. It's hard to admit to yourself and to God your innermost struggles and failings. Or it's hard to question the very one who gave you life to begin with...isn't that wrong??

Well, no. God never asked us to sugarcoat out feelings when we pray. In fact, if anything, the opposite is true...as the psalmist teaches us.

You might have learned the acronym A.C.T.S. when you were growing up as a guide to how to structure your prayer: Adoration – Confession – Thanksgiving – Supplication (which is a fancy word for Petition...which is another fancy word for asking for stuff). And there is nothing wrong with using A.C.T.S. as a guide.

But prayer, at its best, is never formulaic. It is raw and real and messy and it may sound a lot like what you sound like when you're crying to your best friend or arguing with your spouse or laughing with

your child or tossing and turning in bed at night with anxiety.

I spent the weekend with nine Calvary folks of varying ages and life experiences this weekend as they began the training to become Stephen Ministers. I think it's safe to say that these nine people and those who were leading were exhausted by the end of yesterday afternoon. Stephen Ministry training is like emotional and spiritual bootcamp...because before you can walk alongside another during a difficult time in life...you have to be very in touch with your own emotions, your own knowledge of feelings and communication, your own fears about silence and being vulnerable or exposed, your own acceptance of the uncomfortable times and spaces in life...or even your own embarrassment or inadequacies about praying aloud or even just being present with someone without trying to give them advice or "fix them." (which is harder than you might think!)

This new class of Stephen Ministers "in training" were already impressive to me because of the commitment they have made to finish 50 hours of training over the next several weeks. But yesterday – I was even more impressed by their courage to be open and honest...to interact with one another with little inhibition. They were courageous with their words and thoughts and vulnerable with their

doubts and questions. And being open and honest with people is exhausting.

That's because vulnerability is exhausting. But it's equally rewarding and renewing. Because – vulnerability is an act of courage. When you share yourself with someone, when you share yourself with God...you don't know what the response will be. Will you be misunderstood? Will you be heard at all? Will God care or give you some kind of answer?

And while our society rightly celebrates the courage of our men and women in the armed forces who go to battle in unknown places to face unknown enemies and face unknown consequences...and while our society rightly celebrates as well the unarmed men and women who, two weeks ago, acted with instinctual bravery outside of a Safeway grocery store in Tucson...we don't, as a society, celebrate the courage it takes to be emotionally and spiritually vulnerable before God and one another. Perhaps that's the church's job. And I wonder, are we doing that well?

I first began asking this question while I was working as a chaplain with cancer patients, people would tell me about their pain, their fatigue, their anger at God, their anxiety and fear of dying, the distance they were feeling from their family, the annoyance they were feeling from their friends who meant well but were

more burdensome than helpful, the forgottenness they were feeling from their church communities...*people privileged me with their honesty*. And then we would pray. *And, more often than not, they didn't give God that same privilege*. They would say phrases like, "I know this is all happening for a reason," or "You are a great God and I know you will pull me through this." There is nothing inherently wrong with these prayers if they are authentically what you are feeling...but so often the words people said after "Dear God" so drastically contradicted the words they shared with me face to face.

Of course, God knows what that person was feeling and God had been present in our conversation all along (I have a holistic understanding of prayer and think those entire conversations were holy and prayerful moments before God), but why do we struggle to express how we feel before God...and even before one another in the church? There's something about saying "Dear God" – that makes us pull back.

If the Psalms teach us anything - it's that God wants our praise – our lament – our confession – our pleas – our bargaining – our anger – our pain – our celebrations – our joys...God wants the nitty-gritty details. God wants us to trust enough to be able to say outright when we think things are not right with the world and when

they are not how they should be if God's Kingdom really is coming "on Earth as it is in Heaven."

Psalm 27 is an excellent example of how to pray to God...full of thoughtful confrontation that is rooted in a remembrance of a trust that the Psalmist once felt and so desperately wants to feel again. His plea is earnest and he's not afraid to tell God that he is afraid and angry.

We will never know the ways of God...and knowing the ways of God is not the purpose of prayer.

Theologian Frederick Buechner says it best, "*God does not give us answers. He gives us himself.*" **The purpose of prayer is to draw us closer to God...** closer to the one who is always drawing near to us...and we will never become close to God, or anyone for that matter, if we do not openly share what we are feeling and thinking. When we open that vulnerable space – we open a space for transformation...a space for God to really work with who we are...because we've shared all that we are with God.

So. As the people of God who have been given a Good Word from God...may we now give to God our own words...and may we know that these words too, are good.

Amen. (Sing Psalm 42, Prayers of the People, etc...)