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OUT OF THE DEPTHS: THE PSALMS AND PASTORAL CARE

BY RICK R. MARRS

Sunday morning in America—worshippers file into the auditorium as the singing begins. Hardly noticed is a young woman seated on the back row. She sits motionless, for just two nights ago she experienced the horrors of date rape. She wants to scream, but hers is not a “screaming” church—certainly not a church that screams at God. At the other end of the pew sits an angry young man, visibly agitated. Just this past week his company unceremoniously fired him after he questioned the apparent unethical business practices of his superior. As the congregation stands and sings, “Christ will me his aid afford,” he rises and walks out. Across the auditorium sits a sullen father who just this week buried his five-year-old son, a precocious child who was hit by a drunken driver while riding his bike. Well-wishers have tried to comfort him, but their well-intentioned words only heighten his growing resentment. Nearby sits a young mother with her two preschoolers. Her children look in bewilderment at her, for last night they saw what no child should ever see—their father physically abusing their mother. She weeps silently behind her dark glasses as the minister intones the benediction—“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you. . . .”

The list goes on and on. On any given Sunday, our sanctuaries house worshippers whose life experiences make it virtually impossible for them to offer praise to God, worshippers for whom an all-powerful, all-loving, and all-just God has become a major problem. Their

presence demands that we ask the toughest of questions. How do we as individual Christians and as communities of faith respond to tragedy, whether global, national, or local? What do we say in such situations? How do we behave? How do we handle the situations that constantly confront us, often surround us, at times engulf us? The question is crucial, for it is in our pastoral care that our theological convictions are most clearly evident.

Providing pastoral care and sound theological thinking in the midst of tragedy requires that we seek valuable and valid resources. Yet it is at this stage that we encounter a problem. A rich scriptural resource for dealing with tragedy resides in the psalms. The Psalter is replete with laments that articulate the cries of ancient Israelites who experienced intimately life’s injustices and sorrows. However, to our modern ears, many of these laments sound impertinent at best, and perhaps impious and heretical at worst. Their bold talk of God and to God stops us short. Such complaints—leveled at God!—sound to us more like the cries of doubters than those of the faithful; we are thus inclined to avoid them as a substandard Christian embarrassment.

Given this dilemma, we unfortunately often rely upon ourselves as principal resource. Left to our own devices, we may engage in empathetic dishonesty (“I know how you feel”), theological arrogance (“It must be God’s will”), or even theological nonsense (“God needed your baby in heaven”). We may opt for a one-

size-fits-all theology and, with theological naivety, use the resurrection as a solution for all of life's ambiguities and uncertainties. Our hymnody reflects such an option: "O for a faith that will not shrink, tho pressed by ev'ry foe, that will not tremble on the brink of any earthly woe. That will not murmur or complain beneath the chast'ning rod, but in the hour of grief or pain, will lean upon its God."

However, if we are to be faithful to scripture, we must challenge ourselves to go where scripture goes. Ancient Israel knew—and will not let us forget—that our affirmation of God as all-powerful, all-loving, and all-just insists that we grapple with life's tragedies and injustices. Israel powerfully reminds us that our God is a God who frees the slaves, overthrows the oppressors of this world, and stands passionately on the side of justice (Exod 2:23–25; 34:6–7). In a world where the "depths" of life at times threaten to swallow us, our God claims to provide a way out of those depths (Isa 51:10). Reminding ourselves of God's power, justice, and steadfast love enables us to hear the lament psalms for what they truly are—strident cries from believers who acknowledge a gap between (God's) rhetoric and reality! Ultimately, the issue is relational. In lament, God's people proclaim that the relationship is in jeopardy, because they are unable to square God's claims of steadfast love and faithfulness with their present experience. Ancient Israel refused the route of over-polite idolatry (i.e., that God is fragile, delicate, and easily offended); rather, she cried out passionately to the God who could make things happen!

The lament psalms—heard correctly—can be an empowering force in our communities of faith, both in private devotion and in corporate worship, for these psalms enable us to weather not only the good times but also the bad. As a whole, the psalms are response literature; as such, they demonstrate that Israel lived between praise (thanksgiving) and prayer (lament). Just as God was bluntly honest with Israel regarding her sin and rebellion—and generous in his encouragement and forgiveness when she repented, so Israel was bluntly honest with God regarding her pain in those moments when she could not square her history with the divine promises—and effusive in her praise when God's steadfast love was self-evident. Out of the depths Israel cried to God, appealing to his reputation and track record. Flat-

tery and manipulation were unnecessary, for Israel's God was a God who entered completely and fully into relationship with her; the relationship was rooted in his integrity.

In that light, how do we respond to the cries of injustice and suffering in our congregations? In actuality, our response must be two-pronged. At one level, the response is verbal; at a deeper level, our response must also involve action. Like the people of ancient Israel, those who cry out today amidst tragedy and serious injustice find themselves significantly dislocated and disoriented. They have lost their ground for praise. Like the psalmists, they often find themselves articulating (whether externally or internally) dangerous language that questions and challenges God's place in the world and in their lives. We dare not allow such lament to be trivialized or discounted (just as we dare not allow the trivial to be lamented). In these moments, what we say and how we act become pivotal.

What do we say? Where do we find the words to respond pastorally to those in the midst of tragedy and crisis? My suggestion is deceptively simple. Throughout the ages, the community of faith has found its word in the word of God. The Psalter provides us with rich resources for pastoral care and theological reflection. The lament psalms contain the powerful words of ancient believers who cried to God and, through that cry, found solace and a response from God. Tremendous comfort lies in the realization that God's people have gone before him with cries of anguish, beseeching him with daring boldness to manifest his steadfast love and faithfulness. The word of God has tremendous power to transform lives. Rather than relying primarily upon our own words, we must allow God's word to do what it does best—speak to our deepest needs and hurts. Psalms such as Psalm 77 possess incredible transformational power:

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me. . . .
"Will the Lord spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?
Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
Are his promises at an end for all time?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"
I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;

Manifesting steadfast
love in times of
crisis is never easy.
The language of
lament is dangerous;
the stakes are high.



I will remember your wonders of old.
I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might
among the peoples.
With your strong arm you redeemed
your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
(Ps 77:1, 7–9, 11–15 NRSV)

However, what we say is only a portion of the story, since at heart the cry from tragedy and injustice involves, whether implicitly or explicitly, the dangerous suggestion that God is at fault! A decisive factor becomes not simply what we say but how we act. Again, my suggestion is deceptively simple in theory but difficult in implementation. Since God's presumed faithfulness may be at issue, the community of faith must respond to the sufferer with faithful actions. As we come alongside the sufferer and let the biblical laments speak for us, we demonstrate God's steadfast love through our faithful commitment to the sufferer. Again, such action is difficult; we need models of faithful pastoral care. Two examples suffice.

At the close of the seventh century B.C., the prophet Habakkuk cried out to God regarding the rampant wickedness afflicting his community. The divine response to his cry was astonishing: God declared his intention to deliver punishment against his people through the

Babylonians. Habakkuk was incredulous. How could the Lord of the universe punish those less wicked through those clearly more wicked? The second divine response was most telling. God simply called Habakkuk to wait for his divine intervention, reminding Habakkuk that "the righteous live by their faith" (Hab 2:4 NRSV). The message of the book of Habakkuk reminds us that we dare not stifle the lament, since through it the sufferer may hear the word of God. As we honestly affirm our helplessness to effect deliverance, God answers with the truth of the gospel. We dare not deny our brothers and sisters the opportunity to hear God's word and respond. Surely the all-powerful, all-loving, all-just Lord of the universe can find a way to manifest his grace to those in crisis and despair. The final words of Habakkuk are poignant:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.
(Hab 3:17–19 NRSV)

Like Habakkuk, God calls the community of faith to pull alongside the sufferer and wait for him to respond. Our task is to help position those who are suffering to be able to hear God's redeeming and transforming word.

A second example helps us see what such faithful engagement looks like. The book of Ruth provides us with a marvelous demonstration of faithful love in action. Naomi, having lost her husband and two sons, returns home "empty" to Bethlehem. Accompanied only by her daughter-in-law Ruth, she bitterly announces to the women who greet her that she is no longer Naomi ("pleasant"), but Marah ("bitter"), for God has made her life empty. During the course of the next several weeks, Ruth faithfully serves and cares for her mother-in-law. Through active and consistent demonstrations of steadfast love, Ruth ultimately restores Naomi to a position in which she finds God's grace and faithfulness. At the conclusion of the story, as Naomi receives

the newborn child that embodies not only a new beginning for Naomi but also a new stage in Israel's history, the women of Bethlehem affirm for Naomi that Ruth is indeed "more valuable than seven sons!" Through Ruth's faithful actions toward Naomi, Naomi experiences God's faithful love.

Manifesting steadfast love in times of crisis is never easy. The language of lament is dangerous; the stakes are high. God calls us to be faithful as he himself is faithful. Avoidance of such difficult situations ultimately suggests a fear that our theology may not be able to handle these difficult moments. However, God calls us to engage the situation and the sufferer, for lives are at stake. And through his word God provides us with models of faithful pastoral care. In Mark 9, Jesus found himself confronted with a distraught father experiencing the anguish of a demon-possessed son. Presenting to Jesus a son wracked with convulsions, the father cried out, hoping against hope:

"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22–24 NIV)

God calls us to engage the sufferer. Our task is clear; scripture provides the words and models for action.

From the depths I cry out to you, O Lord—
 Lord hear my voice;
 Let your ears be attentive
 to the utterance of my supplication,
 If you, Lord, would record iniquities,
 Lord, who could stand?
 But with you is forgiveness!
 On account of the promise I look for
 the Lord expectantly;
 I wait for his word;
 my soul looks for the Lord
 more expectantly than watchmen do
 for the morning.
 Like watchmen waiting for the morning,
 let Israel wait for the Lord,
 for with the Lord is steadfast love
 and abundant redemption.
 Indeed, he will redeem Israel
 from all her iniquities. (Psalm 130)

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