

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, August 15, 2010
 Twelfth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 15-C
 Psalm 143, Hebrews 11:29-34; 12:1-2; “Let God be God”
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I really enjoy reading those wonderful stories in the Old Testament – the creation narrative, Noah’s Ark, Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, Daniel in the Lion’s Den, Jonah and the whale. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It’s the saga of the Israelites wandering through the desert after the escape from slavery in Egypt looking for a homeland. There are heroes like Moses, Aaron, Solomon, David, Joseph, Ruth, Sarah, Tamar. And tragic heroes too like the unnamed Jephtha’s daughter, Hagar. Stories that come to us in song – Dem Bones, Jacob’s Ladder, Joshua and the battle of Jericho. Stories we teach our children in Sunday School. We hear the words of Isaiah in the magnificent Messiah – there’s much that’s familiar to us. And there’s also much of the Old Testament that appears again later in the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible is a history book, perhaps not all events occurred as they are written, but it is a history of a people and their faith – of how Yahweh protected them in their wanderings, of the covenant, of their straying from the covenant and the results of that.

There’s nothing of the human condition left out in these stories – violence and anger, murder and intrigue, and so much pain. We hear that pain in the Psalm we read together this morning – in fact, when I talk with people dealing with fear, anxiety, deep pain in their lives I encourage them to wander through the book of Psalms. We are reminded especially in this Book I think, there that there’s nothing we can’t take to God: our anger, our sorrow, our frustrations, as well as our joys - and the psalms and the stories of the Hebrew Bible are testaments to that. They’re so earthy sometimes and they touch us in our real lives in extraordinary ways.

Maybe we think things are different now – the world has changed. We know that Jesus has come as our savior and redeemer. Our worldview is very different from that of the psalmist.

But is it really. The enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground. My spirit faints within me. My heart within me is appalled.

Let’s hear these words with the ears of a Black South African, even all these years after the end of apartheid as a legal system. With the ears of an AIDS patient, a battered woman, an abused child, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the dying, the one waiting for medical test results, the jobless, the widowed, the divorced, the lonely. Hear these words with the ears of flood victims in Pakistan, the fishermen in the oil ravaged Gulf. And hear these words with the ears of someone mourning the death of someone close.

Who among us has not known that pain sometime in our lives – or in the life of someone we care about? The deep pain does not change through the centuries.

The psalm is a prayer. The psalmist starts with a request: hear my prayer, give ear to me, answer me. Out of the pain the psalmist takes the only action known to him: he calls on God for deliverance. He doesn’t say that he’s innocent, he’s not looking for

an excuse – he only knows he can't cope with this pain on his own. And the only way open to him is to give himself up to the grace of God. What a faith statement that is!

Walter Bruggemann identifies 3 different types of psalms: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. The orientation psalms are the songs of creation and well being – all is right with the world.

The psalms of disorientation are such as those we read this morning – all is not right with the world – in fact, the world is falling apart. These psalms are about loss of order, life as the psalmist is experiencing it – the dark side.

Then the psalms of reorientation – the psalmist has passed through the darkness and enters into new life where it hasn't been expected. It isn't a return to the prior experience of orientation but a new orientation – the psalmist has been transformed – the world is different now – it's a new normal.

The dark side is hard to face – it's painful, uncomfortable, frustrating – all those things, isn't it. But the psalmists did it anyway – who but God is strong enough to take on our pain, our frustration, our loss of control, our words – remember in the ancient world the power words had – they still do. But there was nothing, is nothing, that we can't take to God. The ancients knew they had to pass through the dark side before there could be transformation – and of course, the same is true for us. The only way out of fear, of pain, of loss, is to go through it – the ancients knew that and so do we. And they had an absolute trust that God would be with them. And so do we.

God to the Israelites was a God of history. Details of God's deeds in history were passed down generation to generation – of how God saw them through the wilderness, provided food and water. God protected them from their enemies. And they kept hearing the terms of the covenant God had made with them – and they remembered them and tried to live them out. And isn't that the goal of our Christian Education program – to pass down the stories generation to generation – to remind each other of the covenant – to reassure each of us that God will see us through whatever wilderness we face. The God of the Israelites is our God as well.

Our psalm this morning is a very real faith statement – in the middle of the psalm there's a "but wait" moment – I remember the days of old – I think about all your deeds, the psalmist says. Here the lament stops, the statement of disorientation is interrupted, and the psalmist remembers the action of God through history. And the psalmist stands with open hands asking for deliverance. Not because it is deserved, but because God is God. Full of grace. Grace that is there, not because of any action the psalmist takes, but because of who God is.

Don't we see a tiny glimpse of hope here – we see someone utterly dependant on God and perhaps most importantly, someone who knows it and acknowledges it. I think of the expression, "Let go and let God." Because at the end of the day, sometimes there's nothing else we can do except turn to God and say, I can't do this – you have to. Thy will be done.

The lament continues but don't you see a bit of a change in the psalmist? Now, it's teach me the way I should go that I may do your will. Yes, the psalmist is still tired, afraid, discouraged – he's feeling all those same feelings that we know so well. But now it's a plea for teaching and I hear that as a new willingness to be transformed.

We don't know what the psalmist situation was or how it was resolved or transformed. What we do know is that the writer trusted absolutely and was willing to be

opened, taught, just because God is God. No ifs. No ands. No buts. God is God and that's enough.

How does all this relate to our lives today? What is the same? What's different?

Some years ago I was on retreat with my home church youth group – we were lying on the floor in a discussion group. I've actually forgotten now what the subject was but somehow we got into a discussion about parents. It was a lively discussion but then it got quiet for a few minutes – I let the quiet sit there – then one of the boys said quietly how it was amazing, as he put it, that parents put up with so much stuff from their kids, but loved them anyway. The fact is, he said with some wonder in his voice, that they are always there for us no matter what. The rest of the kids agreed and I asked, who does that remind you of?

More silence until one of the kids said, "God."

From there, the discussion went on even past the time I'd allowed in the planning. We talked about decision making, the different choices our kids have to make now – I didn't have to deal with the same choices about drugs, alcohol, sex at 15 as they do today. The fragility of the world and our environment – all of these issues surfaced. At the close of our time together we were searching for something to hold onto, something that didn't change. What did they come up with? God. No different now than in the time of the ancients. God is God. And we can hold onto that. The same grace is available to us now as was available to the psalmist then. Why? Not because we deserve it. God is God. And we're called to let God be God today and always.

What else is the same? The psalmist asks for God's ear – to be heard. And then proceeds to describe the darkness to God – and it's by moving through the darkness that he begins to pass into reorientation. What is more satisfying to us than to experience being heard? The amount of money we pay to therapists is some indication of that. The experience of being heard – with freedom to speak our joys, our sorrows, fears, angers – all of that – and to be heard is a treasure. Not just listened to but heard! That experience frees us to move on and we, like the psalmist, can speak to God that way. Just as the psalmist does, so may we also. Imagine. We don't have to be afraid of the dark side – we can name it – we must go through it to be transformed, re-oriented, made new. And the same God of the psalmist is with us too. The words of the old hymn, "take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms he'll take and shield you – you will find a solace there" – are as true then and now and always will be.

For me there's something else that is the same: God's works. The psalmist was probably talking more about God's deeds – the provision of manna and water, the protection in the wilderness – but what of God's deeds in the natural beauty of the world? There is nothing that can restore my sensibilities, my sense of awe and wonder, more than watching the movement and hearing the sound of water. The tide comes in. The tide goes out. What of the joy of standing in the pouring rain and watching a rainbow form? Sitting on a hill and watching the sun rise or set. Or just last week when I was watering one of my flower pots, noticing a bird sitting not a foot away from me, drinking the water pooling by the pot. It was breathtaking – indeed awesome.

I know our environment is in danger – images of the smoke and filth coming from wild fires around the world, images of oil beads on our beaches at the Gulf, those pictures of wildlife coated in oil – I'm sure you're as sickened by that as I am. All of God's creation is good and we all have a part in making it last. The psalmist asks for teaching

to know God's will – and we're called to do nothing less. We have the power to save or destroy God's creation – it's up to us to savor it, protect it, to be good stewards of God's good creation.

Now, what is different from the time of the psalmist? What do we know now that the psalmist didn't know?

Jesus came. Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord. He has come to us to share our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

We have a model here that the psalmist didn't have. Jesus, the man fully human and fully divine. Who advocates for the most powerless of all – the widows and orphans, the tax collectors, the Samaritans, - all the "other" of the time. Jesus who got angry – imagine his rage as he destroyed the money changers tables in the temple.

Jesus walked through the darkness and moved into reorientation. It doesn't get any darker than Good Friday. It doesn't get any brighter, more joyful, than Easter morning. Talk about leaving the old orientation behind and moving into the reorientation of the resurrection. Talk about new life where it wasn't expected.

The human Jesus who cried out on the cross, who was tempted, but who taught us to pray, not my will but yours. Sounds like the psalmist's teach me your way, doesn't it.

Yes, we know something very important that the psalmist didn't know – we know Jesus Christ as Lord. We know Jesus Christ as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Perhaps the psalmist is a model for us : he stands before God, hands outstretched, utterly dependant on God – and he admits that – he prays for teaching, for God's spirit to lead him, not because he deserves it, but because he knows he needs God. And he knows God will be there because God is God. God doesn't change – we can hold onto that – that's the promise.

New life comes when we face and pass through the darkness – may we all be surprised by that and may we respond as did the psalmist, "For I am your servant." May we all know the joy of letting God be God and finding a peace that passes all understanding, whatever lies ahead. Amen.