

Psalm 89:1-18 (NRSV)

God's Covenant with David

A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

- ¹ I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- ² I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
- ³ You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
- ⁴ ‘I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all generations.’ ” *Selah*
- ⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.
- ⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,
- ⁷ a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?
- ⁸ O LORD God of hosts,
who is as mighty as you, O LORD?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.
- ⁹ You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
- ¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
- ¹¹ The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.
- ¹² The north and the south—you created them;
Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.
- ¹³ You have a mighty arm;
strong is your hand, high your right hand.
- ¹⁴ Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.
- ¹⁵ Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;
- ¹⁶ they exult in your name all day long,
and extol your righteousness.
- ¹⁷ For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favor our horn is exalted.
- ¹⁸ For our shield belongs to the LORD,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm 89:38-51 (NRSV)

- ³⁸ But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
- ³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.
- ⁴⁰ You have broken through all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins.
- ⁴¹ All who pass by plunder him;
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.
- ⁴² You have exalted the right hand of his foes;
you have made all his enemies rejoice.
- ⁴³ Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not supported him in battle.
- ⁴⁴ You have removed the scepter from his hand,
and hurled his throne to the ground.
- ⁴⁵ You have cut short the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame. *Selah*
- ⁴⁶ How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
- ⁴⁷ Remember how short my time is—
for what vanity you have created all mortals!
- ⁴⁸ Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol? *Selah*
- ⁴⁹ Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?
- ⁵⁰ Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted;
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,
- ⁵¹ with which your enemies taunt, O LORD,
with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.

From Praise to Lament

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: January 27, 2008

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Psalm 89:1-18, 38-51*

Jesus asked Peter, “Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink?” Enthusiastically Peter assured Jesus that he was more than ready. Well, we all know how the story went. Peter fled when the arrest was made. At the trial he said he didn’t even know the man. Days after the execution we find him hiding in a locked room. So much for drinking from Jesus’ cup.

The words of the Psalmist make me think of Peter this morning. The first 18 verses are filled with beautiful poetry, poetry that exclaims the promises of goodness and victory at the hands of God. All praise is sung to God. God is great and wonderful and trustworthy. Oh, how the Psalmist loves God in those opening verses.

In the next section, a section which we didn’t read this morning, the tributes continue. You gave us David. You anointed him. He outwits the enemy. He crushes our foes. You have promised him steadfastness and loyalty for ever and ever. David’s line will endure like the sun and the moon.

And then, all of a sudden, the mood changes. The Psalmist laments:

³⁸ But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.

³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.

The Psalmist never comes back from the dark side. The Psalm concludes:

⁴⁹ Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

⁵⁰ Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted;
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,

⁵¹ with which your enemies taunt, O LORD,
with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.

Over the years interpreters have struggled to understand this Psalm. Why does it abruptly shift gears in the middle? Why does it praise God and then end on such a sour note? I won’t bore you with all the theories that have been proposed, but trust me, most of them don’t get you very far. I’ll give you just one. It’s actually about the most popular explanation. It goes, well, we have this Psalm which radically changes gears two-thirds of the way through. Clearly, they say, it was really two very different Psalms and someone just stuck them together and put them in the Bible as one.

Right. You don’t have to believe in Biblical inerrancy to be skeptical about the idea that the Bible was put together with duct tape.

To be fair, though, the struggle to explain the Psalm is understandable. Why does it change so dramatically? And why does it end with dismay that God has not lived up to God’s

own promises?

It's here that Peter is so helpful I think. For Peter understood Jesus to be making certain promises to him. And to Peter those promises looked a lot like those in the Psalm. Peter thought that if he put his trust in Jesus, then through Jesus God would give them the victory. That is, Peter thought Jesus was his ticket to victory over the authorities and over the empire. When it all ended on the cross, the words in the latter part of Psalm 89 could very well have been moaned by Peter himself. Where are you, O God? What happened to your promises? Aren't we your anointed ones? Haven't we been loyal to you? We walked all over the countryside with you. We nearly died in storms out on the sea with you. We went up the mountains and down the valleys. You kept telling us about the kingdom of God. You kept saying that it would grow like a mustard seed. You told us that if we were good soil, that when our seed sprouted it would grow into a great tree. But now the only tree I see is the one they nailed you to. That tree is in my dreams every night. What about those promises? What about them? What happened to them?

Now, let me say up front that Peter suffered from something I know something about. Peter wanted a simple formula for life. Peter wanted to believe that if he but did the right things, if he believed the right things, if he worked hard, everything would be just fine. Does that sound familiar? It does to me. I heard it from as far back as I can remember. Dudley, if you work hard and keep your nose clean, and if you respect God, the world is your oyster. Did anyone ever tell you that? And is that how it worked out? Is there anyone here who has a perfect life? Now, of course, none of us has probably been perfect, either. But if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that life is a lot more complicated than Do the right thing, and you'll get everything you desire. Neither good living nor God seem to be a flu shot that protects you from life's vagaries.

Now, we don't give up this idea very easily, though. Have you ever been in one of those down places, and you want to get out? What do you do? Pray? Maybe go to a therapist? And O my, what do you find out then. You go to God or a therapist, and you say you want your pain to go away. And the next thing you know, you're doing just what they tell you to, and the pain gets worse. You realize that religion isn't as simple as you'd hoped. Trungpa Rinpoche, the Buddhist teacher who, quite honestly had his own issues, famously told people not to enter the spiritual path if they weren't ready for the ride of their life. Similarly, the therapist tells you that the only way around your troubles is to go right through the middle of them.

And you find yourself, not unlike the Psalmist, lamenting that this was not what you were promised. St. John of the Cross called that moment the dark night of the soul.

And guess, what? It only gets worse. When you pin the therapist down, when you ask him, Now tell me, if I go through the middle of this trouble in my soul, if I work hard on myself, will I finally get to that place where my life will be simple and perfect, you know, smooth sailing? The therapist will say, your ears will hardly believe what they hear, the therapist will say, No, but don't worry, you'll handle all the stuff much better.

It's basically the same answer that Jesus gave to Peter. Can you drink the cup I drink? Peter, have you been listening at all? Did I not tell you that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head? Did I not tell you that this path leads to persecution? You know I did. Did I ever tell you that the kingdom of God was Shangri-La, or bliss, or never-never-land? You know I didn't.

And so we and Peter are left right where Psalm 89 leaves us – with lamentation. The promises we thought we had have vanished like smoke. We've misunderstood. We are left

crying with the Psalmist, where is God's steadfast love of old?

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the concentration camps of the Holocaust and whose powerful writings are a witness to the contemporary world, often disturbs us in his stories because of his reluctance to wrap things up into neat and happy endings. G.B. Walker says, "His stories are part of a process that destroys the enchantment of reality and reveals the jagged edges of events which have not been domesticated by memory and reduced to consonance."¹ Elie Wiesel, as a Holocaust survivor knows better than to domesticate life, to wrap it into lovely packages of sentimentality.

In the end, Wiesel and the Psalmist point us to the same place, to the beginning, to our presumptions about life and about God. It is very clear that Peter willfully misheard Jesus. No matter how much Jesus tried to explain that the secret of life, or the kingdom of God, or the Gospel, as much as Jesus tried to tell him that none of these things, nor even God himself, were about promises of victory and worldly power, Peter insisted on believing that victory and worldly power were exactly what God was all about, exactly what God promised the faithful. And one way of reading the whole Hebrew Bible, from Genesis through the prophets, is to see it as a struggle in which God tries to reveal God's self to human beings who already think they know what God means to them. They whine in the wilderness, because they expected God to take care of them. They demanded to have a king, because they understood that God meant to give them military victory. And when David's kingdom passed into memory, they imagined that another David would come in thunder and fire and crush their enemies.

But the story ends with all the rough edges still sharp and exposed. As Christians we say that Jesus was the Son of David, but he was anything but a firebrand who crushed our foes into dust. It is at our peril and most certainly a wild misconstrual of the Gospel to call upon God today to bless us with victories and power and acclaim. Nothing will more certainly leave us with the lament of the Psalmist pouring out of our mouths. The Gospel goes wherever it goes by way of the cross, and no matter how one understands Easter, the scandal of the crucifixion, the scandal of a God who rather than defeating the power and principalities is instead executed by them, that scandal remains the central symbol of the drama. To miss that fact is to block our ears and cover our eyes to the obvious just as Peter and the Psalmist did so long ago.

In Elie Wiesel's short story called "The Wandering Jew," the young speaker says of one of the wandering teacher's dazzling expositions: "That was beautiful." He is rebuked by the teacher, who says: "When will you understand that a beautiful answer is nothing? Nothing more than illusion? Man defines himself by what disturbs him and not by what reassures him. When will you understand that you are living and searching in error, because God means movement and not explanation?"²

Wiesel is hypersensitive to easy explanations and facile reassurance. It's hard to argue with him. For the Holocaust itself can be seen as the result of an ideology built on just such simple-minded explanations of the world, explanations that were meant to reassure a fearful

¹Tate, M. E. (2002). Vol. 20: Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 51-100. Word Biblical Commentary (430). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

²Ibid

people. Insecurity and fear seethe with danger in the hands of those who seek to cure their anxiety with victories and power, and especially in the hands of those who say the power and victories are what God has promised them.

God means movement, not explanation or reassurance, says Wiesel's wandering Jew. The therapist who confesses that the end of your therapy isn't a guaranteed bowl of cherries is saying something like that. Jesus was trying to tell Peter something like that, too.

I'm struggling to put into words what the point finally is. Maybe that's the truth of Wiesel's insight – that you can't wrap it all up with a bow. But if we quit chasing after false promises that not only distract us but destroy us, if we give up easy explanations and undemanding reassurances, if we truly say that we will drink Jesus' cup, for example, where does it take us?

Maybe the words of the wandering Jew are it. Maybe instead of being stuck, it puts us in motion. If we don't spend all our energy and resources and attention trying to make things the way they aren't, maybe we are more free to grapple and engage with them the way they actually are. Ironically, we are then also more likely to help change things for the better.

When Jesus asked Peter if he could drink the bitter cup that he would drink, Jesus wasn't principally trying to tell Peter that all was bitterness. But he knew that a strong desire to escape bitterness would ultimately lead Peter to destructiveness and sorrow.

Ironically, it is this very destructiveness that causes the bitterness in the first place. When individuals and nations believe that God has promised them a life without sorrow, a life of victory and success, they justify afflicting others with war and poverty in the name of their promises from God. Jesus, God incarnate, meant to put that lie to rest once and for all. Jesus himself was a victim of those human pursuits. They put him on the cross. Jesus became the prime example of humanity gone wrong.

But he was something else, too. For he showed those who followed him that if one chose love, compassion and forgiveness instead, there would surely be the cup of bitterness, but there would just as surely be a much greater movement toward communities of love and hope, communities of care and compassion. Jesus told Peter that he would, indeed, drink the cup of bitterness. He meant that either way, either way Peter chose to go, there would be bitterness and sorrow. For the ways of the world deliver sorrow in spades. But Jesus also meant that his way, even though it passed directly through the cross, also led, in the words of Wiesel's wandering Jew, to movement. It led to a transformation of the cup of bitterness. That is it led to God. Amen.