



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Hear Us, O God
Philippians 3:4b-14; Psalm 80

For the past couple of years, I have had the privilege and challenge of leading chapel with the children at our weekday preschool. We spend a few minutes each Thursday morning reading a story, doing an activity, or learning an object lesson to help the children to think about themselves and the world in relation to God. Since I am generally more fluent in speaking teenager than preschooler, it has been an adventure for me to share ideas and ask questions in a vocabulary they can understand and to remember how literal preschoolers can be. I am learning at least as much as they are and look forward to my time with them each week.

Last fall, I showed up for chapel with several backpacks and tote bags filled with hardcover books. I asked one of the teachers to assist me, and I began to tell the children about all the worries and stresses their teacher might be having. "Let's pretend," I said, "that your teacher is under a lot of stress right now because her schedule is so busy, and she's really worried about a big bill that's due this week, and her kids are causing even more stress when they fight and misbehave." With each example, I added a heavy bag to her back or shoulders until she was completely weighed down. Then, I told the kids how the Bible tells us that we should help carry one another's burdens and gave examples of how, if I'm her neighbor or friend, I might help her out. With each of those examples, I took a bag back from her until we were each carrying the same load. We said our closing prayer, and I left feeling quite proud of my creative lesson which would clearly be meaningful to the children.

The next day I received a report from our secretarial assistant Liz that her daughter Lauren, who attends our preschool, said that what she learned in chapel that day is that her teacher is not very strong.

In the face of all that the world has been piling on all of us lately, I admit that I'm not feeling very strong these days. The weight of tragedy, fear, national turmoil, international tensions, political division, and community crises has left many, perhaps all, of us weak and weary, and, though we want to be

able to turn to our neighbors to offer help, we often find that our strength is depleted and our stamina is waning. Even those of us who generally fancy ourselves resilient and competent and in control watch the news, get caught up in one more debate with a friend or family member, receive one more request for help, or take a long, intentional look around us at our world, and we just don't feel very strong.

Today's Psalter lesson tells us that God's chosen people knew exactly what it felt like to lack strength. We don't know the precise setting of this Psalm. It is attributed to Asaph, which could be a reference to a scribe who recorded one of the Psalms of David or Solomon, or it could refer to the Asaphites, the name used for a group of temple musicians. The latter is more likely since the Psalm appears to be referring to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians some 200 years after Solomon's death. The Assyrians were known for being brutal to conquered peoples, and the kind of suffering described here with words like broken, ravaged, burned, and cut down offers a picture of the harsh treatment the Israelites would have received at the hands of their invaders.

The Israelites were God's chosen ones, the people with whom God had formed a covenant, the ones whom God had promised to bless so that they might bless others. God had rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh's oppression, brought them safely through their wilderness wanderings, protected them as they occupied Canaan, and prospered their kingdom from the time of the Judges through the reigns of David and Solomon. Even when the tribes disagreed over the heir to Solomon's throne and the nation divided, they continued to live and work and worship in relative peace and prosperity, and God continued to honor his promise to bless and multiply them.

But for what? So that now they could be humiliated, a laughing stock among the nations? So that they could be enslaved and tortured once again, this time at the hands of ruthless barbarians? So that all that they had received of God's blessings could be devoured by pagans who defiled the Temple and mocked their God?

From this place of pain and desperation, the psalmist cries, "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel!" Like lost sheep, their song calls out for their Shepherd to hear their cries for help, find them, and lead them to safety. In their brokenness, the refrain of their hymn begs repeatedly for God to shine his face upon them, to restore their crumbling walls as well as their hope. As they look upon the destruction and suffering all around them, their hearts plead, "How long, O God, how long?"

Throughout history and up to this present moment, we humans have looked around us at suffering and devastation, whether it be from natural disasters, disease, or violence we perpetrate against one another, and asked similar questions, especially "Why?" Why do bad things happen to seemingly good people? Why do calamities befall not only the wicked but also the righteous? For all the good that our ingenuity and compassion have brought to humanity, why do we continue to cause such harm to one another and to our world? And for people of faith, why does a loving and gracious God allow such horrible things to happen?

If you've come today hoping to hear answers to those questions, I'm sorry to disappoint you because in spite of my best efforts to figure it all out, I don't know. I do not claim to have the wisdom or perspective to offer such insight. Especially in light of a series of devastating hurricanes and fires; racial tensions that have erupted across the country; political violence in Spain, India, Kenya, and the Middle East; threats of nuclear war from North Korea; mass shootings in Tennessee, Las Vegas, and Kansas just in the past two weeks; and countless other local, national, and global catastrophes we hear about almost daily, I, too, hope and pray to be able to make some sense out of all that is senseless in our world, to find strength to carry the weight of the tragedies happening around us, and to discover some word or act of compassion that might relieve someone else's suffering. With the Psalmist, with those who are hurting most acutely, and with all of you, my heart cries out, "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel! Restore us, O God!"

But while there are many things we cannot know when crises arise and suffering occurs, our faith in a loving and gracious God does have much to teach us. As much as we want precise answers and concrete explanations, though, perhaps we will find in the midst of the inexplicable that God calls us to look deeper, to trust more fully, and to understand not only with our minds but even more with our hearts. When we are searching for strength and understanding in the midst of our sorrow, we may discover that we have been seeking them from all the wrong sources and that we have misplaced our trust.

When God first promised a covenant with Abraham, when that covenant was more clearly defined by the words Moses brought down from Sinai, and when it was fulfilled by the deliverance of the people from Egypt and protection for them as they entered the Promised Land, God was always clear that their relationship must be one of trust in him. Even when the Israelites begged for a king so that they would feel more secure and be like the other nations, God tried to convince them that they were not like the other nations and that their security could be found in his promises to them. But instead of

placing their hope and confidence in God, the people trusted in their political and military leaders, in their prosperity and accomplishments, and even in their possession of the land itself. They became comfortable and complacent in their abundance, even attributing their status as the chosen ones to their own worthiness and superiority, forgetting that all of these comforts and benefits were not the result of their own achievements but were the gracious gifts of God.

We hear this same message in today's epistle lesson. Paul has written to the Philippian Church, rejoicing in the good reports he has heard about their work and praising them for their obedience. He encourages them to keep their actions and attitudes focused on the message of Christ. But he also warns them not to allow themselves to become complacent or overly confident. He tells them that if anyone has reason to trust in status and achievement, it is him. He is well bred among the Hebrews, born into the highest status and privilege. And he has used all of those opportunities to his advantage, being highly educated and accomplished, zealous for his faith, and righteous under the law. But Paul's encounter with Christ caused him to suffer the loss of all these things, convincing him that his pedigree and status and all of his achievements were rubbish, temporary and fleeting gains in light of the eternal hope he has found in Christ. Paul has learned that those things in which he had placed his trust could not offer true security, either in this life or the next, and that he could only find a hope which does not disappoint when he placed his trust in the living God.

I had hoped beyond hope that we could get through the aftermath of these latest tragedies without having to say it again, but based on news reports I've heard this week, it is also necessary to emphasize that the suffering we witness around us and that we experience ourselves is not caused by God and is not a result of God's punishment. Especially as followers of Christ, we proclaim faith in a loving and gracious God, a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We speak of God's infinite mercy and compassion, and yet some leaders who have declared themselves spokespeople for our faith take to the airwaves following catastrophic hurricanes or tragic violence or even personal crisis and claim that these events are in some way God's wrath for this wrong or that sin. They claim that we are suffering because we, collectively or individually, don't have enough faith or haven't prayed hard enough, or haven't lived by their interpretation of biblical laws. To these accusations, I believe the life, death, and resurrection of Christ have pronounced a resounding, "NO!"

While it is possible to read portions of the Old Testament prophets, and even parts of today's Psalter lesson, and find the belief that the destruction

and suffering of the kingdom of Israel is punishment being meted out by God and that the invading armies are the tools by which God is chastening his people, the prevailing message, even of the Hebrew Scriptures, is one of God's mercy in spite of Israel's failure to honor the covenant. And with the coming of Christ, God declared, once and for all, not wrath and punishment for our sins, but a love which conquers hate, a hope which defies despair, and life which defeats death. In the coming of Christ, God did not demand punishment as payment to him for our sin. Rather, in the suffering and death of Jesus, God has claimed solidarity with us in our suffering. He overcame sin and death to offer assurance that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, sin and death do not have the last word. God took human form, and right in midst of our pain and conflict and doubt, offered to us in-the-flesh hope that when we don't feel very strong, God is our strength.

But's God's amazing grace, his flesh-and-blood mercy, didn't end when Christ ascended into heaven. In his infinite compassion and wisdom, God gave us one another, the communion of saints which is Christ's Body on earth. We are not perfect—far from it. We continue to get many things wrong. But together we are companions for this journey, brothers and sisters with whom to laugh and to weep. Despite the failure of the delivery of my message to the preschoolers, we are called to carry one another's burdens. In the Body of Christ, we can be strong when others are experiencing times of need and can rely on others in our own times of weakness.

When I look around at all that is happening in our world, I wish I had answers, or better yet, solutions. I long for our life together on this planet to be easier and for it to hurt a lot less. There are times, I must admit, that I wish we could come into this place to forget about all that's happening out there. But as good as Christ's good news is for the world, it does not offer an escape from the realities of suffering and need. Rather, our faith in Christ is a call for us to go right into the midst of that suffering, to love with our hands and feet, to minister to needs wherever we find them. The truth is, before God and surrounded by the pain and turmoil of this world, we are all God's small, broken children offering our frail, lisping praise to a loving and patient God.

The good news for all of us, then, is that in the face of suffering and tragedy and unanswerable questions, we don't have to be strong enough to handle any of it alone. In fact, it may be that our strongest moments are the ones when we cry out, "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel! Restore us, O God!"

God of grace, we seek your comfort and mercy because in moments such as these, there is nowhere else we can turn. The light of your presence and the abundance of your gifts to us are cause for gratitude and rejoicing, yet so much of your goodness to us has become overshadowed by sorrow and anxiety. The darkness within and around us is so great that at times we can scarcely find a glimmer by which to take our next steps, but we trust in your promise that the light of Christ will shine in our darkness and can never be extinguished. Hatred appears to reign in our hearts and in our world, but we trust in your promise that the love of Christ will tear down walls of prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear. Death has its grip on us so that we cannot comprehend a way out of our sorrow, but we trust in your promise that the peace of Christ will pass all our understanding. We trust your promises, O God, because you have been faithful and merciful to a faithless and disobedient people. We trust your promises, O God, because even in the midst of our foolishness and destruction, *often* in the midst of them, we sense your enduring presence with us and feel the gentle nudgings of your Spirit, urging us to pray and to work, to love and to serve, in spite of overwhelming fear and doubt.

In the fertile soil of our trust, Creator God, plant the seeds of justice and hope, and water them with courage and love, that from our moments of pain and tragedy we might cultivate a movement of change in our own hearts and across our land. Inspire us to speak words of comfort. Embolden us to stand against hatred and injustice. Move us from our comfortable places. And empower us to work for a community, a nation, and a world where compassion vanquishes hatred, where love overcomes indifference, where your light and life dispel the darkness in every corner of your world and in the lives of your children everywhere. In the name of Christ who came to demonstrate to the world your amazing grace. Amen.