Proper 14A: Matthew 14:22-33
Church of the Good Shepherd
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How long, O Lord?
The Psalms of Lament

There is a scene in the 1997 movie *The Apostle* that offers a striking lesson on prayer. The movie is about a charismatic Pentecostal preacher named Sonny, played by Robert Duvall. After finding out his wife was cheating on him, one night Sonny has it out with God. In the top floor of his house, Sonny cries out to the Lord in anger and frustration, yelling at him, arguing with him, cajoling him, begging him, so much so, so loudly, the neighbors call the house about the commotion. His mother assures the caller that "Ever since he was a little boy, Sonny has been talking to the Lord. Sometimes he talks to him, sometimes he yells at him. And tonight he's yellin' at him." With that she hangs up the phone.

Like Sonny's neighbors, many Christians don't know what to do with Sonny's kind of "prayer." It doesn't sound like any prayer you hear in church. But that may have more to do with our own sensibilities than it does with their legitimacy as prayer. In fact, if you've started reading through the psalms, like I suggested last week, you may have noticed that there are quite a few prayers in the Psalter that sound a lot like Sonny yellin' at God. Prayers that speak of sadness, of grievance, of anger, of lament. We almost never read these psalms in worship, but these psalms dominate the first half of the Psalter (Psalms 1-72) known as "the prayers of David". One might suspect that the reason they are excluded is because the psalmists focus so much on themselves. "Look at me, God, listen to me." Or maybe it's because the psalmists come across as demanding, rude, even downright ugly, accusing God of abandonment (22:2, 88:14), of murder (22:16), of falling asleep on the job (44:24). They try to bribe God (5:6) They tell God to just go away (39:13). Finally, and most offensively, the psalmists take a decidedly *un*-Christian attitude towards their enemies: they pray "devoutly" that terrible things will happen to them, even to babies and little children (109:6-20, 137:9, 143:12).

Still, the sheer number of these lament psalms forces us to take them seriously, to respect them as a "biblical model of prayer." As a matter of fact, they constitute the largest category of psalms in the Bible, outnumbering even the psalms of thanksgiving. Which is a curious thing considering the Jews called the Psalms the Book of Praises, and yet it includes more *laments* than anything else!

This says something, I think, about how ancient Israel approached prayer, in contrast to how we approach prayer. Ancient Israel apparently believed that the kind of prayer we most need to know is not the shout *Alleluia*!, but instead the loud groan. And they have bequeathed to us a *lot* of material on which to practice, a lot of complaints. Therefore it is troubling that most Christians are almost completely unfamiliar with these "lament psalms." Except on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, these psalms almost never appear in Sunday worship services. It appears that modern Christian worship designers define worship more narrowly than did ancient Israel. And as a result our spiritual lives are arguably impoverished. We might even call it deformed, on account of our failure to bring the language of suffering, the words of woe, into the sanctuary as an integral part of our corporate worship.

For these psalms have a lot to teach us, whether we find ourselves in need at the moment or not. I mean, take Psalm 6, which we just read, for instance.

Looking at this psalm, what words or phrases stand out? Well, the first word in this psalm is the most important: “Lord” (YHWH). That’s the most frequently repeated word in the psalm—God’s name. The fact that God is addressed in the first line of this and every lament make it clear these psalms are a dialogue, an exchange between two persons. The psalmist isn’t just indulging in self-pity or “wishing upwards,” with no particular hope of satisfaction. Rather, the psalmist is speaking directly to someone, to God, throwing a javelin right back at God!

After this address, how does the rest of the psalm go? How would you characterize the “movement” of dialogue? If you look at the lament psalms, almost always what you’ll find is that the psalmist ends the prayer in a different place from where he started. Nearly every time, the psalm starts out with petition and complaint and then there’s a shift, a break, and the psalm turns in the direction of praise. There’s a pattern: these psalms go from complaint to confidence in God, from desperate petition to anticipatory praise. But the curious thing is, the psalms make that move without ever telling us that anything about the situation, anything concrete, has changed for the better. The fact that the Psalms never clearly report a change in external circumstances is one mark of the Bible’s persistent realism. It shows how when God answers prayer, it’s not always or exclusively in the terms we expect and long for; the answer may be given in a way that is not even perceptible to someone looking at the situation from the outside.

Now, this doesn’t in any way take away from the intensity of the felt experience. The lament psalms are particularly evocative of the suffering the psalmist has endured. Here in Psalm 6, for example, the psalmist’s pleas to God and complaints testify to acute suffering (verse 2), to feeling abandoned (verse 1), bested by an enemy (verse 2), to fear that death is imminent. The psalm's mood varies from impatience ("How long," v. 1) to sadness and anger (v. 2) to petulance (vv. 3-4), to cajoling ("but I trusted you," vv. 5-6) The psalmist desires divine attention and a response ("consider and answer me," he insists, verse 3), yet it’s not clear what he expects God to do. But even without knowing any of the context, we recognize that the psalm expresses well what it is like to have a strained relationship not just with a trusted friend, but with God.

Standing back a bit, though, we can see how the whole prayer makes a bold assumption: namely, that God cares that we are in pain and can be expected to do something about it. This is a remarkable assumption if you think about it—that God who made heaven and earth should care that I am hurting. Other Middle Eastern peoples, Israel’s neighbors, would never have assumed that their gods—Marduk, Baal, Ashur—cared anything about them. But Israels God did. That Israel could trust that God cares about his people is the only thing that explains this style of prayer, a style without parallel in the ancient world. In no other culture did people pray to their god with language that was so strong, so bold, so rude: in another psalm (Psalm 44), the psalmist cries, “Wake up, God! Why are you sleeping? We haven’t forgotten you; why have you forgotten us?” (44:21, 24-25) Here, in Psalm 6, the psalmist makes a more subtle appeal to the Lord’s “loving-kindness” (in verse 5), but still there is a discernable kick to it. The psalmist is saying, “We have a deal, Lord, and it’s time you made good on it!”

Then the veiled accusation in Psalm 6 turns into a veiled threat: “For there is no mention of You in death” (verse 6). Behind this assertion is an appeal to God’s enlightened self-interest; to put it another way, the psalmist is proffering the bargaining chip of praise. For as ancient Israel conceived it, the only thing God

wants that humans have to offer is praise, and *only the living* can do that. The psalmist assumes that the dead are senseless, unthinking, and the place of the dead, Sheol, is a place of silence. From this, he draws a crucial inference: If only the living can praise God, then my life is valuable to the Lord. You might even say God's divine reputation depends on my staying alive. What chutzpah!

The answer that God ultimately gives to the psalmist's accusation is of course the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That divine answer becomes clearer when we consider the question in less personal terms: "Is God's glory diminished, or extinguished, by human death?" The psalmist thinks so. And, in a sense, all the heirs of biblical faith, both Jews and Christians alike, have come to hold the same conviction, that ultimately for God to be God, He *must* triumph over human death. One of the main doctrinal points on which religious Jews and Christians agree is that God resurrects the dead. Now, the doctrine of the resurrection may be beyond what the psalmist is thinking about here, but one might say that the seed of that doctrine lies in the belief that God can be persuaded, coaxed, and even coerced into saving our skins. God, we protest, would not be God if He did not save us, as that would mean a failure to make good on His promise. So now we begin to see why the psalms are so central to Christian faith: they push so hard at God, and, in the most personal terms, they push the envelope of our own limited faith.

In addition to the directness, the most striking thing about the language of the lament psalms is the poet's use of metaphors. Psalm after psalm, line after line, listen for those vivid metaphors that tell you exactly how bad it feels: "Along my back, the plowmen plowed" (129:3). What is it that feels so bad? We don't know. When the psalmist says in Psalm 22 "All my bones are out of joint" (v15), that probably does not indicate an orthopedic problem. The psalmists habitually give few, if any circumstantial details. Yet this metaphorical latitude, this combination of precision about the feeling and vagueness about the circumstances, makes the psalms available for use by any of us. Listen to what the metaphors are telling us about how he feels: "I have become like a leather flask in the smoke" (119:83)—I am dry, cracked, leaky, and therefore disposable. How many people do we know or see that feel this way: jobless youths in the inner city, the frail elderly, executives who have been laid off, homemakers for whom life has been meaningless after children have left home, or when a spouse died? Not knowing what situation the psalmist is speaking about allows us to use their words for our own experience of grief. And when we are not ourselves in grief, they can instruct instruct our compassion for others who are.

One further mark of the realism of the Psalter is the fact that it includes two psalms—Psalms 39 and 88—that make no turn toward praise. There are two psalms that end still holding out hope for God that has not been satisfied. The very existence of these exceptional psalms, these praise-less psalms, is important, for it suggests that unresolved despair is itself one legitimate, though tragic, aspect of our life with God. Crying out to God, screaming at God in the darkness—like Job, refusing false comfort yet still being unable to rise and embrace hope—there is room for that also in the life of faithful prayer. The lesson I take from this is that sometimes the only act of faith—for those who suffer and those who minister to them—is to name our desolation before God and to involve God in our suffering and to await God's response in faith.

It should be clear by now how important, what a blessing the lament psalms are to us. For what the lament psalms do is let us express our griefs, our pains, our sufferings in our own prayers without fearing recrimination, condemnation, or even humiliation by others. These psalms not only permit us to express our anger against God, they also teach us words and ways in which to do so. The verbs and adjectives with which they describe and address God model for us open, honest biblical prayer. They help us to learn

how to articulate the pain and the grief that we experience, individually but also collectively as a community. The point is, we don't have to internalize pain, push it down, let it fester and grow sour. Better to give it to God, he can handle it. Better to pray our pain than to vent our anger at others in dangerous and inappropriate ways. Not only is this safer for others, but it also serves to strengthen our faith. For, when we can pray our laments, when we speak of our pain to God, we acknowledge God's promise, his covenantal bond with us. Could we ever address a mere acquaintance or associate so directly without fear of reprisal or else rejection? No, but God invites us to share our laments with him, to share ourselves with him, even the ugly, raw parts. God can take it, he can take it and transform it, can transform us through our prayers. Thanks be to God!