

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 20

I Timothy 2: 1-7

Jeremiah 8: 18-9:1

Psalm 79

### **Lament, Vent, and Repent**

In the process of organizing our walk-in attic, going through boxes of dusty books,  
to see what to keep, and what to give away,

I came across a peculiar book that once belonged to my grandmother:

my grandmother, who only had an eighth grade education,

having gone to work to support her family;

my grandmother, who was self-educated through her love of reading;

my grandmother, who was German Moravian.

The worn book that caught my eye, was entitled *Under Cover*, written in 1943

by a journalist who had spent four years infiltrating radical

“patriotic” groups in the United States which were being

fueled by subversive propaganda coming out of Nazi Germany.

An Armenian immigrant to America himself, the journalist Arthur Derounian,

wrote under the pen name, John Roy Carlson,

to expose and fight the fascism and racism that *his* people,

the Armenians, had experienced in all its manifestations.

Among the groups he infiltrated were the The Christian Front,

The Christian Mobilizers, the American Defense Society, the Anglo-Saxon

Federation of America, and the American Patriots, among others.

So, I flipped through the book, and immediately became alarmed by the

nature of the rhetoric flowing from these radical right-wing cells.

Let me read you some of the language coming from their rallies:

*Wake up, Christians. Look around you. See what is happening to America. The whole country is overrun with foreigners...is this the white America of our fathers? Is this the land of Christian patriots or blood-sucking communists? This here country has been stolen from us Christians by a bunch of conniving rats. What are we going to do about it?*

And the crowd responds in rage...*Send them back in leaky boats! There's foreigners everywhere. My son can't get a job, but they get the jobs!...America is for Americans"* (Carlson, John Roy. *Undercover*, p 39-40)

And from another meeting, this time of well-heeled Christian women:

*Do you realize what a Communist revolution will mean to your daughters? Do you realize what it will mean to have 13,000,000 Communists turned loose? Need I tell you what happened to Hungarian peasant girls? Do you want the same thing to happen to white Christian, American womanhood, the pride of the nation?...The time for tolerance is past. Let us forget tolerance. Let us banish the word from our daily life. Let us learn to hate from now on. Hate. Meet hate with hate!* (*Undercover*, p. 49)

In response to comments like these, Carlson wrote in 1943,

*To join a 'one hundred percent Christian-American-Patriotic' group you didn't have to be Christian or American. Heathen and Mohammedans were welcome. Japanese were eligible. Crooks, thugs, racketeers, step right up. There is just one requirement. Hate! Hate the Blacks, the Jews, the Polacks, the Catholics, the Communists, the Masons, the bankers, the labor unions! Democracy? Hate anything, but hate! And call anything you hated by a common name. Rich man, poor man, art, science, logic, politics – tie them together, stick an odious label on them and hate that label for all its worth.* (*Undercover*, p. 50)

I was intrigued that my grandmother had adhered her personalized book-plate

inside the front cover and kept this book.

Why? She certainly was not a hater.

But she was white, and she was Christian, and she was of German heritage.

Perhaps she marveled at how easily she could have fallen under this same spell

which fear and hatred casts.

Perhaps she kept hearing the same old tropes, like the “send them back” chants

coming from contemporary lips in her own backyard,

wondering if evil ever abates, or if it only shape-shifts

and re-appears in different settings, under different guises.

And perhaps she had come to realize how white supremacy, racism,

and anti-Semitism have a Christian component that is an indelible stain

which won't bleach out no matter how hard we try to white-wash history.

Perhaps like me, she found Christian complicity in evil, violence and hatred

terribly alarming, sad and most certainly cause for lament.

Oh, it's just talk, we might say. It's just good Christian people speaking

before they take time to think.

Said Toni Morrison, the African American author and essayist who died recently,

winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for literature,

*Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge, it limits knowledge...It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks the fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly towards the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison, Toni. Nobel Lectures, December 7, 1993)*

I find Psalm 79 to be exemplary in its response to great evil and the complicity

of people of faith in any age and time.

Psalm 79 is a nationalistic lament, expressing concern over the havoc

created by the influx of foreign invaders to Jerusalem.

Sound familiar? Is there anything new under the sun? (Ecc. 1:9)

This lament is an expression of grief over the loss of a dream:

the dream that Jerusalem, the Holy City, and its Temple  
were personally protected by Yahweh God as God's holy habitation,  
and therefore, indefinitely impregnable and indestructible.

In the first three verses, the psalmist describes three horrors particular  
to the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE:

they have defiled the holy Temple;  
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins;  
and they have left unburied the bodies of the faithful dead,  
with no one to bury them.

The images are gruesome, like scenes we might see on the nightly news,  
from the detonation of an IED in a busy market in Syria,  
or from the suicide bombing of a wedding in Afghanistan,  
or from that bullet-ridden Walmart in El Paso.

A beloved place lies in ruins, the bodies of God's servants lie as carrion  
for the birds of the air and as flesh for scavenging wild animals.

And the people of God seem powerless, which is why I find their reaction,  
to this sacrilege of holy ground and of holy people to be quite the opposite  
of those who target opponents by spewing and espousing hate.

First, they lament. Although traumatized and violated, they pull together *as a*  
*community of faith* and express their distress, disappointment and grief *to God*.

This is their vigil of sorrow; this is where they light their candles;  
this is where they moan their mournful, tearful songs.

It is not just their city, their Temple and their people who have been devastated;  
it is God's city, God's Temple and God's people for which they implore  
God's empathy.

"How long, O Lord, will you be angry forever?

How long will your fury burn like a fire?" they ask. (v. 5)

I love that "how long" and "forever" are in the same question, don't you?

Although they hope that God's wrath is limited, it certainly feels like forever.

However, as fire is finite, perhaps, also is God's anger finite.

To open a dialogue with God like this when their inclination is to shut down  
all holy conversation, is to breach that wall of silence  
and open a way forward to new possibilities.

"How long", that familiar mantra of most laments, trusts that God will hear our cries,  
trusts that God will respond, trusts that God's help will come,  
and trusts that God will rescue once more. It is an affirmation of faith!

We want to know how long that will take, O Lord, how long we must endure.

Secondly, the people of God vent their anger, too, in lament,

because they are only human, and that's what we do when we humans are hurt,  
fearful, anxious, or threatened; we lash out in anger.

After all, a perceived enemy has rained death and destruction upon them.

So, in verse 6 they name the object of their anger as the unbelieving nations  
who have afflicted them; the invaders; the infidels; the ones

who "have devoured Jacob and laid waste to his habitation". (v. 7)

I hear the heat of their anger, definitely, but what I don't hear is hateful rhetoric

directed at the enemy, the foreigner, or the stranger.

Once again, it is directed toward Yahweh God, whom they solicit to pour out  
and reflect that same anger which they feel upon those nations and kingdoms  
that do not know God, or call on God's name. (v.10)

Do these vengeful sentiments align with our Christian sensibilities?

Apparently, the lectionary gurus think not, omitting verses 10-13

from our Revised Common Lectionary where the people of God

call for "vengeance for Your servants spilled blood"; an eye for an eye.

Furthermore, they petition God in v. 12 to "give back to our neighbors, sevenfold,  
the insults they have heaped on You".

That's not exactly the love your neighbor as yourself, which Jesus commands.

However, God allows this expression of raw grief as a viable prayer,

like Job's lament, like Jonah's lament, like Jeremiah's lament,

because the God of mercy and compassion wants to be in authentic  
relationship with us, and lament is authentic personal communication.

God wants it. God can take it. We are allowed to dish to God in all its ugliness.

Being faithful does not always have to look or sound pretty, and that's good news!

And finally, after they lament and vent, the people of God repent.

You have to look closely to find it in this psalm, but it is there in v. 9:

"Help us, our rescuing God, for Your name's glory;

and save us and atone for *our sins* for the sake of Your name."

Our sins implies our complicity and our involvement in the havoc.

The psalmist interprets this national disaster of violent invasion by asserting

that it is not God, but the people of God, who are responsible for this tragedy;  
hence, the need for repentance, for the sake of God's glory and name.  
God's chosen people, the people of God and the sheep of God's pasture,  
even with our best intentions and heartfelt desires, have sinned  
and contributed to the problem which now has them flummoxed.  
Which takes me back to my grandmother's book, *Under Cover*, and the ah-ha  
epiphany that Christianity, and white western Christianity, in particular,  
in its misplaced claims to theological superiority and supercessionism,  
is complicit in much of the anti-Semitism, white supremacy and racism  
which continues to break out like the hives on our body.  
Hence the lament; hence the venting towards God, and *not towards our neighbor*;  
and hence the call to repentance and to atonement, in order to seek  
the *tikkum olam*, the repair of our broken world.

Psalm 79 ends with one of my favorite, most tender expressions of trust in God,  
"we are Your people, the flock that You tend". (v. 13)  
It reminds me of the beautiful prayer cited at the end of every  
Service of Witness to the Resurrection, when we commend our beloved  
ones, in faith, to the everlasting arms of God.

"Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant.

Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold,  
a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

Sometimes the flock is in jeopardy, sometimes the sheep are without a shepherd,  
and sometimes we, like sheep, have gone astray, nevertheless,

we humbly pray and we repent of our complicity in the ills of this world.

We humbly pray, and we commit ourselves to the hands of our merciful Savior,

Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, who calls us by name,

and leads us out (John 10:10), forward, and into the green pastures

of God's intended shalom. Amen.



