

'If Only – Separating God's Truth from What We Want'

Based on Psalm 13, Jeremiah 28:1-9 and Matthew 10:40-42

Delivered on Sunday, June 28, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

In our call to Worship today, the Psalm we read from asks, *'How long, O LORD? How long? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?'* Now, I suppose there is a chance that you have never felt this way. Indeed, there may be a statistical possibility, but I think it is highly unlikely. Especially, when we consider how long we have been apart, unable to gather because of the very real risks of COVID-19.

It is normal for us to lament and ask God, how long? But even apart from this current crisis, I think we often find ourselves impatient with God. No matter what the struggle we find ourselves in, I think we tend to respond in one of two ways. We act strong by putting down 'enemies' in order to make ourselves feel better, or we act weak, and let the struggle defeat us and we give in to our base desires. Maybe we do a combination of both.

In other words, try to handle the problem all by ourselves. We put ourselves at the center of our own universe. I can say I'm guilty of both: Saying, 'Well what they do is worse!' or saying, 'Oh well, what's the point anyway?' Have you done this? Made comparisons? When you have received bad news, have you just given up? As I already confessed, I know I have. Too often.

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? In Hebrew it is literally, 'How long should I take advice in my life, having this daily sorrow in my heart?' Indeed, the struggle is so hard because the writer cannot bear it alone, but the thought of accepting the advice of others is a painful one.

So, in this internal struggle, the writer looks outside for someone to blame. He asks now, *'How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?'* The writer wants God to know: I'm the righteous one. I'm not supposed to be low, humbled. And in the meantime, my enemies, well they are lifted high, above me? Why? Why aren't they dealing with this struggle that I deal with daily? There are traditions that say King David wrote this Psalm, but if he did, he is guilty in this first part of the Psalm of some poor leadership skills.

According to the book, *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins, great leaders have some common traits, but one of those traits is that great leaders look out the window in times of success, always looking to give credit to others and share credit for accomplishments. These great leaders then also look in the mirror when things go wrong, taking responsibility and shielding the team from failure. Poor leaders look in the mirror to claim their own success, and look out the window for someone to blame, especially in times of unrest and failure.

Clearly, the Psalmist here is struggling, so, it must be the enemy's fault, or God's for doing nothing.

In fact, the Psalmist begins to get feisty with God, even threatening the Lord in a way. *'Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or else I will sleep the sleep of death,'* as if the writer is saying to God, 'Tell me what I want to hear, answer me, or I'll die, and it will be your fault.' Indeed, the writer even tries to guilt God by association. *'My enemy (meaning God's enemy too) will say, "I*

have prevailed,” and *“My foes (and yours God) will rejoice because I am shaken.’* You can hear tones of prayerful game of brinksmanship: “God, you have to side with me, because I dropped your name, and if you don’t do this, people won’t believe in you.” We’ve likely all been there.

In the reading from Jeremiah today, we the prophet Hananiah playing these games. Already, some years earlier, King Nebuchadnezzar had sieged Jerusalem, and had taken who they thought was their rightful king and the nobility across the region to Babylon. As you might expect, the people longed for things to go back to normal. And what we find is prophets like Hananiah feeding into this mindset. As one pastor whose work I read this week put it, they become “Pulpit Pinocchios.” He calls the Hananiahs from then and today puppets, who lying to the people, telling them what they wanted to hear, rather than seeking a word from God, consistent with God’s word. Their preaching was a sales pitch, rather than the truth.

But Jeremiah, has been preparing the people for the inevitable all along. He knows how awful it is to imagine serving King Nebuchadnezzar, but he says God doesn’t want the people to fight, or even resist going into exile. Rather, God wants the people of Judah to be evangelists in exile. Indeed, in the next chapter Jeremiah will advise the people, “to build houses in Babylon, grow you families in Babylon, and seek the welfare of that city Babylon.” Again, here it is not just to seek the welfare of Judah’s exiles, but the whole city they live in, because the welfare of the whole city is their welfare.

In other words, Jeremiah says live justly, just as God has called you to live, even if it’s Babylon which benefits from all your work. The people of Judah do not want to hear a message like this because it feels like defeat. We don’t like to hear it either. In fact, when Christians mention the prophet Jeremiah how often do we call to mind chapter 29, verse 11, *‘for I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper.’* We want the promise, but we rarely remember these words that come right before that verse about God’s expectation of patience.

Like the Psalmist, Jeremiah’s audience can’t possibly imagine any good coming of this struggle. So, when Hananiah and others tell them that they are going to be winners again, they latch on to this lie and miss the bigger promise God has for them. This lie tells them that they will see a return of the good old days, when it was “us against the world and we were winning.” But through Jeremiah, God desires patience, and a faith that trusts in God’s promises.

For the exiles, the promises meant a return to the land and the long-awaited Messiah. For many, the vision of the Messiah was one of a King who would reunite Israel, and restore the nation’s independence, particularly independence from Empire. In the first century, under the rule of Rome, which was a military superpower with an oppressive police state, there was an assumption that this King might be a revolutionary, one who would have to take up arms and overthrow Rome, restoring the old glory of Israel as a mighty nation. As we know, Jesus was indeed a revolutionary. He turned everything upside down, including that need to bear arms.

In today’s text we see the end of Jesus’s speech commissioning His lieutenants so to speak, and in what we have read, we see Jesus revealing Himself as Lord of the Harvest, the one to whom He told His disciples to pray to for workers. Now Jesus then sends them, the 12 disciples, commissioning them now to be Apostles, to go out into the world and start sharing in his work. Jesus tells them that they will suffer and be persecuted, that they will even suffer isolation from their family. It isn’t

an easy road for disciples of Jesus, but at least for all their struggles, they will be regarded highly, right? At least? No.

No, today's scripture closes out what is known as the Missionary discourse in Matthew, and Jesus says that whoever receives someone in His name, receives Him, and whoever receives Him, receives the fullness of God who sent Him. At first this sounds like a high reward: Jesus's disciples will be received as God is received. Indeed, Jesus says the one in the name of a prophet gets a prophet's reward, and the one in the name of a righteous man gets a righteous man's reward.

It seems like this is shaping up to be a pretty good pay off. But again no, 'whoever in the name of a disciple gives these little ones just a simple cup of water, will not lose their reward' – notice it doesn't say will earn a reward – 'but not lose it.' Remember the chain, the one who receives a disciple, receives Jesus, who is God. So, when you receive someone in the name of the disciple, other disciples, then you are receiving through this person the presence of God in Jesus Christ. But these disciples are called 'little ones,' or children, which in that cultural context meant lowest rung.

When you are a disciple of Christ, you have your reward, because you are revealing God to the world, but it is not for you to be great, but to be like a child, a little one, humble, dependent on the One who sends you, and those whom you humbly go to, will not lose their encounter with God, because you revealed Jesus to them.

You see, at the beginning of this discourse, Jesus tells his disciples that they should not expect the world to go easy on them, because the world was not going to go easy on Jesus, their teacher and Lord. No, when the Word of God by which all things were created, took on our humanity to be fully a part of that creation, it was not to be accepted and pampered by the world, but to turn over the expectations of this world, by living like us in all things but sin, and dying for us on a Roman cross, a symbol of oppression that was reserved for slaves and rebels.

But even when the religious authorities and the empire's authorities unleashed all they had, sin and death could not defeat Jesus, who humbly laid down His life to their ways, and triumphantly on the third day rose again from the dead on the third day, showing that all they had – sin and death – had no power over Him, and therefore us anymore. It is true that by this death and resurrection, we might share in God's life, a life that is to the fullest, abundant right now, and also eternal. This is not winning by the world's standards, but much better.

When Hananiah said all would be normal again soon, again it was what the people wanted to hear. Jeremiah's response is priceless – *"Amen, may the Lord do so!"* – for he wanted this too. But more importantly, he wanted people to submit to God's will, not their own. He tested his word from God against the existing word of God, to show that what he said God asked now, was nothing new really, as every other legitimate prophet had forecast this kind of thing.

We must do that today when people tell us a supposed word from God, that just so happens to fit our view of our own exceptionalism to make us feel good, or a word that demonizes our enemies, or really just those we call our enemies. The whole of scripture is about God's glory which we are called to reflect, in a world that is hostile to God, but which God loves dearly, wanting them to know the good news of God's love and offer of eternal and abundant life. This means that we, like God, must as Jesus so boldly said, love our enemies and to even pray for them.

We must resist modern calls of Hananiah for peace that comes by sweeping everything under the rug. We must not miss this opportunity to seek justice, reconciliation and real peace. Hananiah speaks for the false gods of comfort and power and popularity. In our day, these are wrapped up in the false god of modern life, where we worship our busy schedules, conveniences and technology, leading us to ignore anything that doesn't affect us personally, because if we ignore something or hide it, we can say, or think, that it doesn't really exist.

When we worship our modern lives, we never see ourselves as mere 'little ones,' but we consider ourselves important authorities in our own ideologies, where those who disagree with us are enemies, whom we must put down and defeat, even kill if necessary.

Right now, I think, our tendency is to hear this word, and we want to apply it to others and not ourselves, because 'they' need to hear this, since it proves I'm right. It's hard, but that is our tendency.

In our sinful nature and by our culture, we are trained to put ourselves first and question others. But in Christ, we must look for what it is that God wants to do in these uncertain times. Scripture shows us that God does not want us to put things back as we had them, but to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, because only this will restore things to how God intended them.

This is not to say that we are wrong to cry out to God, "How long O LORD, how long?" One thing I love about Psalm 13 is how it turns, from lament to a deep peace. In verbalizing these frustrations with God, the writer finds God and is no longer taking on the struggle by his or her self, seeking the God who can help. So, let us cry out to the Lord to notice us, to hear our pleas for mercy, because such a prayer opens us up to the will of God, freeing us up to see the truth of the gospel, that God is indeed with us. God is with you.

I believe this. And I believe this is why we see such a shift in the Psalmist's words, when he threatens God, then says: *'But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.'* This lament did not lead to giving up or getting what was asked for, or hearing what they wanted hear. Instead the writer hears what needed to be heard from God, which is the only truth that really matters: The truth of God's steadfast loving presence even in the midst of all of life's challenges. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from Pinawa.Church/puzzles (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

B E A L L L I S T E N F A M I N E
U X P I T K P E S T I L E N C E M
T I R M A N Y N P G B W P C J P A
F L O H F O R T E R R H R O E R Y
U E P O R W H H A E I O E U R I P
L S H U O N E I K A N P C N E E R
F T E S M H A S T T G R E T M S O
I O T E L O R D R A K O D R I T P
L H S A I D I H U M I P E I A S H
L A Y O U R N A L E N H D E H P E
G N W I L L G V Y N G E T S P E S
A A W A N C I E N T D S I V E O I
G N O P L A C E S H O I M E A P E
A I R C O M E S P E M E E S C L D
I A D W H E N O O N S S S S E E W
N H S T R U E F K P R E S E N C E
S T A N D I N G E B A C K L W A R
T H A T B A B Y L O N N R S V B E

Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

(Jeremiah 28:1-9 NRSV) In ***that*** same year, at the beginning ***of*** the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet ***Hananiah*** son of Azzur, from Gibeon, ***spoke*** to me in the house of the LORD, in the ***presence*** of the ***priests*** and ***all*** the ***people***, saying, 'Thus says the ***LORD*** of hosts, the God of Israel: I ***have*** broken the yoke of the king of ***Babylon***. Within two years I will ***bring*** back to this ***place*** all the ***vessels*** of the LORD's ***house***, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away ***from*** this place and carried ***to*** Babylon. I ***will*** also bring back to ***this*** place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the ***exiles*** from Judah ***who*** went to Babylon, says the LORD, ***for*** I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.' ***Then*** the prophet ***Jeremiah*** spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who ***were standing*** in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah ***said***, "***Amen!*** May the LORD do ***so***; ***may*** the LORD ***fulfill*** the ***words*** that you have ***prophesied***, and bring ***back*** to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles. ***But listen*** now to this word that I ***speak*** in ***your hearing*** and in the hearing of all the people. The ***prophets*** who ***preceded*** you and me from ***ancient times*** prophesied ***war***, ***famine***, and ***pestilence against many countries*** and ***great kingdoms***. As for the prophet who ***prophesies peace***, ***when*** the word of that prophet ***comes true***, then ***it*** will ***be known*** that the LORD ***has truly sent*** the prophet."