June 3, 2018

Psalm 13

How Long: Renouncing Evil

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Psalm 13 Common English Bible

How long will you forget me, God? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me? Look at me! Answer me, O my God! Restore sight to my eyes! Otherwise, I’ll sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, “I won!” My foes will rejoice over my downfall. But I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to God because God has been good to me.

In June we are going to be focusing on the words of the prophet Amos who tells us that God doesn’t want our joyous worship unless we are also concerned with justice. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Whenever I think about justice I think about our baptismal vows. I really do! We say yes to these questions: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

By the 4th century, the church had instituted a powerful symbol of the transformation of candidates for baptism away from evil and toward good. Before going into the water, people would face the direction of the west, the direction of the setting sun, and renounce evil. Then they would turn away from that direction to face the east, the direction of the rising sun, as a sign that they were leaving the forces of evil behind and facing the light of God in their lives. The language of renouncing evil is old, and has come to us through the ages as our rites of baptism invite us to renounce evil in all its forms, the ones that rise up within us and the systemic oppression inherent in our societies. We affirm that we have the freedom to do so and that it is God in whom we put our trust.

But, today’s scripture and the poem and the song that we have just heard point to the reality that evil, injustice and oppression are still all too real in our world today. We know this. We know that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. We know that we live in a world where the top 1% hold 50% of the world’s worth. Our Christian faith calls us to have mercy on the poor and oppressed and it just keeps getting worse. How long, O God, how long?

Our faith calls us to be concerned about those with physical ailments. Jesus had so much compassion for those who were sick. How long, O God, must we make people choose between their health and paying the rent?

There are so many things that can make your heart break when we think about justice. There is racial justice, human rights, human trafficking, our earth, immigration and refugees, education, war and violence. We long for God’s peace and justice. And until that time, we cry out with the psalmist, “How long?”

This Psalm is what we call a lament Psalm, a song of crying and weeping and sadness. In fact, half of the Psalms are Psalms of lament. These were songs written in a time of exile and persecution and the poets of the psalms were trying to give voice to the pain of the people. Songs of complaint and crying out to God don’t sit well with us. We are not only Americans, but we are Christians. When something is wrong, we want to do something to fix it! “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” How do we do that? How do we resist evil and injustice and oppression? How do we turn towards God’s light? John Wesley had three general rules. Simple rules, but profoundly difficult. Do no harm, do good, draw closer to God through prayer, reading scripture, fasting, and worshipping God.

That poem we heard said: “May we come to understand that absence is not always enough. ... The absence of evil is good, but the presence of righteousness perfects what is good.” We have to figure out when our silence means that we are doing harm. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was arrested and imprisoned for his outspoken opposition to Hitler, said, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” We all have to decide for ourselves where that line is between doing no harm and doing good. Between keeping quiet and speaking up.

Here’s the thing, God was not a Republican nor a Democrat. We are not of one mind in this congregation. I believe that we all value the same things, but that we disagree on how the waters of justice might flow to achieve them. We do have common ground. It is possible to cry how long and fulfill our calling to do something in that waiting as we resist evil and in that resisting expose evil to the light.

Too often we put people in boxes. We say that there is us and there is them. Those we trust and those we try to avoid. Those who make a lot of money and those who are just trying to get by. There are those we share something with and those we don’t share anything with, but there is more that brings us together than we think.

I said earlier that today’s Psalm was a lament Psalm. One of the features of a lament Psalm is that they do not end with complaint and crying out to God. They always finish by expressing trust in God that the future will be good. For God is good to us. It is in God that we trust, even when we cannot see our way forward. “But I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to God because God has been good to me.”

Have you ever been somewhere, usually a church, where someone says “God is good, all the time.” And other people say, “All the time, God is good.” It came out of the African American community as an expression in the Lament tradition of offering praise to God who is good especially in the midst of pain, even and especially when the world is not good. It is the ultimate trust in God who works through us to transform injustice.

I was talking with a friend who runs a church music camp every year. She was a part of this Choir Camp when she was growing up in the 1980s when they had 250 plus kids participate. Now she gets to put it on for other kids. This year they only had 7 kids register and she had to make the decision to cancel Choir Camp. When she is running Choir Camp, she calls out “God is good, all the time” to get the kids attention, to call them to order if you will, and the kids respond, “All the time, God is good.” She was driving home after the meeting where the camp directors had told her she had to cancel camp. She was feeling really discouraged about having to cancel Choir Camp this year, and a car drove past her on the tollway that had a bumper stick on it in two parts. Sticker one said, “God is Good.” Sticker two said, “All the Time.” It could have been coincidence or it could have been a reminder that God knows what we need when we need it. She decided it was a nudge from God that it will be okay.

 I want to invite you to close your hands. Make a tight fist if you can. This month we will contemplate what we need to give up in order to let justice roll down, to let justice prevail in our lives, in our church, in our world. I invite you to imagine that tight fist as a symbol of the frustration or anger over injustice. What in particular creates sadness and lament for you? Now slowly open your hands, letting go of the tension there and imagine that cool water is flowing into and over them. It is only in opening to the freedom and power God has given us that our hands become ready for loving action and not closed and ready to meet violence with violence. God works through us to transform injustice. May the waters of justice flow and roll through us all. Thanks be to God, Amen.