

**First Presbyterian Church of Redlands**  
**Rev. Cheryl Raine**  
**Second Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2020**

**The First Reading is Psalm 13:1-6 from the NRSV**

<sup>1</sup> How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

<sup>2</sup> How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

<sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

<sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

<sup>5</sup> But I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

<sup>6</sup> I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

**The Second Reading is Perfecting God by Bishop Latrelle Miller Easterly**

Perfecting God, as we walk further into your light and your Word manifests more deeply within us, may we come to understand that absence is not always enough. The absence of hate is good, but the presence of love perfects what is good. The absence of evil is good, but the presence of righteousness perfects what is good. The absence of violence is good, but the presence of peace perfects what is good. The absence of scarcity is good, but the presence of abundance perfects what is good. The absence of discrimination is good, but the presence of justice perfects what is good. Transform us as only you can, Perfecting God. Mold us and make us after your will, while we are waiting, yielded and still.

**The Message is entitled, *Absence is Not Enough***

"On Sunday, August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky," writes poet Ann Weems. Listen to one of fifty psalms of lament she wrote:

O God, have you forgotten my name?

How long will you leave me  
in this pit?

I sang hosannas  
all the days of my life  
and waved palm branches  
greened in the new spring world.

Rich only in promises  
from you,  
I followed  
believing,  
and then they killed him  
whom I loved

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more than my own life  
(even that you taught me).  
They killed him  
whom you gave to me.  
They killed him  
without a thought  
for justice or mercy,  
And I sit now in darkness  
hosannas stuck in my throat...

Why should I wave palm branches  
or look for Easter morning?  
O God, why did you name me Rachel?  
A cry goes up out of Ramah,  
and it is *my* cry!  
Rachel will not be comforted!  
Don't you hear me,  
you whose name is Emmanuel?  
Won't you come to me?  
How long must I wait  
on this bed of pain,  
without a candle  
to ward off the night?

Come, Holy One,  
feed to me a taste of your shalom.  
Come, lift to my lips  
a cup of cold water  
that I might find my voice  
to praise you  
here in the pit.  
Pull forth the hosannas  
from my parched lips,  
and I will sing to all  
of your everlasting goodness,  
for then the world will know that  
my God is a God of promise  
who comes to me  
in my darkness.

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“How long, O Lord? [Psalm 13:1a NRSV]

“How long... how long must I bear pain?” [Psalm 13:1a, 2a NRSV]

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?” [Psalm 10:1a NRSV]

“I cry to You out of desperation, my God.” [Psalm 17:1a *Psalms Now*]

“Where in the world are You, O God.” [Psalm 10:1a *Psalms Now*]

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [Psalm 22:1a NRSV]

Psalms of lament are part of our heritage. Through the psalms, God’s people spoke to God of their grief and pain and rage. In the Foreword of Ann Weems book entitled, *Psalms of Lament*, Walter Brueggemann writes, “The life of the world is saturated with pain and ache not yet finished, not yet answered, not yet resolved.” We don’t have to live very long to experience what the psalmists have expressed in the psalter. We know all too well that our world is not right and it certainly wasn’t when the psalmist wrote.

The stars fell from Ann Weems’ sky on August 14, 1982, because her son, Todd, was killed less than an hour after his twenty-first birthday. She wrote in the Preface of her book, “This book is not for everyone.” She continues, “It is for those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep. It is for those whose souls struggle with the dailiness of faithkeeping in the midst of life’s assaults and obscenities. This book is for those who are living with scalding tears running down their cheeks.”

I vividly remember being with two moms, who like Ann and Rachel from the Book of Jeremiah, were wailing. These two moms wailed as their two toddlers were frantically attended to by emergency physicians and nurses. These two toddlers had been plucked from the bottom of a murky swimming pool and whisked by ambulance to the nearest hospital. I don’t think I will ever forget these mom’s “scalding tears running down their cheeks” as they cried out in pain and grief.

Our world is not right. Our world has not been right for a long time. The people of Israel cried out and we continue to cry out individually as well as communally, “How long, O Lord, how long?” What I deeply appreciate about the psalms of lament are their raw honesty. God’s people cry out, trusting that their complaints will be heard. They double down speaking their grievances often in repetitive detail recruiting what feels at times like an absent, silent, indifferent or uncaring God. The psalmists demand an answer from God using imperatives such as, “turn, heed, save!” The psalmists often let’s God know that God’s reputation is at stake, which may not seem respectful to some. Yet, people who are hurting take risks that may seem irreverent in calling God to intervene and make good on God’s promises.

“Oddly enough,” writes Brueggemann, “when the need, the hurt, the demands, and the venom are fully voiced, something unexpected happens in the psalm.” We heard it in Ann Weems’ opening psalm, too:

Come, Holy One,  
feed to me a taste of your shalom...  
Pull forth the hosannas  
from my parched lips,  
and I will sing to all

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of your everlasting goodness,  
for then the world will know that  
my God is a God of promise...

The mood and the tone of the psalms of lament change. Fully voiced the ones lamenting reclaim with confidence and trust that God hears and will deal bountifully with them. “How long must I bear pain?” becomes, “But I trust in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because the Lord has dealt bountifully with me” [Psalm 13:2a, 5 and 6 NRSV]. “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?” becomes, “But you do see... you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice...” [Psalm 10:1a, 14a, 17a NRSV]. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” becomes, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel...I will tell of your name... I will praise you” [Psalm 22:1a, 3, 22 NRSV].

Brueggemann writes, “It is not at all clear what happens that permits such a turn... but it is clear that a turn regularly happens.” Could it be the raw honesty of these words; the raw honesty of fully voiced pain, both individually and communally, that causes this turning? Or could it be, as some scholars suggest, that as the people of God come together and fully voice the pain, it is able to be held, expressed and transformed? Together, by God’s grace, we can provide a crucible for a way forward through our pain.

What pain is still raw for you? What is causing you to cry out, “How Long, O God?” What individual or communal justice do you cry out for? What do we cry out for together? I am sure it wouldn’t take us long to develop a list that is long these days...

We cry out against perpetrators of hate... the rhetoric that pits one against another, insinuations that assert some are better than others, the hate spewed at those who think differently politically, religiously, economically or... you fill in the blank. We cry out against evil... the wanton disregard for life, greediness at the expense of others, the abuse of power to obtain more power. We cry out against violence... the violence that claims innocent lives, the violence that silences, the violence that abuses. We cry out against scarcity... the belief that there is only enough for me and I need to collect and hoard, even if others go without... (My son sent me a text of a sign posted at Costco yesterday, “Due to high demand there is a limit of 2 waters and 2 paper goods per household.”) Scarcity... there will not be enough so hoard, keep, don’t share. We cry out against discrimination... How long, O Lord, will our skin color or ethnic facial features or our language determine how we are treated by others? Did you know that Asian Americans are feeling a backlash given that the current health scare originated in China? How long, O Lord, how long?

We cry out and today as fear rises worldwide in response to the spread of the coronavirus, I personally cannot help but cry out to God for those already barely hanging on to life financially in the best of times. As large events are canceled and low wage earners are furloughed, what will happen to their ability to pay rent or buy food? What will happen to single parent families who will be unable to work if schools are closed and what will happen to those employed by the schools? I am not sure what the emergency bill of \$8 billion dollars is supposed to cover, but the ripple effect of the rising panic is potentially staggering. What about those living on fixed incomes for when panic rises so do prices? And who will have access to healthcare in the midst of all of this and what are the risks for the healthcare workers?

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How long, O Lord? Are we just to wait on you, God? Are we just to cry out in pain and fear and rage? Is it enough for us, as your people, to just say that hate or evil, violence or scarcity or discrimination doesn't reside within us? These are absent from us, O God, so isn't this enough in our waiting. Isn't this enough, for you are the one that needs to do something and do it now.

Yet, Bishop Easterly reminds us in her prayer poem that absence is not enough. We can't just say to God, I don't do any of those things, so leave me alone while I wait for you to swoop in and fix everything. No absence is not enough, for God calls us to account. God calls us to engage in loving acts of compassion. God calls us to relationships that bring forth life in ourselves and in others. God calls us to work for peace that is for all people. God calls us to share the gifts we have been generously given, trusting that we actually will have more and not less when we share. God calls us to act justly, honoring the belovedness of each human life.

Absence is not enough... we must offer ourselves as God's instruments, bringing the beautiful harmonies of heaven on earth each and every day in small ways and large ways.

Mama Toya stands on the hillside above her community of Villa El Sol in the central Andes, in Peru where the 84-year-old has planted 30,000 trees over the past two decades. Mama's faith calls her to act, to restore fertility to her community's lands that have been contaminated by emissions from a nearby metals smelter as well as to adapt to advancing climate change. A Presbyterian mission partner in Peru is donating \$20 to its own newly established tree fund on behalf of each Presbyterian short-term mission trip participant it receives. Every penny of these funds will support Mama Toya's work to help offset greenhouse gas emissions generated by short-term mission participants' air travel. Mama Toya is being used by God.

I can't remember where I read this, but there was an abandoned small park near a church. The park was in disrepair. The church went to their city to ask about the property and the struggling city gladly gave it to the church. The church had a couple of work parties and installed some new benches and soon people in their neighborhood began to take pride in the outdoor space. What caught my attention was a sign the church posted by one particular bench. It read something like this: Every Tuesday from 4 PM to 6 PM, Come and be listened to. People from the church then volunteered to be listeners. No advice was to be given, the instruction given to the listeners was simply be present and available to listen to others. What transpired was nothing short of miraculous as community members stopped by to be listened to. Lives broke open and new relationships were formed.

The absence of hate and evil, violence, scarcity and discrimination in our lives is not enough. We are called to participate in making the world a better place. As Henri Nouwen asks himself daily, "Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I forgive? Did I love?" Did our lives bring forth life in others today?

How long, O God? How long must we wait? Not a second longer, because, by God's grace, we can participate in bringing about God's vision each and every day, as we trust that the little bit of love we sow now will bear many fruits. Turn to each other and share this exchange, "Trust God's grace. Now go and sow love."