

***Advent is a Time to Weep***

Trinity CRC, Dec. 3, 2017 AM

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

**Psalm 80, Matthew 2:13-18**

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My dear sisters and brothers and girls and boys,

Would you say that you do not have or never have had a reason to cry out to God in pain? If so, then either you are lying, you are in denial, you have an extremely high pain threshold, you do not go to God with your trouble, or God has graciously spared you from pain. It is true that God graciously spares people from some hardship but virtually no one goes through life without some pain. That's why as Christians we need to know that we are free to express our pain to God. We are free to weep before the Lord.

Rather than express it, though, some of us cover our pain, perhaps by turning to drugs in an attempt to mask our sorrows. Others become hardened, bitter and angry. Some refuse to let people get close to them again so no one can ever again hurt them. Some of us keep ourselves so busy that we don't have time to think about our heartache. Others may become depressed because we can't stop dwelling on our pain. And I'm sure there are many other ways—usually unhealthy ways—to hold in or deny our pain.

The pain I'm talking about is not just the physical pain of a hangnail, a stubbed toe or scrapped elbow. It goes much deeper. It is the cry to God from the bottom of your heart. It's the anguish of the soul that wants to die because he can't stand the pain anymore. It could be the cry of one struggling with cancer or arthritis or mental illness. It could be one of us recovering from a very serious accident or major surgery. It could even be our cry from a tough marriage or ongoing family situation or the result of tension between friends. It could be financial uncertainties. In short, it is frustration with the way life is unfolding. It's the cry of your heart, whatever your struggle.

In Psalm 80, it's the cry of God's people exiled in Babylon and ravaged by Assyria. The rock group Bony M popularized Israel's lament many years ago when they sang, "By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, hey, hey, we wailed when we remembered Zion." God's people were suffering physical hardship but also emotional and spiritual fatigue. They'd been dragged away from their homes, their families and their livelihood. Their towns, including the Lord's temple in Jerusalem, had been demolished. And now they found themselves in a strange land with strange gods. And they wept. From Babylon they cry out to God, longing for Zion because Jerusalem is their meeting place with God! So they cry for deliverance. They cry out, "*Restore us, O God.*"

The pain is not exclusive to being exiled. Many of us know the anguish of death. Next Sunday evening we'll have a blue Christmas service where we acknowledge such loss and pain. When your child or grand-child dies, your spouse, your parent, or your good friend, the tears don't seem to stop. This was the cry of the mothers in Bethlehem that we read about in Matthew 2. After King

Herod's soldiers came through and killed all the baby boys, Matthew records word from Jeremiah:

*Mt 2:18 "A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more."*

The pain is so intense that you don't want anyone to console you. You just want to cry out to God, "Why? Why? Why? I want my child back. I'm broken inside. I feel like my heart has been ripped out of me!" When life is falling apart, when we feel uncertain about the future, when we're scarred and hurting, then it's good for God's people to cry out to the Lord.

The good news of advent is that we may weep before the Lord concerning hardships that come upon us through no fault of our own. But that's not all. We can also cry out to God from the pain of our own sin. We can weep before the Lord as we come to grips with our own mistakes and the pain that it causes others or ourselves. We've all felt the negative consequences of our own sin, even things we might not consider serious but are wrong nonetheless. We speed down the highway until the flashing lights come up behind us and we feel the humiliation of having to pay for our actions.

Psalm 80 is the cry of God's people in exile. They are in Babylon because God has sent them there as punishment for their wickedness. And from this position of humiliation and failure, from their brokenness and despair they look up to God again. Having hit bottom, having lost all dignity, they look up and call out to God. Their feelings may say he doesn't care. But they have learned otherwise. They know God is a covenant God; that means he's trustworthy and faithful to his promise. They know that he is the one they should never have rejected or doubted. They may well remember his word to Jeremiah in ch. 33:3, "*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.*"

No matter why things are bad in our lives and no matter how bad they may look, we have the promise of our faithful, covenant God. We can cry out to him and he will answer us. That is why this theme of lament ties in so well with advent. We probably don't normally think of weeping and crying in connection with advent. More than likely we get excited about Christmas, family get-togethers, parties, presents and fun. We think mostly of happiness. We sing "Joy to the World". But remember what we also sang this morning! "*O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.*" It's the theme of Psalm 80. God's people cry for the Lord to save them while they mourn in exile, in Babylon.

And we too look to him to deliver us from our trouble and pain. That's the hope of advent. The Deliverer is coming. Yes, we celebrate that Jesus came the first time. But we also cry out to him because he's coming again. He's coming and will right all the wrongs and restore all that is broken. We cry out to him and he will answer. The answer comes in his way and his time but it does come as surely as Jesus came the first time, as the fulfillment of God's promises for a Messiah. That is

our hope as God's people. And hope is a certainty that God will do what God promises us. That's the kind of God he is!

### **The Basis of Our Hope: God's Love**

Look at how that works. Notice, first of all, that the basis of our hope is God's love—the love of a shepherd.

*Ps 80:1 Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock;  
you who sit enthroned between the cherubim,*

From the midst of despair and uncertainty, even because of our own sin, the psalm shows us the freedom we have to cry out to God because of his love. No matter where we are or what state our life is in; no matter how deep the pit we feel we are in; no matter how we got there; we may call upon God. He is not distant from and uninterested in us. Nor is he so lofty and mighty that he will have nothing to do with us. That is the amazing thing! God is lofty and holy and mighty—enthroned between the cherubim! AND YET he stoops to listen to us. And it's not that he needs us. He was here and doing fine all by himself long before he created people. But despite our sin and brokenness, the great God of Israel, the Lord Almighty, still loves us and wants to help us. And, of course, that is the gospel message in a nutshell as we know from John 3:16—*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*

We have no right or reason to expect his love. We don't deserve it for being so good. But he offers it freely to us. His love is based solely on his grace. The very familiar biblical imagery of God as a shepherd reminds us of our helplessness and his love for us. Anyone who knows about sheep knows that they are totally dependent on the goodness of the shepherd for their survival. They depend totally upon the shepherd for their protection, pasture and pure water. Psalm 80 recalls how years earlier God led his people from Egypt into the Promised Land.

The OT Joseph was a type of Christ. The Lord sent Joseph into Egypt ahead of his family to spare the lives of Israel from a coming famine and to set the stage for Israel to occupy the Promised Land some 400 years later. Now notice that in the NT, Jesus was sent into Egypt to spare his life from Herod's armies. But in God's time, he came back to deliver God's people from sin and shepherd them into the glorious Kingdom of God. That kingdom is now here in part but still awaiting completion at Christ's return. Jesus the Shepherd is still leading his people to a place of abundance and fulness. That's our confidence. Our hope! Our certainty.

A second familiar image in Psalm 80 is that of God as a gardener. Israel says she was a vine, which God brought out of Egypt.

*Ps 80:8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it (your vine).  
9 You cleared the ground for it,  
and it took root and filled the land.*

God tended and nourished her and planted her in a new land where she prospered. Like the sheep, the plant is totally dependent on the grace of the gardener. He must take her from the place of hardship and transplant her in a better place and then nurture her each day. And that is also the role fulfilled by Jesus who is the True Vine which gives life to the branches. We are planted in his kingdom here and now but await the time of our transformation when every weed will be plucked up. We will bloom as never before!

The basis of our hope is God's loving care. Knowing that God cares for us when we are in despair and promises to answer us, means we can cry out to him regardless of the source of our pain. It might be our own neglect and disobedience that has forced us into dire straits; it may not be. But either way we can cry out to him with hope because of his love. Psalm 80 reveals the truth about God's love. Whether we feel it or not, due to exile or pain, the truth is that God has revealed himself to us as a God who loves us enough to save us. We are so valuable to him that he saves us. And he has a glorious future for us in Christ.

### **The Basis of Our Hope: God's Power**

Secondly, this psalm helps us see that our hope in God for restoration is based on his power. Not only does he want to help us because he is loving and gracious. He can help his people because he is all-powerful God. That gives us confidence to cry out before him with our pain because we know that the One to whom we pray is able to help us.

This is the heart of the repeated refrain in this psalm. I don't know if you noticed it when we read Psalm 80 but virtually the same refrain is used in vv.3, 7, and 19. The only difference in each of those is the growing intensity of the name used for God. In the English it is translated as "*Restore us, O God*" in v.3, then "*Restore us, O God Almighty*" in v.7 and finally "*Restore us, O Lord God Almighty*" in v.19.

That refrain "*restore us*" comes from the root word "*to turn*" and means, then, "O God, turn us" or "cause us to turn." It is the people's acknowledgement of a broken covenant. God's people have sinned. And God has been justly angry with their insincere prayers, as described in v.4. Now they acknowledge that God alone has the power to turn their hearts back to him. Israel confesses she is helpless to save herself. She is not only physically in trouble but spiritually desolate. She needs God's power to change her situation and to change her heart!! So she cries out for a complete re-creation so the covenant relationship can be restored to what it should be. She weeps for the covenant blessing of God, where his face shines upon her once again because his shining face symbolizes his favour and good will.

The bottom line is that the people of God know they cannot live up to God's covenant apart from his power. They cry out to him, as helpless sheep, as withering vines, pleading for him to restore them by his Almighty power.

So advent is a time to weep because we know we are helpless to change our situation. But God is not powerless to help us. He is willing to because he loves us. And he is able because he is the Lord God Almighty! He is all-powerful.

Advent reminds us that Christ came into our world of brokenness. Indeed, even his coming displays just how desperately we need his salvation and deliverance. The mothers of Bethlehem wailed for their children because a wicked king was worried about his own power. And all throughout history sin rears its ugly head causing grief and misery in the lives of people. That's why Jesus came!

He came to establish a kingdom of hope. God the Father warned Joseph to flee to Egypt with baby Jesus. The life of the Messiah was spared so he could grow up in our world, learn firsthand the pain we endure, and ultimately die in order to conquer our sin and sorrow. And, friends, Jesus has done the job he came to do. He defeated sin and Satan and has established his kingdom on earth for and in us. Though we see and feel it only in part now, one day when Christ comes again, the weeping for sorrow will be changed to laughing with joy. And God's children shall live in peace and tranquility in the eternal kingdom of God, free from all the pain and misery we now know so well.

That's our hope. We have certainty that Christ will restore us. Weeping lasts for a time but does not have the last word. Jesus does! And he will restore us and fill us with joy by his love and power!