

Like Sheep for the Slaughter

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

March 20, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Psalm 44

Romans 8:31-39

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? For it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’”

When I open the Bible to the Book of Psalms, I never cease to be astonished at both the depth and breadth of honest human emotion. Nothing is left out! From the praise and thanksgiving of a congregation employing lute and harp, trumpet and cymbal to the anguished cries of an individual sinking in the mire with none to help, the psalms tutor us in the agonizing, searching, soaring conversation that is called prayer.

This morning we turn to a psalm about which we know very little contextually, save that the words were words of national lament to God spoken at some time in history by God’s people *in extremis*. As I read these words today and in the context of a world unraveling before a tragedy whose magnitude escapes human comprehension, Miguel Unamuno’s prescient observation for our world *in extremis* comes to mind once again.

I am convinced [he writes] that we should solve many things if we all went out into the streets and uncovered our *griefs*, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeeping them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God. And this, even though God should not hear us; but He would hear us. The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which [mortals] go to weep in common. A *miserere* sung in common by a multitude tormented by destiny....It is not enough to cure the plague: we must learn to weep for it. Yes, we must learn to weep.

I know of no better definition for the psalms of communal lament. I think the psalmist who wrote the 44th implies, from the beginning, that we learn to weep at our father’s feet, on our mother’s lap, in the hold of the community of faith. “The Psalms of the Old Testament,” writes Old Testament Professor and friend Patrick Miller, “belong to the earliest memories of my childhood when our family would gather on Sunday afternoons to read, memorize and sing them.” As we are told of a God who forgives all our iniquity, who heals all our diseases, who redeems our lives from the pit and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, we begin to talk with God as though we were talking with a friend.

From their ancestors, the community of the psalmist knew the mighty deeds of God that had gotten them victory in battle and treaded down their assailants; who had saved them from their foes and confused those who hated them. Though note that the psalmist refuses to connect the swords wielded by armies or the strong arms of warriors with the direct intervention of God in human history. We gather that it was *through* their trust in God’s presence with them, rather than trust in the bow or the sword that they were victorious in battle.

“History assumes a different aspect when seen by faith,” writes Artur Weiser of this psalm:

it is not the victories achieved by force of arms or the heroic deeds of warriors crowned with glory, such as the heroic epic would extol, which form the subject matter of the hymn in public worship; they are completely overshadowed by the acts of God who, emerging from the background of history, makes himself known to the eyes of faith as the One who really shapes the course of events and lets the congregation share in them.

Yet paradoxically, it is their knowledge of God that becomes the problem on which the whole psalm hinges. Because they have known God's presence with them in the past, now they know God's absence, God's hiddenness, God's abandonment in the present. Whereas before, their armies had gotten victory through their trust and faithfulness toward God alone, now their weapons are impotent against the enemy and God appears to be against them. Relentlessly, the congregation shouts its complaint to God: you have rejected us and abased us; have not gone out with our armies and made us turn back from our foes; have made us like sheep for the slaughter and scattered us among the nations; have sold your people for a trifle; have made us the taunt of neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us, a laughingstock among the peoples.

We know these complaints. They echo down the corridors of history as nations rise and fall, as religions flourish and decline, as peoples succumb to plagues and as whole villages are sucked into the sea. They are the complaints of people whose only comfort, in life and in death, was once that they belonged to a God who watched over them in such a way that not a hair could fall from their head without the will of their Father in heaven. Otherwise, why would one expect life to be other than one damn thing after another? Moreover, to whom would they complain if there were no Master of the Universe to hear? The words are directed against a God who was once touted, in childhood, as a friend and now seems to have become an enemy.

No complaint in human history embodies the words of the 44th psalm more truly than the complaint of God's people in the death camps. To wit, consider this midrash written in the winter of 1944 on the 44th Psalm:

"You desert and shame us"—as they cut our beards and mass rape our women.
"You do not go out with our armies"—with our resistance.
"You put us to flight from our enemies"—in mass exodus and transports.
"Those who hate us tear us to pieces at will"—using our skins for lampshades and our flesh for soap.
"You hand us over like sheep to be devoured"—in the gas chambers, crematoria, and mass burning pits....
"An object of head-shaking among the people"—in disbelief that something like this is happening to anyone, much less to us, Your chosen people.

Yet in this situation, individuals and communities often can be heard to ask, in the next breath, what have we done wrong to deserve God's absence, God's silence, God's punishment? The question has a long tradition in Scripture. It is characterized by the formula of the Deuteronomist: If you do this, then God will bless you; if you do that, then God will curse you. We have noted many times from this pulpit that such a way of understanding the relationship between God and God's creatures has great appeal. Job's friends are its most ardent advocates! No doubt the defeat and exile of God's people to Babylon was fit into this understanding of reaping what had been sinfully sown. Evangelical pundits of every age have always been eager to connect the dots of human sinfulness and God's wrath.

Not so in the 44th Psalm! In fact, the heart of the psalm seems to call God's bluff on a simple tit for tat execution of the covenant. *If we had forgotten the name of our*

God, or spread out our hands to a strange God, do you not think God would know this?, they ask. God knows the secrets of the human heart and therefore knows that because of God we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. As the community noted earlier, In God we have trusted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.

When I think of all the destructive religious instincts that would have us blame the victims for the tragedy that has befallen them, be it the triple tragedy of an earthquake, a tsunami and a near nuclear disaster or an epidemic such as AIDS or genocide or 9/11, I practically want to shout when I come upon the psalmist's insistence that the community has been faithful, has kept the covenant from the days of their childhood. Yet in these verses, there is no attempt to whitewash God for the unconscionable anguish of innocent human beings. Rather, as we said from the start, this is a real conversation, a real argument, a complaint that waits for an accounting from the God who must rouse himself and draw near enough to hear.

Beginning with the Book of Job straight through to Elie Wiesel in the Jewish community, there is a long tradition of theological protest against God. Often the setting for this exchange between God and mortals is a courtroom. Other times it is more like a lonely shout out to the heavens. In rabbinic tradition, a protest prayer could only be uttered by a saintly rabbi under restricted conditions. The unspoken question that invites the protest of the innocent is the question of God's perfection. Put another way: can God make a mistake? "The biblical evidence is that God can make a mistake," according to Emory professor of Judaic David Blumenthal. "'God changes God's mind in the case of Noah and in the desert regarding the rebellious people. In the Rosh ha-Shana liturgy, God prays that God's mercy overcome God's anger, implying, if not stating clearly, that God can be overwhelmed by factors in Godself [in God's own being]."

I think this is a thought that nice Christians do not allow themselves to have! Not so the community of the 44th psalm. Because God's absence, God's silence, God's judgment is indefensible, the community shouts as we did to call ourselves to worship: *"Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us forever! [Answer us!] Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help."*

But how, asks Blumenthal, how does God repent?...If the echoes of the book of Lamentations and the book of Job are heard seriously, God repents," he says, "by talking to us, by seeing us, by taking notice of us, by acknowledging us in some concrete way." Though I think it would be a theological stretch to say that the incarnation is an act of repentance on God's part, I do believe Jesus Christ is God's answer to the communal lament of a people who seek God's presence, a turning of God toward us, an entering of God into human suffering.

At the end, the psalmist appeals to the steadfast love of God, crying, "Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love," the love we first heard of at our father's feet, on our mother's lap and in the hold of the community of faith. "That love of God," concludes Weiser, "is the hidden pivot of the whole psalm....It is true that in the psalm the love of God appeared to the eyes of the people at that time to be obscured by a veil because of the mystery of suffering..." a veil that, through the suffering of Christ, drops from the face of God, to the end that nothing might separate us, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor life nor death nor any other creature might separate those who are being slaughtered all the day long, from the love of God in Christ.

“I no longer ask you for either happiness or paradise” prays Elie Wiesel;
all I ask of You is to listen and let me be aware of your listening.
I no longer ask You to resolve my questions, only to receive them and make
them part of You.....
As for my enemies, I do not ask You to punish them or even to enlighten them;
I only ask You not to lend them your mask and Your powers. If you must
relinquish one of the other, give them Your powers. But not Your
countenance.
They are modest, my requests, and humble. I ask You what I might ask a
stranger met by chance at twilight in a barren land.
I ask you, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to enable me to pronounce these
words without betraying the child that transmitted them to me: God of
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, enable me to forgive you and enable the child I
once was to forgive me too.,br> I no longer ask You for the life of that child,
not even for his faith. I only beg You to listen to him and act in such a way
that You and I can listen to him together.

The gospel is this: God has roused himself to be born in a manger, God has become
the one innocent who can with righteousness intercede for us, that in him those who
are being slaughtered all the day long for his sake shall finally be redeemed for the
sake of his steadfast love. Thanks be to God.