

Hear, O Lord!
Job 27:1-6
Romans 8:18-27

“Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

Page after page, psalm after psalm, verse after verse, one prayer is prayed relentlessly by the characters in the Old Testament: “Hear, O Lord. Hear.” The cry comes out of the depths of human doubt in the wilderness, out of the depths of human frailty and sin in the promised land, out of the depths of an exile’s anger at God’s silence or a sinner’s bold insolence before God’s judgment. But more to the point of John Donne’s prayer and the psalmist’s *De Profundis*, the cry that is the psalmist’s prayer arises out of the depths which are the unfathomable distance between beseeching and beseeched, between us and God.

Throughout the season of Lent, in hymn and anthem, in text and proclamation, this cry will become our own as we consider Psalm 130, a penitential psalm. In the profound honesty of the psalmist’s prayer, we are made privy to a penitent sinner’s anguished awareness of his unrighteousness before the righteous God, even as she knows, in the same breath, that her only hope is in God’s grace and mercy undeserved.

“This was Luther’s favorite psalm,” reports Artur Weiser, “which served as a model for his famous penitential hymn,” the hymn we have already sung this morning and will continue to sing in the weeks ahead. Martin Luther identified Psalm 130 with Paul and with the unmerited gift of grace that alone allows a sinner to stand in the presence of a righteous God. Augustine wrote this psalm on the wall of his bed chamber when he was sick unto death, so that these words would fill the last breath he would take. John Wesley remembers how, on May 24, 1738, he was asked to go to St. Paul’s Cathedral where the anthem was “Out of the deep have I called to thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.” This was the afternoon of the same day that found his

heart “strangely warmed” in the evening at Aldersgate. “An assurance was given me,” the Reformer writes, “that [Christ] had taken away my sins, even mine....”

We too have cried, “Hear, O Lord,” like pilgrims fallen to the bottom of a canyon, our words echoing to the highest cliff in the faint hope that the Maker of Heaven and Earth should hear. As regards prayer in general, we sometimes cry like newborns in the dark, trusting that if we cry long enough and loud enough, One will come to us, lift us up, hold us close; other times we ask as toddlers whose speech is no more than fingers pointing to what we want, accompanied by senseless syllables sent Godward; mostly we petition as reasonable adults, instructing God concerning the life our better selves have earned; until finally we rage like old fools on a cliff, biding the pelting of the pitiless storm within and without: from out of the depths or while wading in the shallows, from the day we are born to the day we breathe our last, we cry to the Lord.

Though we must be careful to notice that the cry of the psalmist in this season is the cry of a penitent, of a sinner. Again writes Weiser, “It is not so much physical suffering and the fear of death which torments him, but rather the feeling of being separated from God by the unbridgeable chasm of sin.” Suddenly I am not so certain the psalmist’s cry *is* our own. Who among us really trembles at the prospect of God’s judgment? What in our upbringing, or in our raising of a son or a daughter, has caused any among us to be tormented by our unworthiness before a righteous God? The more I thought about the penitent cry of a sinner this week, the more I wrestled with how to locate us languishing in the depths of the human condition we so blithely deny. I therefore need to begin again if together we are to imagine even our better selves in the depths that are the unfathomable distance between beseeching and beseeched, between us and God.

Imagine yourself first, on the way to the summit of a mountain. Your foot slips or the rope does not hold and you fall head over heels down a canyon, landing in the “v” of the crevasse, half-alive and half-dead. You are helpless, broken in body and spirit, perhaps writhing in pain, utterly alone. All you have is your voice intact, a voice that now must reach the ear of the One who maybe even let you slip and then watched you fall. This is the same One who is the only One able to help. The distance is incomprehensible; the desolation unbearable; the silence interminable: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!*

Now imagine that the fall is not a physical fall from the heights of a mountain to the lowest point in the valley: imagine the fall is a fall from grace. I repeat: we have little imagination for this sort of fall. Rather we are mostly voyeurs, are we not, fascinated by the fall of others. Consider the fall of the powerful: imagine living every day with the fact that you once held in your hands the possibility of ending the carnage in Rwanda or Darfur or Syria or the Sudan and you chose political advantage. Consider the fall of the nobodies: imagine yourself seventeen, led away in handcuffs after you have fired a semiautomatic handgun at the heads of your classmates; imagine saying, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry” as you enter a cell, the door clanking shut behind you; imagine being the grandfather whose gun it was. We cannot imagine, we say; we know we are not fallen like this. Then imagine the betrayal of a friend to get ahead, the unfaithfulness hidden for years from a covenant partner to meet your needs, the covered-up fraud or the socially acceptable greed that accounts for your success until you turn out the lights out at night to sleep. No? At the least, then, imagine the accumulation of imperceptible regrets that have begun to weigh you down, that remind you every day of the person you have not become, the little failures of will that will leave you empty-handed and unable to give account for the life you have been given by God to lead. Still not ringing a bell?

Then simply imagine yourself to be Job, righteous and upright, yet utterly and inextricably broken, destroyed in a whirlwind; separated from God for reasons you cannot fathom by an unbridgeable distance.

Here in the depths, absent from the headlines, we mostly keep our mouths shut until, short of being found out, the silence that falls between the easy lies and the hidden sins, between our righteous days and our lost nights, until the unbridgeable chasm between ourselves and God, becomes unbearable. “Hear us, O hear us, Lord,” we whisper in the words of John Donne’s penitential poem. “Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts,” we begin boldly to plead, beseeching God to come close enough to hear the prayer of a penitent fallen too far from grace to even know that we have fallen. I am sorry. I am so sorry. I am sorry, we say, because we do not know what to say; we do not know how to pray as we ought.

But listen again to Donne’s prayer. For, to borrow Paul’s words, there seems to be a sigh too deep for words praying in him. “Hear us, for until Thou hear us, Lord/We know not what to say;/Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts *gives voice and word*;/*...Hear Thyself, now, for Thou in us dost pray.*” For Thou in us dost pray! My fellow penitents, the God we have called upon from the depths of the canyon is the God who has quit the heights to join us here, in the depths, even in the depths of the grave. And because God has come to us in Jesus Christ, we are no longer creatures who must cry from an unbridgeable distance; we are children who may speak to the One who hears, face to face. Therefore in the depth of any given darkness, as we cry, “Here, O Lord,” the breath is not ours but Christ’s; the prayer which forms on our lips is not ours to pray, but Christ’s to pray in us; the sighs which heave our souls up in a sob are nothing other than the Spirit blowing where it will: grace *in extremis*, mercy made manifest at life’s boundaries, forgiveness undeserved.

Now it remains for us not to speak but to listen: to listen for God's word in us, in flesh of our flesh, who is Jesus Christ. Curiously, as thick as the Old Testament is with the prayer, "Hear us, O Lord," in the New Testament, we are the ones enjoined to hear. Verse after verse, the command is to listen to Him who comes in the name of the Lord; because, in him, our every prayer is answered. In him God is with us: whether miraculously healed or as we lie to die, God is with us; whether in triumphant victory or utter defeat, God is with us; whether broken into pieces or for a moment made whole, God is with us. I think of Job's words in Archibald MacLeish's J.B. Job's livelihood destroyed, his body racked with boils, their children dead, this faithful, upright man says to his wife, "Sarah! Listen to me! (Silence) Sarah! Even desperate, we can't despair--let go each other's fingers--sink numb in that dumb silence--drown there sole in our cold self....We cannot....God is there too, in the desperation. I do not know why God should strike, but God is what is stricken also...." God is what is stricken also. By God's gracious choice not to be God without us, it is *God who cries for us* from out of the depths in Jesus Christ.

Not knowing the depths out of which you may be crying imperceptibly at this very moment; not knowing the depths that await you as with one slight misstep you find yourself in free fall; not knowing the dangers, toils and snares through which you have already come, may I suggest a discipline appropriate for the weeks leading up to Easter morning? May I suggest we each take these days of reflection and repentance to commit to memory the words of Psalm 130? I suggest this to you as one who has both known in the depths the gift of words not my own to say to myself; and as one who has been privileged to accompany some of you into the depths and say these words to you. There, where we have no words, we are given words to cry, words like: *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations; O Lord, you have searched me and known me; The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?; God is our refuge and*

*strength, a very present help in trouble; The Lord is my shepherd. Now as a penitent, dare to cry:
Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ear be attentive to the voice
of my supplications.*