

From Whence Does Our Help Come?
I Samuel 7:3-12
Matthew 15:21-31

“...for he said, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’”
“But she came and knelt before him saying, ‘Lord, help me.’”

At the end of a season and before we begin a year of Sundays wrestling in the pulpit with the questions that have come from the pews, I thought we would do well to notice the questions of those who have gone before us in the pages of Scripture. On one hand, the questions in the Bible remind us that we are not the first to ask and are never alone in extremis as we rail against the heavens or struggle with the mystery; on the other hand, that we are still asking the same questions ages and ages hence suggests that the definitive answer is neither evident nor obvious because God has chosen to love us with a love that does not coerce but sets us free. These, then, are the questions that have bracketed mortal existence from the beginning, bowing us before him in whose hand we are held. I invite you hear in the questions from Scripture your own.

“What will you give me for I continue childless...” “Why have you done evil to this people?” “Why did you ever send me?” “Why does your wrath burn hot against your people” “Why have you treated your servant so badly” “Shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?” “If the Lord is with us, then why has this happened to us?” “Am I to die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” “Have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” From Genesis through Kings, people in the thick of human history have asked after the rhyme or the reason hidden in the midst of sorrow and disappointment and grief.

Then there are the unrelenting questions of the psalmists. “Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” “How long, O Lord, will you look on?”

“Why do you sleep, O Lord?” “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?” “Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” “How long?” and “Why?” says Old Testament professor and friend Patrick Miller, “...are [the questions] at the very heart of the human rage against heaven. When one is in distress and trouble, the questions that always come roaring to the forefront of the mind and heart...are ‘*Why* is this happening?’ or, to God, ‘*Why* are you doing this (letting this happen...)?’ and the complaining query, ‘*When* is this going to end?’ or ‘*How long* do I have to endure this suffering?’”

Finally in Pat Miller’s compilation of Old Testament questions, there are the questions of the prophets. Ezekiel: “Ah Lord God! will you destroy all who remain of Israel as you pour out your wrath upon Jerusalem?” “Ah Lord God! will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?” Jeremiah: “Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do those who are treacherous thrive?” “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” Habakkuk: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence?’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?” “Why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?”

Implicit in each of these questions is a cry for help. When the enemy is in pursuit, when the disease rages unabated, when you are sinking fast into the miry bog of hopelessness, when you are lost and alone and abandoned, from whence does your help come? Two secular answers

have recently been given in Tampa and Charlotte: self-reliance, perseverance, hard-work, though the deck be stacked against you on the right hand; common effort, shared responsibility, mutual forbearance, though the road is long and hard on the left. No doubt Israel had similar answers available to her, stern overlords and benevolent rulers whose ordering of the ancient world day by day promised to uphold, govern, direct and sustain the people. Yet page after page of this story invites us into another conversation with the inscrutable character in whose hand we are held no less than they.

“Do not cease to cry to the Lord our God for us,” said the people of Israel to Samuel, “that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.” Sometimes the help asked for is the help received. The enemy is routed and it is easy for God’s people to sing, “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither to Thy help I’m come.” By the way, top among the questions asked at the door of the church: “What is an Ebenezer?” The word means “stone of help”: “So Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah and called its name Ebenezer for he said, ‘Hitherto the Lord has helped me.’”

Yet hear Samuel’s subtle qualification of the help given the people by God: “*Hitherto* the Lord has helped us” or in the NRSV “*Thus far* the Lord has helped us.” To this point in the story, God has helped, and therefore we will remember, when trouble next visits us, from whence our help has come. Still, Ebenezer stands as a reminder that there are no guarantees ahead. Samuel knew enough not to take God’s help for granted, not to presume from God’s hand an easy answer.

I think, in this regard, of the late Reynolds Price who wrote of the “whence” of his help as a tumor snaked its way up his spine: “I’d lie alone in my bed in the dark and sense the presence, just to the right in my mind’s eye, of a patient listener behind a screen....I never asked

myself who it was, from the gallery of possible hearers....It--he, she or whatever—never spoke a sound but only heard me out as I worked at discovering my minimal needs and feasible hopes. I never asked it, point-blank, for answers—not yet anyhow. Its reliable presence seemed only to say that I had somehow to build my life on radical uncertainty, knowing only that I was heard by something more than the loyal but powerless humans near me.”

In spite of the prose that seems to paint a palpable presence and an audible voice, answering as well as hearing the questions dared in ancient Israel, I expect in the moment these people experienced not much more than what Reynolds Price experienced alone in his bed. But in each case, there was a dogged trust that the One who had been their refuge and strength, their only comfort in life and in death, that One would eventually show up, come to their aid, accompany them in the valley of the shadow, vindicate them against the foe without or within. In fact, what I love in particular in the psalms is the glimpse we are given of the mind’s inner dialogue that complains with the first breath [“Why have you forsaken me?”} and petitions with the next breath [“Do not forsake me”] and trusts with the last breath [“The Lord will not forsake his people”]. From fear to anger to trust and back again and again we go as we attempt to build our lives on radical uncertainty, knowing or hoping or wishing or longing to be heard by something more than the loyal but powerless humans near us.

Though I tell you, our questions have been heard by someone more, by the one loyal and [to the world] powerless human being who has come to be near us and in whom the invisible, inaudible God was pleased to dwell. You could say that he is the answer to all of our prayers and yet, beginning with Matthew’s Gospel, the vast majority of questions posed about Jesus or to Jesus are the questions of those who could not quite get their heads around the sort of help they had been given in him. Matthew’s first question is that of scholars searching for truth. “Where is

the child who has been born King of the Jews?” Once encountered, the human response partakes of wonder and incredulity. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” “What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” “Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?” “Can this be the Son of David?” “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’” “By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you this authority?” “Is it I? Is it I? Is it I?” “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” And the last like the first: “Are you the King of the Jews?”

From whence does our help come if it is not the decisive and victorious help we think we need? Our help comes from a loyal and [to the world] powerless human being who bears our infirmities and weaknesses, who comforts us in sickness, trouble and sorrow, who provides not for our wants but for our needs and in whose light we may work at discovering our feasible hopes. To borrow the words of the psalmist, “*He will not let your foot be moved.*” He has hold of you. He will help you stand firm along the way, though still you must set out on a way that is rocky and steep and filled with danger. “*He who keeps you will not slumber.*” His watchful eye never closes on your troubles or your fears. This is the kind of help that is not evident; nevertheless, you may live trusting that there is no darkness too dark nor place too distant that he has not been. You are not alone. “*The Lord is your keeper, your shade.*” He has come between you and all that would harm you. He has taken upon himself the brunt of the heat of the sun and the

blows of human infirmities visited upon you, according to ancient belief, by the moon. He has done battle with all that would destroy your soul; he has even entered the grave and triumphed over the last enemy of your life that is death.

Still our questions persist because we cannot get our heads around the kind of help we have been given in him. Like the tired old joke, when we reach the pearly gates ready to berate God for not having saved us from drowning, God will say, "But I sent the life guard; I threw you the lifeline; I stretched out my hand; I held you close in order rescue you and you fought me every step of the way." But from our perspective, we are the Canaanite woman: questioning, pleading, begging, demanding his help. And what follows is silence, maybe a crumb from the table. "Lord, help me!" we cry again, willing ourselves to believe. Perhaps it will be only as we look back on the long way we have come that we will see as the Israelites saw and say: it was God who did not let our foot be moved, who kept our life, our going out and our coming in. From whence does our help come? From the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ and who, even now, sends us help in the loyal and [to the world] powerless friends by our side. Really? Really! Thanks be to God.