

Persistence
Hosea 1:2-10
Luke 11:1-13

“I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

We begin this morning not with the persistence of prayer or the persistence of God, but with the persistence of chaos. When I consider, near at hand, the names and circumstances of those in our prayers as a congregation, when I think about the troubles of peoples and nations that call out of us the same petitions to God week after week, I realize that you and I are constantly asking God, one way or another, to contain the chaos that encroaches on the space and time we have been given to be human in. Cure the cancer, slow the ravages of age, heal the estrangement, put an end to the violence and hatred, stop the waters from rising or the winds from swirling or the earth from quaking, we pray again and again. What is it about God’s good creation that necessitates an alliance between our persistence and God’s if life is ever to be given some semblance of normalcy?

In an incredible book entitled *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Jewish theologian Jon Levinson speaks of the keen sense of precariousness that runs throughout Scripture about the created order. Beginning with a story that means to tell us, among other things, what sort of world we live in, we read that when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the formless void and darkness that covered the face of the deep were not banished or defeated but only confined. A few chapters later, just in case we thought God’s initial confinement of chaos secured our lives from disaster, another story is told about a flood that confirms our contrary experience: human existence in the world God created is fraught with danger, God’s promise after the flood notwithstanding. “The confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation,” Levinson writes,

and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance ensuring those cosmic dikes do not fail, that the bars and doors of the Sea’s jail cell do not give way, that the great fish [Leviathan] does not slip his hook. That vigilance is simply a variant of God’s covenantal pledge

[to Noah]. Whatever form the warranty takes, it testifies both to the precariousness of life, its absolute dependence upon God, and to the sureness and firmness of life under the protection of the faithful master. [According to the biblical narrative, t]he world is not inherently safe; it is inherently unsafe. Only the magisterial intervention of God and his eternal vigilance prevent the cataclysm.

So every Sunday we gather to proclaim the power and majesty of God because we have made it through another week without being destroyed; and every Sunday we beseech the same God to contain the chaos that nips at the edges of our ordered lives. Perhaps in this week you and your family have fared well, so that you are awash in gratitude; still, only time and chance separate you from “the plaintive cry of those who live by hope alone, hope conceived [in the promise of the One who made us] and nurtured [even now] in the liturgy” of church and synagogue.

To pray, therefore, is to enter into a conversation with the Creator of the heavens and the earth at the intersection of faith and realism. There with our heads bowed and our eyes wide open, we refuse the “cheery optimism of those who crow that “God’s in his heaven-/All’s right with the world”; but we also refuse the unqualified pessimism “that attributes to innocent suffering the immovability of fate.” Rather we call upon God “to close the gap between [God’s] reputation and [God’s] current behavior.”

I think that is precisely how Jesus is telling us to pray. Start with God’s reputation, with who God is known to be because of what God has done before and what God has promised yet to do, even though God does not seem to be up to much in the present moment. You could say that this is trying to butter God up: praise be to you for the incredible God that you are; thanks be to you for all the things you have done for us; glory be to you for all that you have promised to do when your kingdom comes. Our laudatory opening also serves to remind us exactly which God we are addressing and what we may expect in the light of memory and hope. This is not your good but powerless friend who is able, at most, to sympathize with your plight. When you pray, Jesus says, begin with the wild assumption that the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who appears to have stepped away from your corner of creation

given the present chaos in your life, can be called upon to contain the chaos again.

Levinson understands the audacity of prayer better than most Christian theologians, I think, because the Holocaust is never far from his mind. In prayer, he says, “The absence of the omnipotent...deity is not accepted as final, nor his primordial world-ordering deeds as confined to the vanished past. Present experience...is not seen as absolute. Rather [what we are going through] is seen as a mysterious interruption in the divine life, an interruption that the supplications of the worshipping community may yet bring to an end.”

Our supplications suppose that something must have taken God’s attention away from our plight—or maybe God is simply resting as God did on the seventh day. In any case, we need to get God’s attention back so that God will contain the encroaching chaos once again. This may not be as easy or as effortless as we think, says Jesus. Prayer is like knocking knock on the door of someone, in the middle of the night, who has been a friend to you in the past. You need the friend’s help. You need the friend to do something for you that you cannot do for yourself. In the large scheme of things, the request in the story is actually quite modest and mundane. Three loaves of bread will do it.

In response, the friend whispers from the second floor window: Are you nuts? It is midnight. Leave me alone. The door is locked. The kids are finally asleep in bed with me. Get out of here.” At this point, I think God’s chosen people are a bit more honest in their response to God’s waving off of a friend. There will be no going gently into this good night. Granted, prayer may begin with a few opening niceties about what a wonderful friend we have in the one Jesus calls Father, but when a friend does not act like one, when God cannot be roused, Jesus says we should not be shy about calling God to account. So instead of excusing God as we often do because we think it unreasonable that God should intervene to fix what has gone awry, Levinson declares that the outbreak of chaos in human existence is “neither inevitable nor excusable: no limited God here, no God stymied by invincible evil, no faithless

resignation before the relentlessness of circumstance. It is,” he says, “between the Scylla of simplistic faith and the Charybdis of stoic resignation that lament runs its perilous course.”

In other words and in spite of what we may *think*, God does have the whole world in his hands and is responsible when chaos bursts its bounds. Therefore, according to Jesus, our prayers should not let God off the hook. We should be out-and-out obstinate when we pray, like the fellow who refuses to stop pounding on his friend’s door at midnight. This sort of behavior is very hard, I might add, for polite and emotionally shut down Protestants, Christians for whom “darn” is as close as we get to an explicative in public. I imagine the friend at the door was anything but nice.

Jesus also says we should ask for what we need, so notice again the modesty of the friend’s request. This is not the man with a daughter about to die who is interrupting the divine life to ask for a miracle. This is not the Samaritan trying to rouse an innkeeper for the sake of someone left for dead by the side of the road. This is a neighbor, with an unexpected guest, who forgot to go to the grocery store. Surely they could wait the few hours until dawn to get a bite to eat. Apparently Jesus believes no request is too incidental to go unanswered or too inconsequential that we should fail to persist in asking, seeking, knocking on heaven’s door.

Although even more curious than the modesty of the friend’s request is the reason for the sleeping friend’s response: he gets up and shoves three loaves of bread into the arms of his importunate friend, not because he is acting like a friend but because he simply wants to shut him up and go back to bed. If the analogy holds, Jesus is saying that God responds to us not because our request warrants a response or because our cause is as urgent as we think it is or because God likes us, but only because we sometimes wear God out with our persistent asking.

Sometimes we must wear God out; but more often than not, it seems that you and I get worn out and give up on praying long before God relents and gives us what we want. This is the moment when

some people opt for the Scylla of simplistic faith, telling themselves that they will understand God's will by and by; while others opt for the Charybdis of stoic resignation, no longer believing that God is--or, if God is, God cannot be the sort of God who is able to contain the chaos. In either case, lacking an answer to prayer, we run away from the God who is God, the God who has answered our prayers in the One who is telling the story.

I think if Jesus were telling the disciples a story about how we do pray rather than how we should pray, he might have told a story about a friend who timidly taps on a friend's door at midnight and, when no response is forthcoming, the friend turns toward home in the dark, empty-handed, maybe embarrassed that she had thought to bother the friend who had many more important things to do than hear her request. Or then again, Jesus might have told the story exactly as he told it, except that when the friend roused from sleep says, "Do not bother me!" the first friend turns on her heels and stomps home in the dark, vowing never to ask the friend for anything ever again. Suddenly she hears footsteps behind her and either is frightened because it is dark and she is alone or, recognizing the footsteps, is so peeved that she wants nothing to do with this so-called friend following her. In either case, she begins to run, but her running is in vain; for the One coming after her is persistent, more persistent than she or you or I will ever believe. "The more I called them," God cries in Hosea, "the more they went from me....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" God cannot; rather God persists in coming after us, all the way to the grave, lest the chaos of death no less than the chaos of life finally have at us or those we love.

Could it be, in the middle of the night, or with one foot in the grave, when you are alone and cannot give yourself what you most need, that God's persistence will not let you go, will not let you be, will not give up on you in the face of your resistance or leave you alone to tremble in the dark? God's vigilance in keeping the chaos contained surely is God's persistence holding back the chaos of your own

life and mine lived without God. “The *cri di coeur*,” Levinson concludes, “the cry of the heart...is unsurpassable testimony not only to the pain of [our] external circumstances, but also to the pain of [our] internal dissonance, which only the creator God of old can heal,” which only the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ can redeem. Ask, seek, knock says God who, in him, is asking, seeking, knocking persistently on the door of your worn out heart. The time is midnight. Pray without ceasing. Amen.