

**SLD11.30.08 First Advent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Psalm 80, Mark 13:24-37**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Naming the Darkness”**

You know, life is hard. You been around long enough to notice that? But it's hardest when you've reached the end of your rope.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's even harder when someone or something cuts that rope and there's nothing left to hang on to at all. And you find yourself in a free fall.

Though maybe even the angst and disorientation of an untethered free fall isn't the hardest. Maybe the hardest is when you finally land at the bottom. When you finally hit, kerplop, the unforgiving floor of your own personal existential Pit, and just lay there in a crumpled, despairing heap.

There aren't really words for that place, there at the bottom of the pit, because there's no air there. No breath. No oxygen, even if there were the will to draw a breath, which there isn't. And certainly, down there in the deep darkness, there is no conversation partner. Not even God.

No light, no life, no hope, no company; that's how it is once you've hit bottom. Once you've hit the pits, you're alone. And dead. And done. Finished, though hardly complete. Just...done. “Abandon hope all ye who enter here,” that's what was written on life's fragile membrane just before your soul crashed through it. And that's that.

Do you understand? That's the existential end of the story.

It is also the cosmic context of Advent. The end of your story, my story, but the beginning of God's.

Or maybe you've never felt depressed like that, never drown in your own poison and hit the skids in such a dramatic fashion. You can, you should, thank God for that.

But life can be, and often is, just as hard for the non-drama queens among us; just more quietly. Remarked Thoreau, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation,” he said, “is confirmed desperation.” (Walden)

You live long enough and you learn that by its nature, life is hard - full of sadness, grief, disillusion and disappointment. And not just for us as individuals, but for us as a community, a generation, a nation, a world.

I mean, who are we happy Christians kidding? We so called ‘faithful ones,’ we ‘believers,’ who only last week celebrated Christ as King of the Universe, Ruler of all Creation, Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, Redeemer of Sin and Reconciler of the Nations – do we honestly believe the Kingdom has come?!

Well, okay, maybe we get a glimpse of it once in a while. Frederick Buechner says ‘if we only had eyes to see, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, and beauty is as close as breathing and is crying out to be born both within ourselves and within the world. If we only had ears to hear, we would know that the Kingdom of God is what ...all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don’t know its name or realize that it’s what we’re starving to death for. If we only had wits to understand, the Kingdom of God is where our best dreams come from and our truest prayers. We glimpse it at those moments when we find ourselves being better than we are and wiser than we know. We catch sight of it when at some moment of crisis a strength seems to come to us that is greater than our own strength. The Kingdom of God,” says Buechner, “is where we belong. It’s *home*,” he says, “and we are all of us homesick for it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life, HarperSanFrancisco 1992, p.305.

But I say, the Kingdom may be our home, but the reason we're all of us so homesick for it is that we're *not* at home...a lot.

Most of the time life's just too tough – sad or disappointing or lonesome or scary or numbingly routine. Most of the time the truth of our stories, like the truth of the stories of the people in the Bible, lies less in “the world of the Sunday School tract...(than in) a Dostoyevskian world of darkness and light commingled, where suffering is sometimes redemptive and sometimes turns the heart to stone. ...Where God is sometimes known through God's life-giving presence, but other times...only by God's appalling absence.”<sup>2</sup> By the appalling absence of God.

Sure, there are times when we glory together in the sweet life-giving breath of the Spirit. But just as often we drudge through a dry valley of bones...alone. Too often life is hard or mean or trite or boring because the Kingdom hasn't come yet, at least not in the all-embracing, all-redeeming, all-healing fullness Jesus promised. And after all this time, Lord have mercy, you gotta wonder why in the heck not.

The writer of Psalm 80 sure wondered why in the heck the Kingdom hadn't come, or hadn't stayed, anyway, once it had made an appearance. Here God, the divine gardener, had “plucked Israel like a grapevine” from the choking greedy weeds of Egypt and planted her in the promised land, and tended her, and nurtured her, and blessed her until she took root and “stretched her branches, at the zenith of King David's reign, from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates.”<sup>3</sup> And now look at her! David's spawn, King Solomon, is dead. Israel's been divided into two separate kingdoms – the north and the south (sound familiar?) who can't defend themselves against each other, never mind

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 308

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation, The Gospel of Mark, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Oct. 1993, “Between Text and Sermon” Psalm 80, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, p.397.

against their common enemies. And the whole nation's gone into a spiritual decline, worshipping other gods more convenient to their division. In short, life is hard. From inside and out, Israel's enemies "have pilfered the fruits of the vineyard and set fire to its branches."

And where is God in all this mess? the psalmist demands to know. Maybe in God's heaven, all right, but where Israel needs God is right down here in this messed up vineyard, thank you very much. Instead, while the people of Israel are mocked and ridiculed and feasting on their own tears, God appears to be angry and distant, annoyingly distraught and strangely unmoved by the whole debacle.<sup>4</sup> The Kingdom of God may be Israel's *real* home but at this moment, this season, this era of their lives, they're feeling far, far away from it.

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel!* demands the psalmist. *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!*

You and I in this country, in this region, in this sanctuary, we're the protected, privileged ones of this world, at least when it comes to food, shelter, national security and wide-screened tvs. In those terms, at least, we're a pretty comfortable and self-satisfied people who try to do the best we can with what we have, and try to be and do good in the world.

But recent cataclysmic events, punctuated by 9-11, percolating through the tech bust, and climaxing (we hope) in the devastating dissolution of financial markets built on greed and pretense, lend to many of us a rather heightened awareness not only of how connected we all are in this world, but how vulnerable every one of us is to the broken, sinful systems that organize our lives and the life of the world. There is a fragility

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 396.

associated with such an awareness – an emerging consciousness that we are both participants in and subject to political, financial and relational systems much larger and complex, and broken, than we realized; systems we might once have imagined unassailable, if not good; reliable and unshakeable, if not fair. But now, what we, and our parents, and our parents' parents banked on, quite literally, fell through.

That's how the psalmist felt. Casting around for solid ground, for reliable human systems, for saving leaders and wholesome community and a predictable, safe future, he found none. Not even his God was coming through. "How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" he asks. "You feed us with our tears. You make us the scorn of our neighbors. The vine you planted, our enemies have plucked its fruit, they've ravaged it, burned it with fire, cut it down."

The Psalmist's God has *not* protected Israel; *not* saved her from her enemies; *not* responded to her prayers, but given her tears to drink in full measure.

Has God ever let *you* down? Did you ever *not* get from God what you wanted? Did you ever *not* get what you needed from God no matter how hard or sincerely you pleaded? No matter how many people were praying for or with you?

Have you ever *not* been saved from pain, from loss, from change, from suffering, from death? Or maybe stopped bothering even to plead because you already knew God wouldn't deliver? Have you ever gotten weary of hearing about a present, listening, caring God when what you *really* wanted, really *ached* for was an efficacious, intervening, *saving* God who'd get with the program?

If so, this lament's for you.

This morning God gets no defense, no contrived happy "gospel" ending, no "all's well that ends well." This morning we get to do what the peppery Hebrew psalmists did

all the time, baldly and without apology, and even in worship! Today we get to lament what ended badly, what breaks our hearts, what pisses us off, and demand to know where God is in it all. In the Hebrew scriptures, the Jews hold their God accountable for what happens and demands their day in court. Whether they get it or not...well...that's another question. But they demand it, without restraint. Like maybe you or I imagine doing when we come before God's throne and ask for answers to "life's persistent questions."

Like, for me, how come when I was only 4 did my strong brother die, which broke my mother's heart and took her away from me?

Or, what was the point of all those people dying in the Twin Towers? And if there were a point, have we gotten it yet?

And what happens after death, anyway?

Or, how come marriages don't last very often anymore, and in the ones that do, people don't seem to like each other very much? Anyway, even when they have a mate, how come so many people go to bed lonesome?

Or, how come irresponsible CEOs are given golden parachutes and old people freeze in the winter?

Why are teenagers are so stretched and stressed and sometimes want to kill themselves?

How long will we get to keep pretending that our lifestyles in this country don't affect the planet?

Anyway, when did our lives become so complicated and busy? When did we forget how to relax?

Why do people still go hungry, even in this country?

Will wars ever end?

Why does fear still drive most of our important life decisions, and is that ever going to change?

Will we ever get better at being human?

Why did you let this sweet church shrink from 400 to 115? And anyway, what's up with the whole mainline protestant church and what are we supposed to do about it?

Why is it so easy to forget you?

And what's the deal with retirement plans? I mean, is *nothing* sacred?!

And what are all these people who are losing their jobs going to do?!

I mean, we are a nation in ruins, our fruit has been plucked, ravaged, our branches cut, the boundaries of our future, burnt.

“Children carry guns and knives to school for “protection,” metal detectors scan for armament, search dogs sniff school lockers for illegal drugs. The elderly lurk fearfully behind doors with multiple locks while even the young and brash dare not walk city streets, shoot, many neighborhood streets, alone. Faithfulness and hard work have been overrun by the wild boars of a”<sup>5</sup> wild, greedy, fey market, addictions abound, the planet itself labors for breath, and, friend God, I've got to say, you seem annoyingly distraught and strangely unmoved by the whole debacle. Where are you in this whole mess? We demand to know!

This lament's for you and me. And we make bold to speak it together, you and I, because, as one scholar puts it, “in the bleak midwinter of its own abandonment and judgment, the church finds in lament a voice for its most unspeakable despair. We are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 398.

in dire need of a Savior whose face will once again “shine” upon us and illumine our deepest darkness.<sup>6</sup>

Life is hard; the world is dark; at this time of the year, at its darkest. And in the darkness, and from the darkness, as the psalmist raises his lament, so we raise ours.

Says one scholar, “Lament is the appropriate language of Advent, the speaking of which is, in itself, an act of faith. Maybe not to the world, who may judge such complaint to be acts of failed faith. But the *trusting* community speaks its truth boldly before God,”<sup>7</sup> knowing that while it may be the end of *our* story, it is only the beginning of God’s.

Therefore, in our own darkness and from our own darkness, we boldly raise our lament before God, even as we fervently join with the psalmist’s prayer: “Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, God, the one whom you made strong for yourself.”

Last week we celebrated that Jesus is at the right hand of God. This week, on this first Sunday of Advent, we pray that God’s hand be on Jesus, and that God send him soon. The sooner the better. Thy Kingdom come, Lord. Send it, now, Lord, for we are homesick for it. *Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*” Send us the Light of the World! For we are ready, you are I, past ready, to come home.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, quote from Walter Brueggemann.