

February 5, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Cry Out”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



*To meditate on the psalms is to choose to will to be ourselves before God,
to sing full throated songs of praise when that is appropriate and
to give honest articulation to our despair when we are sad.*

~Soren Kierkegaard

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Psalm 88

*O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.
Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you.
Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of
forgetfulness?
But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?
Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me; my companions are in darkness.*

Matthew 5:1–12

*1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his
disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed
are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who
mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the
earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be
filled. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in
heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called
children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for
theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and
persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice
and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the
prophets who were before you.*

“Cry Out”
Psalm 88, Matthew 5:1–12

What does *home* mean to you? Is it a geographical place? Is it the physical structure you live in? Or is *home* a feeling? A writer, a sociologist, and a philosopher spent an evening together discussing the concept of home. Among the three of them, they had lived in more than half a dozen countries and each of them fluently spoke more than one language. They quickly decided that country of birth, mother tongue, or length of stay does not make a place home. Gradually, they reached a consensus: home is the place where you feel a sense of safety, familiarity, stability, and belonging.¹

This concept of home is precisely the concept that is violated when we find ourselves in a season of spiritual disorientation. As I mentioned last week, theologian Walter Brueggemann divides the psalms into those of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation. Last week, in the psalms of orientation, we found expressions of confidence and certainty about who God is and who we are. This week, with Psalm 88, we encounter disorientation. This psalm, and the others in this category, pull back the curtain on a part of every life of faith—those times when we lose our confidence in who God is and who we are, when we no longer feel at home in the world.

My friend Samantha is a pastor at a church in North Carolina. She recently took a trip to New Orleans with some friends, and they marveled at the way this city brings together a wild mix of cultures – French, Cajun, African, Spanish, English – welcoming all kinds of people as they are. But it was clear that there are still painful wounds and fault lines of division. One day, Samantha and her friends embarked on a self-guided walking tour of some of the city’s historic houses. They came upon a beautiful yellow mansion which had a sign in front identifying it as an inn. They began talking to the manager of the inn, and Samantha asked him, “Who used to own this house?” “It was owned by a Presbyterian minister,” the man replied. Samantha’s face lit up. “Well,” she said, “Actually, I’m a Presbyterian minister.” “Is that right?” the man said. “Well, that guy’s name was the Reverend Benjamin Palmer. He was a big racist.

¹ Masha Gessen and Martina Navratilova, “How Trump Has Taken Away Our Homes.” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/opinion/how-trump-has-taken-away-our-homes.html>

In fact, they say his big Thanksgiving sermon was about how the gospel condones slavery and it inspired the state of Louisiana to break away from the Union.” “Huh,” Samantha said, “Did I say I was a Presbyterian minister?” But what she wanted in that moment was to become invisible. The man’s words threw her into a state of disorientation, for it made no sense to her that a fellow minister, a follower of Jesus Christ, could perpetuate injustice and suffering rather than work to eliminate it.²

These kinds of disorientations happen to us all, and the sense of confusion and shame and sometimes even despair that accompanies them is often short-lived. But they reveal to us the larger movement that of the ongoing cycle of faith, from orientation to disorientation to reorientation and back again. The experience of moving among these three states is what keeps our faith from stagnating, it keeps us moving forward and ever deeper in our understanding of what it means to live in God’s world and be God’s children.

Of course, there are countless examples of disorientation that are neither short-lived nor easily transformed into a new and deeper understanding. Psalm 88 shows us a child of God who is profoundly disoriented, emotionally and spiritually, almost to the point of death. In the Jewish tradition, death was typically understood as a final separation between a human being and God. Death is the place where God is not.

The psalmist writes: “I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more...” *This is a person whose world has been completely upended.* We don’t know why but we can speculate –a terrible and tragic loss, a debilitating illness, a betrayal that has left him without any sense of safety, familiarity, stability, or belonging.

As you can probably imagine, having people find out that I am a minister has led to many interesting conversations over the years. Sometimes this information cuts the conversation short, as a person tries to reconcile their image of a Christian minister with the person before them. Other conversations take a deep dive into thorny questions of sin and forgiveness. Sometimes it turns out the person has a secret they’ve been waiting to confess and having a minister to talk to who also happens to be a stranger seems like the perfect

² Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block, “Walking Uphill,” sermon preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC, January 28, 2017.

opportunity. But recently, the discovery of my professional identity elicited a response I'd never gotten before. After this person found out what I do, he fixed me with a defiant gaze and said, "Well, then maybe you can explain to me why God has abandoned me, why God obviously doesn't care a thing about me, why God doesn't give me the attention you might give the backside of a rat. Can you explain that?"

I stood there, shocked at his vulnerability, and, in that moment, I could find no words. Maybe if I'd had more time, maybe if he wasn't a total stranger, maybe there was some set of circumstances in which my theological training would have enabled me to craft a helpful response. But in that brief exchange, I had nothing to offer this broken and hurting human being that would change his profound sense of disorientation.

Now that I've had time to reflect on that encounter, I wish I'd simply offered him a blessing, the kind of blessing Jesus announces to his disciples in the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are the very first lesson Jesus teaches – as one preacher put it, it is Jesus' inaugural address.³ As such, the Beatitudes lay a foundation meant to prepare the disciples for what's to come, for all they will be called to endure in his name. And what Jesus says is that God's blessing is with those who are suffering. That statement right there – that God's blessing is with those who are suffering – should throw each of us into a state of disorientation. Because in our world, this is not how we understand blessing.

Think about how we use the word "blessed." We say we are blessed with a happy marriage, healthy children, meaningful relationships. We say we are blessed with material resources that allow us to buy and fill a beautiful house or drive a sleek new car or travel to exotic places. We say we are blessed when we get into the school of our choice or experience success in our career. We say we are blessed to live in a country where we are free.

But when Jesus teaches his disciples for the very first time, he starts by destroying the illusion that our health or wealth or happiness is a sign of God's blessing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit...are those who mourn...are the meek... Blessed are those seeking what is right...Blessed are those working for peace in a world that glorifies war...Blessed are the persecuted...those being insulted and falsely accused..." In his very first teaching, Jesus disorients his followers

³ Samantha Gonzalez-Block, *Ibid.*

with the good news that God is with us in our suffering. God's blessing is poured out upon us, in our suffering. It is okay to acknowledge our disorientation, to cry out to God and to others as the psalmist does, because in it, God is there, blessing us.

I want to be clear, though, that I am not suggesting that pain and suffering, are, in and of themselves, redemptive or valuable. But if, as Jesus promises, God is with us even in our most difficult moments, even when we feel abandoned by God and everyone else, then Jesus is also promising that our suffering does not go unnoticed by God. To the contrary, God is at work in it, because God is always working in us and through us. Theologian Richard Rohr puts it this way: our pain always has something to teach us, but to find out what, we must first acknowledge it.

A preschool teacher tells of her experience in a school that had two classrooms of students of the same ages and backgrounds. Each day with their lunches the kids got a cookie wrapped in cellophane. In one classroom, the teacher would come around with scissors and snip the cellophane off each cookie. In the other classroom, the teacher advised her aides, "Do not touch those wrappers, do not help the children open them." So these kids had to open their cookies themselves. Sometimes, as they tried to get that tightly wrapped plastic off their cookie, there was a big struggle, and the cookies were reduced to crumbs in the process. But each kid eventually got the wrapper off – working through desire, frustration, anger, and accomplishment. They learned something about what they were capable of. And they were energized by all those around them going through the same struggle.⁴ Now, which of those two classrooms would you want yourself or your kid to be in?

I know that many of you are overwhelmed and, in some cases, deeply disorientated, by the changes around us – in our government, in our culture, in the church. Some of you feel personally threatened and afraid. Some of you wonder whether this country can still feel like home to you, whether you can continue find a sense of safety, stability and belonging. What our life of faith teaches us is that these times of disorientation are not punishment or signs of God's cruelty. As Jesus teaches us, with his words and with his own life and death, is that it is the ones who are poor, the ones in mourning, the ones seeking

⁴ Rivka Galchen, "Mo Willems Funny Failures," *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2017.

to do what is right, the peacemakers who are indeed blessed by God. For disorientation is a necessary phase of transformation, and transformation is God's greatest gift.

A colleague of mine credits his grandfather, Ben, with being the greatest influence on his own faith. Ben was a child of the Great Depression and a veteran of World War II. After he returned from the war he married and had three daughters. He started his own business, worked hard, and built a good life for his family. Then tragedy struck. His oldest daughter, Nancy, a teenager, was in a car accident. The other three passengers walked away from the crash, but the car rolled over Nancy. After several days in critical care, Ben and his wife made the agonizing decision to end life-support.

When my colleague decided to go into the ministry, he asked his grandfather about that time. After a long silence, Ben said that losing his daughter made him question everything. Although he'd always gone to church, he lost interest. He realized that he'd only been going out of a sense of obligation, not faith. He then spent years questioning God, blaming God for his daughter's death. He was confused and hurt and angry and deeply disoriented. Then, one day, he suddenly realized that the anger and hurt had come because he thought he understood how life worked. He thought if he lived a good life and worked hard, he could expect good things to happen. He realized had been trying to cut a deal with God rather than trust God. He thought he could earn God's blessing. With this realization came a choice: he could ignore God's presence and let his anger and hurt control him. Or he could accept that God was with him, had been with him all along. He could choose to trust that even in his profound disorientation, he was truly blessed.⁵

Amen.

⁵ Chris Girata, "The Good Choice," Day1.org, February 14, 2016. http://day1.org/7052-the_good_choice