

## “Oppression”

Psalm 40 (NRSV)

Lent II - Wednesday, March 23, 2011

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Before I recognized my call to ministry, I had every intention of becoming a teen librarian. Living in a world of vampire fiction and graphic novels, it was a treat to read books that stretched beyond the standard expectations found on the best-seller lists in my area of specialty. A few years back, while employed with Mentor Public Library, I discovered a book by Patrick Ness entitled *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, an epic story about a boy trying to save the world from a bigoted tyrant who oppresses everyone and anyone who won't conform to his will. Like a lot of teen lit, this tale has a sci-fi component to it, and the plot takes place in a futuristic world where everyone can hear the thoughts of animals and men all the time, filling the world with incessant chatter of thoughts. The thoughts of the women, however, remain silent.

While the main plot about overcoming an unjust ruler is exhilarating, for me the most fascinating aspect is seeing how Todd learns to communicate with women through the silence of their thoughts, especially when the rest of his world is filled with constant, never-ending noise. I'm drawn to the allegory of God as the silent listener, hearing our independent voice in the clutter of the noise around us, while we are like Todd, confused as to how we can connect with someone whose thoughts we can't hear.

I have been reminded a lot of this work of fiction lately as we experience the reality of Lent. As the hush of the winter fades and the noisy rush of spring overtakes our lives, we can experience uncertainty in our own conversations with God; particularly when those prayers come from a feeling of oppression.

Uncertainty can be a common emotion as we search for ways to communicate such feelings, especially when our audience doesn't always respond in an obvious way. In today's text, we see that our psalmist struggles between what he feels should be said and what it is his heart needs him to say.

The psalmist starts his conversation by talking directly to God, providing lots of evidence on how steadfast his faith is, and why his trust is in the Lord. He explains that he shares the good works of God to others and delights in God's will. He talks about the relief he feels from being pulled from the pit and set on solid ground, and how God's love has placed a song of joy in his mouth. We read ten verses of his joy and delight in the will of the Lord, and then, all of the sudden, his thoughts change direction so quickly that without a literary pause, or at least an intellectual seatbelt, the reader could suffer from spiritual whiplash:

<sup>11</sup> Do not, O LORD, withhold  
your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe for ever.

<sup>12</sup> For evils have encompassed me

without number;  
my iniquities have overtaken me,  
until I cannot see;  
they are more than the hairs of my head,  
and my heart fails me.

This sudden change of heart in many ways is the most relatable component of this passage. When we are in times of trial, we want to know the reason why bad things happen, and how long we can expect to suffer. Perhaps to quash our guilt or to gain a sense of understanding, like the psalmist, we justify why we should be treated better than we are. We say to ourselves that we are good Christians, good people, good parents, good children, and because we are so good, the only explanation for our suffering is that God must be withholding His mercy. How else can we explain the silence and unanswered questions? There has to be **some** reason why we are being oppressed. If, by some chance, we are able remember that through Christ's sacrifice our sins are forgiven and we will never be a pawn for punishment, then surely someone else must be held accountable. Verses 14-15 talks about our innate desire to oppress our oppressors:

<sup>14</sup> Let all those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire my hurt.  
<sup>15</sup> Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, 'Aha, Aha!'

There are times when anger over our oppressors is a motivating force towards justice. Oppression comes in many forms – harassment, persecution, bullying, neglect – and one of the most vital ways to promote change is to acknowledge the hurt these behaviors cause. While remembering our pain is good and beneficial from a progressive standpoint, we have to be cautious not to imprison our hearts in emotional despair for the sake of personal justice. As we travel towards the freedom we find at the cross from sin, we should also seek ways to shed the shackles of oppression we place upon ourselves. The more we look to the past seeking retribution instead of looking to the future seeking the sanctity of God, the more we invite ourselves to live in the pit of our despair.

The psalmist knows this, which is why when beginning this psalm, he reminds himself of the safety God provides. He is directing the intention of his prayer and thoughts towards that which he wants to move – God's love. Yes, he shares his frustrations and anger, but does so in a transformative way instead of a self-oppressive way. By focusing on God rather than pain, he is slowly loosening the binds of oppression that are within his control. He further recognizes that without God's help, a part of him will remain imprisoned in pain. In verse 17, the psalmist acknowledges his vulnerability, and in doing so, releases himself to God's mercy: "As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay."

An interesting token about this text is that essentially it is a longer version of Psalm 70. Historians believe that Psalm 70 was written first, and then expanded upon to make Psalm 40. Verses 13-17 of Psalm 40 are almost identical to the entirety of Psalm 70.

*\* Read simultaneously*

Psalm 40 (read by reader one) \*

<sup>13</sup> Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;  
O LORD, make haste to help me.

<sup>14</sup> Let all those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire my hurt.

<sup>15</sup> Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, 'Aha, Aha!'

<sup>16</sup> But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, 'Great is the LORD!'

<sup>17</sup> As for me, I am poor and needy,  
but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
do not delay, O my God.

Psalm 70: (read by reader two) \*

<sup>1</sup> Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.  
O LORD, make haste to help me!

<sup>2</sup> Let those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek my life.  
Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire to hurt me.

<sup>3</sup> Let those who say, 'Aha, Aha!'  
turn back because of their shame.

<sup>4</sup> Let all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you.  
Let those who love your salvation  
say evermore, 'God is great!'

<sup>5</sup> But I am poor and needy;  
hasten to me, O God!  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
O LORD, do not delay!

This Lent, as we explore new ways to make our prayer life more genuine, the development of Psalm 40 provides some guidance. Its evolution demonstrates that the most healing prayers are ones that begin centered on God instead of anger. To have a fully developed relationship with God we need to be honest, which means voicing our frustrations on our oppressions. But we hold the responsibility in remembering that God does not withhold mercy and grace. We need to actively

develop within ourselves the intention found within the first ten verses of Psalm 40. That intention will help us remember that we are heard above the noise and through the silence, and see the hand pulling us up from the pit onto solid ground.

I would like to share with you a meditation entitled “God is in Silence” by Susan Palo Cherwien <sup>1</sup>

In the emptiness, God is.  
In the darkness, God is.  
In the silence, God is.  
When the psalmist cried out from the pit,  
God was already there.  
When we cry out from the deep night,  
God is already there.  
When the silence is roaring in our minds,  
God is there.  
For when we are emptied of our paltry projects and goals,  
When our grandiose and prideful accomplishments  
run aground in darkness,  
When even our incessant mental chatter ceases to despair,  
God is revealed in silence.

Whither can we flee from God's presence?  
God is.

Amen.

As we receive our offering, I invite you remain seated and join us as we sing the band U2's musical interpretation of this passage “40”.

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<sup>1</sup> Cherwin, Susan Palo; *Crossings: Meditations for Worship*, Morning Star Music Publications, St Louis, MO 2003