

“Restlessness”

Psalm 77 (NRSV)

Lent 1 - Wednesday, March 16, 2011

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May God's grace and peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds open. Amen.

Tonight is the first night we delve into the book of Psalms, where we can look at the ancient words of the psalmist to help us talk to God about what is going on with us today.

I love the Psalms. This book is filled with poetic language, intense themes and moving verses. For me, this book is the clearest example of how a faceless, nameless person can reach into the depths of our soul and help us find words to a part of our heart that is not always easy to voice. I also enjoy the idea that our psalmist is the token gothic artist of the Bible, who, if given the chance today, would probably listen to Jim Morrison while quoting Edgar Allan Poe. Who better to help us reflect on the drama of this journey we call Lent.

In Psalm 77, we discover that our author is restless, and when I read this Psalm I am reminded of a night I shared with my niece last summer. My sister is a music director for a church in Brunswick, and every Thursday evening she rehearses the choir and band. Being a good wife, she kindly “requests” that her husband, a high school choir director, help out with these groups, which allows my parents and I to have some quality time with the kids once a week for a few hours.

One night late last spring my niece, Phoebe, was in rare form. Normally a sweet, obedient, lovey little girl, she was a bit high strung – running around, not following directions, being a bit louder than usual. There was a spring storm brewing outside, and her two-year-old body resembled the raw energy of the whirlwind blowing out in the night sky. We tried everything to get her to relax – reading stories, taking a bath, watching an episode of Little Bear, but nothing worked. She was too wound up.

We had just gotten her into her jammies, when all of the sudden there was a loud crack of thunder. I'll never forget the look of shock on her face when she heard that sound, her mouth formed in a perfect “o,” eyes wide, searching for my mother. Phoebe could not have been more startled, and at that moment all she wanted was the comfort of her grandma. It started to rain pretty hard, and I was a little worried that she would be frightened by the loud sounds of the storm. But as soon as she crawled into my mother's lap, and snuggled into the arms of a hug that only a grandma can give, she startled to relax. It was as if that crack of thunder allowed her to get out of her head and remember that someone else could help settle a bit of that restlessness.

That is the plea we see from the psalmist, asking God to provide some relief from his restlessness. We don't know exactly what is causing him to be a bundle of raw energy, but we can clearly see it. He can't sleep. He can't stop thinking about the days of his past. He tells God that he is uneasy, and that his soul refuses to be comforted. The psalmist has tried everything he can think of to get out of his head – meditation, blame, sorrow – and still he finds no peace.

It is easy to feel a little sorry for our psalmist, because we can see that all he wants is to be able to relax. Especially now, during this season of reflection, we relate to that craving of spiritual sanctuary.

Restlessness finds us in many forms. A racing mind, energy that won't escape us, tossing and turning in our beds at night. Like our friend here, I am no stranger to insomnia. When under stress, I have a hard time turning off the dialogue in my head. Too often I have had a war with the clock, saying to myself, "Okay, if I fall asleep right now I can get three hours of sleep..."

Perhaps the worst part of restlessness is how solitary it makes us feel. While our restlessness may affect the people in our lives, we feel separated from those around us. Our psalmist feels that way too, and says, "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever?" The psalmist feels so alone and aches for comfort so badly that he says, "in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying".

We all have had moments where we have waited, with our arms stretched out, praying for relief. We are like Phoebe, wanting to crawl into the arms of comfort.

But as we look at the words of this text we see that relief does come. While the psalmist can't literally crawl into the arms of God's grace, he can crawl into the memory of fulfilled promises. He remembers the times that God has provided for others in turbulent situations, such as Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. In verse 19 he says, "Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen."

It is easy in times of unrest to believe that because we are not able to be comforted we are therefore alone. But this is not true. We become so clouded in our own discomfort that our heart fails to see that we have a companion. The question becomes how do we make ourselves recognize God's companionship in those moments when we are totally consumed within ourselves?

The psalmist suggests we give ourselves a break.

When you look at Psalm 77, you'll see this word off to the side of some of the stanza's called "Selah". It is believed that Selah is a directional cue for when psalms became a part of the liturgy, letting the readers know where to insert a musical break. Not always having a team of musicians with us every time we crack open the Bible, when we read the word Selah we should take a moment to pause and allow a break between thoughts. Looking over this passage again while allowing for these breaks, we see these pauses are placed purposefully, and that they come at points when our hearts could use a breather.

When we are angry:

³ I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.
Selah

When we are worried:

⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?
Selah

When we are ready to feel comforted:

¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.

¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

Selah

What we learn from this conversation is that sometimes it is important to live in the heart of the storm, to allow ourselves the right to wallow in the waters of our unease. It is purposeful to recognize that our lives are affected by the energy that is inside of us, but we shouldn't allow those temporary feelings of restlessness to become our reality. We need to recognize when our prayer needs a break, and live the purpose of *Selah*.

Giving ourselves a mental break serves as that clap of thunder which can startle us into a new way of thinking. Giving ourselves a break in our prayer allows us to step out of the storm long enough to see the footprints of God walking along side of us.

I'd like to share with you a meditation written by Margaret Chamberlain¹, which may help us in times of restlessness as we journey to the cross:

There are times, Father

When my hand falters, unsure of the next move.

As I loosen my grasp on all I have known,

I feel your warm touch,

guiding my fingers to a course untried

And I am led onward.

There are times, Father,

When I long to *just stop!* To stop doing,

stop running, stop falling behind,

stop catching up.

To be still, be fed, be carried, be led,

be lifted, listened to,

be loved, believed,

to just BE.

Always you have been there,

Waiting in the still, welcoming my embrace.

Amen.

¹ Tirabassi, Maren C.; *Daybook for New Voice: a Calendar of Reflections and Prayers for Youth*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland OH, 2004