

“Sorrow”

Psalm 102:1-22 (NRSV)
Lent IV - Wednesday, April 6, 2011
© Kristina N. Heise, 2011

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

Psalm 102 is one of the more difficult psalms we examine this Lent as examples to build better conversations with God. This is a lament of sorrow, and much like when we experience tough times in our lives, not so easy to talk about. In fact, when researching this psalm, I struggled to find many resources to educate me about it. While they are out there, the two sources that have been a right-arm of knowledge to me throughout the past four weeks didn’t even have Psalm 102 listed as a discussion point. They skipped right from Psalm 101 to Psalm 103.

Maybe it’s because, on the surface, Psalm 102 seems to be nothing more than a long cry of agony. You really have to do some digging to find the good news in this passage, which is ironic because when we are struggling, we also have to do some digging to find the hope in sorrowful times. Sorrow is paralyzing, heart wrenching and exhausting, and it is hard to feel supported, even by God, when we are in the midst of it.

In Psalm 102, we see that our author is living in the midst of a sorrowful time. He shares he is floating in anguish, living in a state of pain so deep that the thought of eating is even too much to bear:

³For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
⁴My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.

Once again he suffers from insomnia, feeling that he is oppressed. With sorrow lining his heart, the psalmist feels abandoned and alone. He is so disconnected to his world that food has lost flavor, sleep has lost its ability to heal, and the words of others scar him like taunts:

⁷I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
⁸All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
⁹For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink

Being so disconnected to his environment, he also believes that God has turned away from him. He shares that he has been lifted up and thrown asideⁱ and says to God, “²Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.”

Sorrow breeds a feeling of loneliness. Eleven years ago, I was diagnosed with lupus, which is an autoimmune disorder that confuses the healing white blood cells in my body, causing them to be either hyper-active or overly dormant. A degenerative condition, it is under the same auto-immune

umbrella as multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia and Parkinson's disease. Honestly, there have been times when my illness has been a bit scary, with complications separating me from my peers. I'm not, however, one to let a physical complication hinder my life's direction, so I chose to use my situation to my advantage and became an advocate with the Lupus Foundation of America. For the past four years I have served as a co-facilitator of a support group that helps new patients and their families adjust to living with this chronic condition.

Without question, I am the tech-savvy half of my facilitating team, and as such primarily handle the web-based questions for our group. Every once in a while, though, I run an in-person meeting. About two years ago, a middle aged woman named Mary came in who had just received a positive diagnosis. Like many patients, it took years for the doctors to identify that it was indeed lupus. For the past 13 years, Mary had been inaccurately treated for multiple sclerosis instead of lupus. Finding out that the doctors had been wrong, leading to years of debilitating symptoms not being properly cared for left her, justifiably, angry.

But Mary was more than angry – she was filled with sorrow. She said to me, “I think the hardest part is that so much of who I am today came from being an MS person. I have been in support groups for MS for over a decade, and shared my life with other MS patients. We were connected because of this horrible thing that, through each other, we could see as something good. And now, now that my illness is called ‘lupus’ instead of ‘multiple sclerosis,’ I don't have that community anymore. As for my family, well, they are tired of the same stories, same problems, having the same conversations about pain. I don't think they care what it's called, as long as I keep my complaints to myself. I have never been so alone.”

It may not be an illness that separates us from our community. It could be that we went through a divorce, lost a job, battled an addiction, buried a loved one, or just made too many wrong turns on our life's journey. Regardless of what brought us to our sorrow, we can feel haunted and alone. How many of us have refrained from talking about our pain with someone who is near to us because we are afraid that their reaction will be rejection? If you were in the midst of a sorrowful time, would you reach out for help, or would you instead burry it deep until the numbness of sorrow begins to fade?

Our psalmist today is like Mary – numb and angry as a result of his pain. But even in pain, hope lives in this message. Underneath the sorrow, our psalmist shows us that sometimes the best way to feel connected to God is to be a part of a faith community.

The stirrings of a hopeful future start to appear in verse 13. The psalmist is thinking about the return of Zion, pondering about the peace and protection he will feel living with other believers in the City of God. He says:

¹³You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.

¹⁴For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.

¹⁵The nations will fear the name of the Lord
and all the kings on the earth your glory.
¹⁶For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
¹⁷He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise the prayer.

The psalmist starts to become grounded once he realizes he is not alone. It is through the connection of a faith community that he is able to remember that the sanctity of God lives within the human experience.

Lent is a time for us to remember the value God places on our humanity, a value proven to us in the embodiment of Jesus as the form of man. Throughout the Gospels we see that as a man, Jesus suffered pain and experienced sorrow. Living in a fellowship of disciples, we also see that Jesus valued community, and described it as a solitary body of God. That Christ was made man and died for the protection of that community teaches us the holiness found in sharing our humanity with one another. This is the same community that the psalmist craves and grants him the hope of relief, and grants the ability for his heart to change.

Our psalmist recognizes that the community of God, and the sanctity it provides, can help us with our earthly sorrows:

²¹so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
²²when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.

Our psalmist finds peace from his sorrow by looking towards a God-centered community, just as we find peace from being a part of a God-centered community. Anyone who was here on Monday for Pastor Dave Smith's funeral can speak to the power that comes with sharing a sorrowful moment with a fellow child of God.

But there is a difference between being part of a community that merely talks about God, and being a part of an actual God-*centered* community. Our actions should serve as testaments of God's grace and love, which means reaching towards the person in sorrow when they are too exhausted to ask for help. Divinity is blessed to have Stephen Ministers and prayer teams actively living the dream of Zion. While their path is not for everyone, Christ equipped each of us with the tools to shake hands with a stranger on Sunday, write a card to the grieving widow, bring food to stock our pantry, sponsor a walker in the Relay for Life, or to raise our voices together in song.

There is an intrinsic need to feel connected to a greater body, to be a part of a soothing whole. What we learn from Psalm 102 is that our actions as a community of faith can serve as a living prayer to God, reminding us that the promised land of Zion was made possible the moment Christ died on the cross.

I'd like to share a meditation with you tonight written by a high-school student named Olin Johannessenⁱⁱ.

It is important to understand that,
while there may be plenty to curse,
each day can be a day of peace; a day of remembrance;
a day for loving ourselves and others –
those close to us or those we've just met...
humankind, big and small, far and near, young and old alike.

Share your compassion with others,
and watch the chain expand,
creating more love, providing a sense of serenity.
Today we pray for hope –
hope for everyone,
the light of hope shining on all people.

Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 102:10 “because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.”

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