

# Nobody Knows

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Psalm 77

As you look to the cover of your bulletin this week, I will confess that I've arm wrestled Walter Brueggemann this week. What began as a contemplation of the community of faith as caring community took on overtones of justice and righteousness and became a contemplation of the community of faith as activists asking hard questions of God and with deep commitment to God's call instigating beloved community for the sake of the world.

What can I say, Brueggemann won.

*Let us pray... Holy God as we exist in the tension between is and should be, as events open our eyes to pervasive injustice and oppression, give us the strength of our calling to live for you and to love our neighbors in way that spread justice and equity and peace. In the stillness of this hour, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

## Nobody Knows

The girl fled the gym floor. A stunt had gone wrong at the state dance competition, there were bruises and then there was the emotional pain. She fled from those who might blame her and was angry with those saying "it's all good" when it wasn't. Her tears were a river— she was *inconsolable*...

Asaph, the psalmist, is inconsolable— wrapped in his misery, stretching out prayers to God that go unanswered, until sleepless night after sleepless night leaves the Psalmist without words. Troubled speech fails and all that's left are silent, pleading tears. Something in Asaph's world has changed; a cataclysmic shift that leaves this poet to question all that is known about God.

The lament rises—and the power of these words, indeed the power of all the Psalms of lament, is that they speak the truth of grief and of pain. The words sing out with the full, raw power of human anguish, lifting up our grief, confronting those things in our lives and in our world that are not as they should be.

In capturing our grief, Asaph captures the way that grief disorients us, and into that liminal space asks questions of God— questions that we all have wanted to ask:

“...Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (Ps 77:8-9)

A young white man attends a Bible study at a historic African American church and kills nine people. God, where are you? A young Arab-American enters a Gay nightclub and begins a shooting spree that ends with 50 deaths including his own. Lord, how long? Armed conflict rages in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and South Sudan. My God, where are you? Multiple shootings have marked our Rochester streets this week. O Lord, how long? Sixteen million children in America are food insecure— one in five of all children, one in three children of color. Merciful God, where are you? Sixteen thousand children under age 5 will die in the world today, most of preventable causes. How Long, O Lord, how long?

These are the questions of “theodicy.” Does our God of love, graciousness, and compassion have the power to intercede in the brokenness that is the world of today? Walter Brueggemann would have us understand that such questioning bear three dimensions: religious crisis, social crisis, and revolutionary action.<sup>1</sup>

The religious crisis tries to sort out the true character of God. We hear the Psalmist speaking out of a religious convention: prayers lifted so “that God will listen to me.” The “I” language of the first six verses is striking—I cry, I seek, I think, I moan, I meditate, I consider, I remember... culminating in this raw statement, “I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit...”

We might understand the hand wringing, but is this really prayer?

With all the “I” language of the first six verses, don’t we hear the unspoken question, “What about me?”

Brueggemann writes, “This speaker has grown comfortable with the great affirmations of Yahweh, because the great affirmations readily translated into self-serving assurance. But now that is all being blown out of the water... The desperate rhetorical questions appear... The speaker begins to guess that the old sure religion is collapsing.”<sup>2</sup>

And not only is the old religion collapsing, but also the social order—its collapse revealing that what was once order is now disorder, what once seemed just is not the way things are supposed to be. God, where are you? Lord, how long?

Pat explanations, assurances, and condolences fail; the grief—inconsolable.

The girl remained huddled in the corner of the dressing room. I watched as another dancer approached. She didn’t say anything, but simply sat down and put her arms around her weeping friend and then joined her in her tears. There they remained, huddled together until the tears stopped...

Some biblical commentators have speculated that Psalm 77 is really two psalms divided neatly after verse 10; a psalm of lament and a psalm of praise. That might make it easier to understand, but the language and the patterns of words and phrases are clearly part of a single whole.

The voice of Asaph, crying out, is inconsolable, asking desperate questions—and then something happens in verse 10. The truth is we don't understand verse 10 well. The Hebrew is obscure and the verse is hard to translate. Modern translators have rendered the verse:

"It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." (NRSV)

"This *is* my anguish; *But I will remember* the years of the right hand of the Most High." (NKJ)

'This is what wounds me, the right hand of the Most High has lost its strength.' (NJB)

"It is my failing, that the High One's right hand has changed." (Robert Alter)

Despite the differences, Brueggemann challenges us to understand this in its words, "If one is linked to a flat one-dimensional faith, then this verse is a bitter loss of faith. But if we think in terms of obedience on its way to risky imagination, then this verse is *an opening for new faith* beyond the conventions and routines which secure but do not reckon with God's awe-fullness."<sup>3</sup>

The Psalmist leads the congregation to the crossroad of bitter loss and risky imagination, but the song of Asaph does not leave them there, it sings words that reorient the people to God: the God who is creator and redeemer, the God of comfort and strength, the God who leads the people along paths of justice and righteousness.

I spent time this Wednesday with more than 80 advocates, activists, and spiritual leaders. We gathered to hear Shelly Tochluk as she engaged us with materials from her book, "Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice." She talked about the tensions that arise as diverse people try to live out values of equity and justice while pursuing lasting reforms. The caricature is of angry, wounded, advocates whose language is antagonistic and divisive even with allies AND of spiritual people who seek "kumbaya moments" and ignore their own role in an unjust status quo.

These were certainly the tensions in my small group. As an ethereal spirituality floated into the conversation, one of our advocates demanded to know what spirituality meant—he didn't understand whatever this (wave hand) was...

I offered my definition haltingly: spirituality is one's connection to a higher power that we call God, which cultivates us to connect with others in ways that reflect God's justice and righteousness. The dimensions are vertical and horizontal and there is not one without the other.

I understand "kumbaya moments." I understand wrapping arms around someone until the tears have stopped. But when we are wounded, "kumbaya" cannot be the end. We must, by the power of God, stand ready to bear the anger and the wounds of the oppressed.

Asked why perceived tensions between spirituality and racial just matter, Tochluk responded, "There is a vast potential of untapped transformative power waiting to be released..." It's waiting for us to connect.

Brueggemann would remind us, as we question, "Where is God?" and "Lord, how long?" we are responding to the growing awareness that our theodicy must enter the social sphere—it must question

the legitimacy of the present division of power and goods, it must lead us into faithful action that seeks to displace an unjust status quo. It calls us to help one another stand.

So we join Asaph, our psalmist, as he takes us deep into the community's true memory of who God is and what God does—activity that goes far beyond the I of the first six verses and even beyond the we of covenant community, and speaks to the creation and redemption of the entire world.

Clinton McCann writes, “The memory of God’s saving deeds in the past makes it possible for women and men of faith to embody the reign of God even in the midst of circumstances that suggest that God does not reign. Out of the memory of the community of faith emerges hope.”<sup>4</sup>

That hope pushes us to act—to act as if we follow a God who is sovereign, a God who seeks justice and righteousness, a God who uses the gifts of our lives to do it— to tap that “vast potential of untapped transformative power...”

I watched that long ago day, as peace slowly descended over my dancer daughter, still tight in her friend’s embrace. I watched as her friend helped her up. I watched as my daughter regained her courage to face the challenge before her—being part of a team whose work was not finished. I am mindful that she did not get there on her own but through the power of friendship and community.

In that act, I hear the echoing words of Paul, “For freedom, Christ has set us free... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“Where is God?” we ask. God is in the impulse that sends us to seek justice, that leads us to live with kindness, that presses us to follow God’s leading with humility and courage and strength.

“Lord, how long?” we ask. As long as it takes for us to release the power of transformation that God plants in our communities—the power of truthful memory that leads us in faithfulness, grace, and compassion onto roads of justice and equity and peace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. Ed. Patrick Miller. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. 260.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann. *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. 262.

<sup>4</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “Proper 8.” *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C*. Louisville: WJK, 1994. 401.