

The psalms of Asaph (Psalms 50, 73-83)

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This week's readings sent me down some rabbit holes that I have been struggling to escape. This is, in part, because they are seriously challenging. Jesus is grumpy and scolding everyone and the psalmist recounts the sorrows of his community as they reach for some consolation. The writer of Hebrews is listing horrific events in the history of the Jews. Isaiah tells us about the beautiful vineyard yielding only bad fruit...the Lord looking for justice and seeing only bloodshed; looking for righteousness and hearing only cries of distress. How often in our worship do we hear these histories of struggle and loss, of battle and defeat, of laments and yearnings? Weekly, I reckon.

And isn't this what our daily news also tells us? All these readings aim to reassure us that God's peace, justice, righteousness will prevail and yet we have so little evidence of it when we turn to bear witness to those who suffer tyranny, war, oppression and exploitation. The Bible seems loaded with horror and so does our world. Now I assure you that I am mostly a person of hope, but gee, it's hard at times. It's because of this that I decided I would enter the rabbit hole to find out about the Psalms of Asaph.

If, like me, you don't know about Asaph, I'm here to enlighten you. Slightly, anyway! There are 12 psalms attributed to Asaph, who is widely believed to have been a musician assigned by King David to lead worship. For this conclusion scholars rely on evidence in One Chronicles. His name appears in a long list of court appointments. Today's psalm is within the Asaph cycle which is considered to have been written about the time of the 722 BCE defeat by the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the Northern Israel kingdom, also known as the Kingdom of Judah. All the academic work I could find gives detailed tradition history or textual criticism ...methods of biblical analysis that are technical and jargon laden. Tradition history attempts to chart the shift from oral to written

tradition and so has a focus on the history of the people. That's why it is important to position it at this moment of defeat of the Northern Kingdom.

So, with my reading I was able to discern one important insight for us today. This is what is called collective lament...it is about a people contorting themselves about what has happened to them. Other psalms are a single person beseeching God for mercy, whereas these take a 'we' voice. Did we do something or fail to do something that brought on the ire and abandonment of God? Did our oppressors persecute us because of the power of our faith in the one God? Are we bearing the sins of those who came before us? And then the pleading in today's psalm: *make your face to shine upon us*. Psalm 82 also caught my eye. Written at the same time it is not a call out to God, but to unjust judges and rulers. When I read this stanza, you will understand why I think we need to read these 2 together:

He accuses the judges:

*How long will you^[a] defend the unjust
and show partiality to the wicked?^[b]*

Then he tells them their responsibilities

³*Defend the weak and the orphans;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.*

⁴*Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*

Once again, a collective lament but this time I remind you it is not a call to God, but to those who are in power. The facts of oppression, injustice and violence have not changed but Asaph is reaching back into his faith tradition to denounce the wicked and to instruct leaders in the ways of justice and compassion. The concluding call is to *God to rise-up and judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance*.

Here we find a precursor to our own twisting to make sense of the big stories in our sacred texts. Do we ask God to extend grace and mercy to us, knowing we have strayed? Or, do we remind God of our expectations of justice because we

are victims of maltreatment? Are we to be judged and punished by not being protected or, are our enemies to be put down? Is this the mood we find Jesus in? *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*

When I got to here, I found myself calling out to God. Why did you put these words in our mouths today, when all around us we see oppression and war? When we see the actions of unjust leaders, who do not support the orphans, the poor and needy. When we experience profound powerlessness to bring about a world of love. When we can see the fire. Yes, I know that I am safe and comfortable and more likely to be held accountable for overconsumption of the world resources and for inattention to the suffering, but I cannot deny what I know about violence, genocide, the arms race and the tearing of peace.

You have heard me mention Sharon Welch, the author of *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*. One of my favourite theologians, she twists the pain even further, saying that we must not give into cultured despair: it's all horrible and there is nothing I can do to fix it. She says this can be the indulgent trap of middle-class folk like me. If I can't fix it, I fall into gloom.

She urges us to accept that we live in a world of great disagreement and clashes of beliefs, conflicting claims for land and power, all shaped historically by practices that other, that marginalize and exclude those unlike us. For her, *the ethic of risk is characterized by three elements, each of which is essential to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds: a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic risk-taking.*

She continues: "Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes." It is found in taking steps toward a desired goal, and focusing on possibilities, rather than outcomes, choosing "to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success."

She also warns us to be careful about putting it all in God's hands in the future, what she names the eschatological reservation. This is what I call tying a Jesus

loves me bow on a bundle of worries and dilemmas. I won't do that today. It's cheesy and dishonest.

I think that the gospel calls us to:

- face the destruction of God's creatures, the plunder of people's resources under colonial aggression and inter-community envy,
- locate ourselves and our people – our collective – in the chain of injustice,
- resist cultured despair by striving to find ways to take responsible action that does not feed the cancer of hatred and revenge

But we must also allow ourselves the truth of the lament about the spirit of our age where the rapacious arm themselves against the vulnerable. To lament collectively is to bring humility about our place in human affairs while acknowledging our shared bonds across all humanity. To lament collectively is see the injustice it, to judge it for what its and to name it. To lament collectively is to say we bring all our tangled emotions, our fears and our hopes to this situation knowing that in solidarity with the victims we share in God's compassion for all God's creatures. The collective lament steers us away from cultured despair, not by denying it, but by activating the dangerous memories that are present in our readings today. They tell us that even in their desolation the people did not turn away. Their struggle is our inspiration. Miroslav Wolf calls this an active hope ...in which we do the work, in our own small spaces of influence, of "stretching love into the future".

That's the best I can do for today.

*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. **12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

