

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

The Rev. Ian Burch

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

Preached via Zoom during COVID-19

June 21, 2020

Bow down your ear, O Lord, and answer me, *
for I am poor and in misery.

Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful; *
save your servant who puts [their] trust in you.

Be merciful to me, O Lord, for you are my God; *
I call upon you all the day long.

Gladden the soul of your servant, *
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

If I have preached three times on the psalms in my life, I would be surprised. They are poetry and resist, I think, the same kind of picking apart that can be our instinct in other kinds of texts. The psalms play with images and sound — almost like songs written down on the page over two thousand years ago. They trade in humor, solace, conviction, and often grief. And it is to this grief dwell on for a bit.

(This next part of the sermon talks a bit about the very real and difficult topic of an infant death, and so if for any reason that isn't a safe topic for you, I would welcome you to tune back in in about 6 or 7 minutes.)

I remember sitting either in a class or a seminar — I can't remember which — where we were talking about the terrible topic of the death of an infant. Many of us are fortunate to never have had that kind of experience, though for most of human history and indeed in many poor communities and communities of color, it continues to be more prevalent that it is in wealthier areas of Milwaukee.

I remember being asked to watch a heartbreakingly documentary following a married couple — a man and a woman — who had carried a baby to term and who had then experienced a death at the moment of birth. I don't remember the specifics of the condition or even the medical words to describe the tragedy, and largely those details are unimportant. I remember sitting there listening to this mother's story, as she talked about how her life is now different having had to live through that kind of loss.

What I remember most about her story, strangely enough, is the way that she talked about the people at her work. This grieving mother said that most people at work wouldn't acknowledge that anything bad had happened. She guessed that they really didn't know what to say to her and so kind of just ignored her at best or offered advice or encouragement to have another child at worst. None of that, of course, was what she needed.

She needed to be able to tell her story. We are a people of breath — think about the way that God breathes into Adam and Eve to bring them to life — breath, spirit. When we die, we say that we expire — the breath, the life literally leaves us. This grieving woman needed the air of her life to pass from her lungs over her mouth and into the world. She needed to be able to frame

her lament and to have that received not just by almighty God as the Psalmist does, but also by her community all around her.

A grieving mother needs to be able to speak about the most awful part of her life and know that God and the community are listening. It is no different with non-white people in our city, needing to let the pain of generational grief be heard. And it is no different for those of us affected by COVID-19: losing family or friends; losing our minds in our socially distanced solitude; losing work or money or power or time. We need to be able to speak the unspeakable into the world, to have it pass over our tongues and be released.

In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, *
for you will answer me.

Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord, *
nor anything like your works.

All nations you have made will come and worship you, O Lord, *
and glorify your Name.

For you are great;
you do wondrous things; *
and you alone are God.

Turn to me and have mercy upon me; *
give your strength to your servant;
and save the child of your handmaid.

Our ancestors knew that our common life could not be about the ritual alone — and thank goodness because the ritual is the main thing that we are missing these days at St. Mark's. They knew that the life-long walk with God had to include lament, the sad song that we sing to a God who is merciful. And, in our Christian tradition, we proclaim that our God had the audacity to become human, to become mortal. Our God threw tables over in the temple and sat outside the city of Jerusalem and wept. Our God hung on the cross feeling forsaken. Our God knows our grief and welcomes the sadness that this life sometimes elicits.

God does not ask you for your perfection. God does not demand your silence about the things in this life that are hard. God does not require that you lop off a part of your personality before coming before God in prayer. So, bring your whole self to worship — the good, bad, and ugly — and know that you are heard by a merciful God that will not censor your pain. Say what you need to say, and know that whatever prayer you have on your heart today for God — even if it is nearly unspeakable — is the right and holy prayer to offer. Amen.