



Harold "Skip" Masback, III
"For Crying Out Loud"
Focal Scripture: Psalm 27:7-14, Romans 8:26-27

Psalm 27:7-14

Triumphant Song of Confidence

*7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
9 Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
10 If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.
11 Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!*

Romans 8:26-27

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

I read a story in the Washington Post two weeks ago about how bees use a code to communicate where they had found food. ("The Consciousness of Bees," Washington Post, July 29, 2022.) When they return to the hive, the foragers dance out their code to communicate information about direction, gravity, and even the relative location of the sun. That's just cool. But, of course, it's not just bees.

Crows, whales, even squid communicate by code. In fact, throughout the animal kingdom, critters are endowed by their Creator with codes to help them meet their most urgent needs.

God made things a bit simpler for humans by giving us the gift of speech. I can just spout a glib pattern of words to guide you to great pork belly bites down at Porky's on Route 7. But what about our deepest spiritual needs? How do we find comfort in the midst of suffering? Hope in the midst of despair? Faith in the midst of uncertainty? Now the mysteries of life are too dense for glib speech. And you can't ask Siri, Alexa or your GPS for directions to God's consolation.

But we can find spiritual direction in our sacred texts, so over twenty years ago I started making margin notes whenever I prayed my way through the Psalms. I wanted to see if the Psalmists had left us spiritual patterns, codes, directions for finding our way through the great challenges of life. The notes got so thick that it got harder and harder to even read the texts. But slowly some repeating patterns emerged.

Sometimes the codes are harder to make out than others, but, since you folks are smarter than the average bear, see if you can spot the pattern running through the following fragments:

From Psalm 6: "My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord, how long?"

From Psalm 10: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

From Psalm 13: "How long, O Lord. Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me."

From Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?"

Or from today's reading, Psalm 27: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me . . . Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger"

Do you see the code? It's the very first step in one of the most common patterns in the Psalms. In 55 of the 150 Psalms, before the Psalmist encounters God, the Psalmist cries out for deliverance, the Psalmist cries out for God's presence, the psalmist cries out from the depths of his heart. As my Old Testament professor Ellen Davis wrote, "It seems that ancient Israel believed that the kind of prayer in which we most need fluency is the loud groan, and they have bequeathed us a lot of material on which to practice."ⁱ

The 55 Psalms aren't all the same, sometimes there's more sorrow, sometimes more anger, sometimes consolation comes more quickly, sometimes more slowly – sometimes much more slowly, but every single one of them shares the following: in every single one of these 55 psalms there is personal or communal catastrophe; in every single one of them there is a tone of lament or dereliction; in every single one of them the Psalmist is crying out loud. And, in every single one of them the cry leads - eventually - to comfort in the midst of suffering, to hope in the midst of despair, to faith in the midst of uncertainty.

Now we all know something about crying out loud. Every one of us has had or will have our cup of sorrow. And we all have known this impulse to cry out loud. But in our stoic Yankee culture, crying out loud seems to have gotten a bad name. At best it seems whiney and weak, at worst it seems to betray a lack of faith in God.

When I meet with folks struck with tragedy, they almost never begin by crying out loud. They start by saying things like, “Well, if God is in this, I’m not sure where.” Or “I’m not saying, I’m mad at God, but . . .” Or, “It hasn’t shaken my faith, but . . .”

I simply nod and listen and let them tell me where they are and how they’re getting through their day. But sooner or later, if I give them enough space and they sense enough permission, a deeper lament, a deeper anger percolates up. “How could God let this happen?” “I don’t know if I can believe in a God who does things like this.” Or “How does God expect me to get through this?”

And, when I hear these words, when I can join them in this place of pain, of lament, of dereliction, I know we are finally getting down to it. I know we are finally “crying out loud.”

With these 55 psalms, the psalmists have left us a precious spiritual code that still blesses God’s people in at least three ways: First, they validate the spiritual practice of “crying out loud” by drawing us into solidarity with our spiritual ancestors. Second, they establish the impulse to “cry out loud” as a gift of grace and a form of faith rather than apostasy. And finally, they encourage our heartfelt cries as a doorway to a deeper faith and relationship with God.

First, these Psalms validate the spiritual practice of “crying out loud” by drawing us into solidarity with our spiritual ancestors. Think how tempting it must have been to our ancestors to clean up their spiritual legacy

by editing out all the times they were whiney, weak, angry, skeptical. It's astonishing to me that they didn't leave us a story that went something like this, "Oh ye who read our tale, know this: we who composed these psalms rejoiced in great blessings and suffered great afflictions, but our faith never weakened. We felt the power of God in our midst at all times and never wavered in our love for our creator."

It might have been tempting for them to have cleaned up their legacy, but let us literally thank God that they did not. The heroes of our faith gave full throated voice to their laments. They gave "crying out loud" a good name so that we might give heartfelt voice to our laments as well.

Second, these psalms establish the impulse to "cry out loud" as a gift of grace and a form of faith rather than apostasy. Now, I know it seems odd to lift up cries of despair and anger as forms of grace and faith. But we've got pretty good authority for doing so. You see, the essence of faith is relationship, trust, hope. We don't cry out and rage at gods we don't believe in. Nobody suffering affliction looks skyward and shakes their fist at Zeus.

As Paul wrote in Romans 8:15, "***When we cry, "Abba! Father!"¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷*** And as Paul wrote in Romans 8:26, "***Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.***"

Do you see how profound this is? I read Paul as saying that every heartfelt cry to God actually begins with grace. I read Paul as saying that the very yearning in our heart, the very hunger we feel for God, the very desire for God's consolation is itself a gracious gift from God. When we cry out to God, it's really God's Spirit moving through us and carrying our yearning back to God, "with sighs too deep for words." As the great 17th century mathematician and spiritualist Blaise Pascal put it, "Thou wouldst not seek him if thou hadst not already found him."

Or, if you prefer a more mundane illustration, Erma Bombeck writes of the time she came out of a supermarket with three kids in tow and pushing a cart when her toddler son got away from her. "Just outside the door, he ran toward a machine holding bubble gum in a glass dome. In a voice that shattered glass he shouted "Gimme! Gimme!" I told him I would give him what for if he didn't stop shouting and get in the car."

“As I physically tried to pry his body from around the bubble gum machine, he pulled the entire thing over. Glass and balls of bubble gum went all over the parking lot. We had now attracted a sizable crowd.

“I told him he would never see a cartoon again as long as he lived, and if he didn't control his temper, he was going to be making license plates for the state. He tried to stifle his sobs as he looked around at the now staring crowd. Then he did something that I was to remember for the rest of my life. In his helpless quest for comfort, he turned to the only one he trusted his emotions with - - me. He threw his arms around my knees and held on for dear life.

“I had humiliated him, chastised him, and berated him, but I was still all he had. That single incident defined my role. I was a major force in this child's life.”

When our affliction drives us running toward God, when we cry out loud with lament, dereliction or even anger, we are affirming that we are in relationship with God, that we have expectations of God, that God is a major force in our life. We are affirming faith.

Finally, these psalms encourage our heartfelt cries as a doorway to a deeper faith and relationship with God.

You see, it seems the life of faith is more like a journey than a one-time decision, and even a heartfelt cry of lament is a first step on that journey that can lead to more.

Thomas Merton put it this way: we puzzle over the mystery of why some people experience the presence of Christ and some do not, a mystery we assign to grace. But the real mystery is why some people hunger for, yearn for, desire the presence of Christ and some do not. We ought to call this hunger the grace of desire. For wherever this grace of desire is given, the hope in God's presence will eventually follow, just as it did in those 55 psalms.

When our suffering crushes our self-reliance and reduces us to what Bombeck called a helpless quest for comfort – when we cry out loud with all our hearts - we are following in the spiritual footsteps of the Psalmists. When we call out for God's comfort from the depth of our souls, we are taking our last stand on Christ's promise, “seek and you shall find, ask and it shall be answered, knock and it shall be open to you.”

So, my friends, if you are suffering this morning, here is the good news. If you have already experienced intimations of God's love, rejoice, for Christ's spirit is with you. But if instead of consolation all you have experienced is a deep, unanswered yearning for God, then take a measure of comfort that your very desire means that God has begun God's work within you. And even if, even if you have never experienced that yearning and only wish that you had, you might still give thanks, because even that wish is a first inkling of God's grace.

My friends, the good news is that God asks only that you start wherever you are on your path home to God. God will meet you right there to guide you the rest of the way. Cry out loud with whatever little mustard seed of desire you have and pray for a bit more. As a saint prayed 400 years ago, "O my God I do not love Thee, O my God I do not want to love Thee, But O my God I do want to want to love Thee." And that proved enough as a start.

Would you join me again in the prayer with which we started our service: "*O Lord our God, grant us grace to desire thee with our whole heart; that so desiring, we may seek, and seeking, find thee; and so finding thee, may love thee; and loving thee, may hate those sins from which thou hast redeemed us.*" **Amen.**

"That cries of pain like this (Psalm 102) are to be found in the Bible is one of the best-kept secrets of the Christian faith. We do not hear them much on Sunday mornings. Many regular churchgoers have no idea that laments like these exist, and so when the lives of Christians plummet to the bottom, they are deprived of any useful prayer.

A young priest visited one of her parishioners in the nursing home where he was living. He would neither speak to her nor look at her; he simply glared straight ahead. Her pastoral instincts were good, so she did not try to engage in chitchat, but went straight for the psalms. She read psalms of comfortBut the words of comfort elicited no response – just the same stony stare. So as a last resort, she began reading from the laments: 'I have become like a vulture in the wilderness, like an owl among the ruins . . . I eat ashes like bread and mix my drink with tears because of your indignation and anger, because you (God) have picked me up and tossed me aside. (Psalm 102:7, 10-11.)

At those words the stony face softened. For the first time, the man looked at his visitor and said, 'Finally, somebody who knows how I feel.'

*Somebody who knows how I feel – and isn't too polite to say it in God's face. That is the value of the lament psalms." Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* . "It seems that ancient Israel believed that eh kind of prayer in which we most need fluency is the loud groan and they have bequeathed us a lot of material on which to practice. Therefore it is troubling that most Christians are almost completely unfamiliar with the lament psalms." *Ibid*. "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break." William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. "I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;/That only men incredulous of despair,/Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air/Beat upward to God's throne in loud access/ of shrieking and reproach." Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Grief." "I am thinking of the same man I mentioned earlier, who lost his voice when his wife died. He says that while he is grateful to everyone who ministered to him, the people he remembers best are the ones who had no words, no answers. He calls them "the silent comforters," and suspects that they were truer mediators of God than the visitors who tried to staunch his grief with words." Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* at 71 (Cowley Publications: Boston: 1998.)*