

## Wednesday, October 18, 2017 - Day 290 – Ezekiel 39-40, Psalm 88, Revelation 11

There is a well-known story about Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp who decide to put God on trial for abandoning the Jewish people. The trial concludes with God's conviction. But the real surprise comes in what happens next. The very same prisoners, who are starving, freezing and dying of overwork and disease, then go from the trial into their evening prayers, offering praise to the same God who they just convicted.

Today's Psalm seems suited to that occasion. It is one of those classic psalms of despair or complaint. The Psalmist cries out to God, complaining of their misery and that they have been abandoned by the very God who was supposed to protect and care for them. Some of these psalms wind up with a happy ending. Psalm 88 does not. Its ends just as bleakly as it began.

Many of us have felt this way at one time or another. Abandoned. Alone. Desperate. Despairing. When we are confronted by a diagnosis, by unemployment, by a failing marriage or by the loss of someone we love... when one disaster seems to follow another and our prayers seem to go unheard... At such times, what can be most heart wrenching is not just the tragedy that confronts us but nagging question, "Where is God?" When we have prayed so hard, when we have done our best to lead a good life, how can this have happened? Why do our cries for help go unanswered? Could it be that God has abandoned us?

While this feeling is entirely understandable, it also reveals a flaw in how we think about our faith. Our belief in God and in God's love for us cannot be a matter of black/white, either/or thinking. We need to let go of the idea that if we are good... if we believe... then somehow God will spare us from the tragedy and horror of life. But as many of us already know, that's not how the real world works. Bad things happen to good people all the time and many times our cries for help seem to go unanswered. This brings us to the real question... does the fact that we unjustly suffer then invalidate our faith? Does our suffering mean that God has stopped caring, or worse, that God does not exist at all?

According to both the Psalmist and the people in the concentration camp who put God on trial the answer is an emphatic, "No!" Because their cry is not just a complaint... it is a prayer.

Even though God has seemingly left them to their fate, they still choose to pray. Abandoned by their friends and surrounded by enemies - they are utterly alone. It would have been easy to succumb to their pain and bitterness and renounce God. But they don't... they continued to pray - they continued to bring their cry and their complaint before God. For they understood something very important - that they were just as much in God's hands now in their suffering as they were in their times of joy. And that is what it means to have faith.

Faith has many benefits - it gives us perspective, strength and a sense meaning and purpose. But one thing that faith does not do for is to guarantee a happy ending - at least not in the traditional sense. Sometimes the hero dies. Sometimes the cavalry arrives too late to save the day, and sometimes it truly seems that evil and death win the round.

This is hard to reconcile with the popular understanding of religious belief. Some people see religion as a means of escaping the painful realities of life. Many Christians want to skip over Good Friday and go straight to Easter. But God is not found by detaching from life. On the contrary, God is found through embracing life... all of life, the good and the bad alike. And if we want our faith to hold up, if we want it to be a source of hope and comfort in the bad times, we cannot afford to gloss over suffering and pain. For God is present not only in our joys but also in our sorrows, not only in our life but also in our death. Having faith means being brave enough to hold the worst of life up to God, knowing full well that the answer we want is not guaranteed.

No matter desperately alone we may feel, our faith tells us that God will never truly abandon us. And so long as God is there, we know that pain and death will never be allowed to have the final word. Jesus was born so that God could share our life... Jesus suffered and died so that God might redeem our pain and our death.

Unless we are willing to endure the loneliness of the garden, unless we endure the agony of the cross and even brave the tomb itself, there is no possibility of Easter. And in those times when your own life is falling apart, when all you can see is darkness... all you can feel is misery and God seems to have left you to your fate... will you give up on God? Or will you cling stubbornly to your faith, lift up your head and cry out to the same God who has forsaken you?

By The Rev. Kirk Berlenbach