

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
June 23, 2019
Psalm 69: 1-16
Pentecost 2 NL 2019

“The water is up to my neck!” “I’m sinking.” “I’m drowning.” “I’m in way over my head.”

All these years later, we use words strikingly similar to the Psalmist when we’re overwhelmed—when we face a crisis that is out of our control. Like the psalmist, we face these moments as individuals and we also face them as a community. Psalm 69 is one of the psalms of lament—it’s a cry out to God for help. A cry that lays out just how bad things are.

I know there are people who—for their own health and survival—have stopped listening to the news. I completely understand that. But I have been praying to God to keep me paying attention—I understand that it is my responsibility as pastor—as a spiritual leader—to know what is going on and to think and pray about what it means to live as people who follow Jesus in this time.

When Jesus came into Jerusalem just before his arrest and execution, he lamented. He wept over the city saying, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” If Jesus were walking here today, he would have the same word for us, “Washington, Washington, if you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

Jesus would lament with us this week. And, in the power of the Holy Spirit, *today*, Jesus laments *through* us. There are many terrible things happening but three brought me to the point of tears and crying out to God the same way that the psalmist does.

The first was how close we have come to war with Iran. I don’t know what stopped the President from sending that bomber but I can’t help but believe it was the prayers of many.

The second part of my lament is the story that has come from the detention center in Clint, Texas where children are being held in what inspectors have called the worst conditions they have ever seen. It’s heartbreaking—the children—some of them infants and toddlers—are dirty, neglected, malnourished, and sick. There are children taking care of children.

When lawyers went to court to protest these conditions, the government lawyers—our government lawyers—argued that they weren’t required to provide diapers, toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, towels or a night’s sleep. The judges were incredulous. All of these children have family in the U.S. they could be released to. Six children have already died in detention. We cry out to God--how can this be happening?

And even though this is happening in Texas—the heart of the problem is in Washington. The inspectors talked to the border patrol agents in the detention facility and none of them believe that these children should be detained.

The third part of my lament is the deportation raids against families that were scheduled for today—and thankfully delayed 2 weeks. These are not targeted deportations of dangerous criminals—these are families. One of May’s friends who is a U.S. citizen has family members

who are not. She posted information on Facebook about what to do if ICE agents come to your door. People all around us are living in so much fear.

I know that these are only a few of the things we lament. These and many more things cause us to cry out with the psalmist, “I have come into deep waters, and the torrent washes over me. I have grown weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes are worn out from looking for my God.”

But even as we cry out to God—even as we tell God just how forsaken we feel—we are actually speaking our faith. We are acknowledging our dependence on God. “In your great mercy, O God, answer me with your unfailing help.”

And we can count on God to answer because God is a God who responds. “Answer me, O Lord, for your love is kind; in your great compassion, turn to me.”

Jesus speaks of this compassionate, responsive God when he urges his followers, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

I think it is sometimes hard to see that God is answering because God’s answer is most often mediated through people—and sometimes—maybe a lot of times we don’t even notice that God is answering through us.

But I think our eyes get sharper when we’re in this time of lament. Maybe all those tears help clear out our eyes and shift our gaze. When we’re no longer consumed with doing it all ourselves—because we know we can’t—*then* we can see what God is doing.

The week after Easter I was able to go to Puerto Rico for the Bishop’s Convocation. Pastors from the Metro DC Synod, from the Maryland-Deleware Synod and from the Caribbean Synod and our bishops all came together. The agenda was *not* rebuilding. We were there to share about our ministry—about the struggles we face—about the joys we experience. The agenda was to support each other.

I was expecting to hear stories about how devastating the hurricane was—and how hard it still is 1 ½ years later. I did hear that. But I heard another story that I was not expecting to hear. It was a story of how much more united the congregations were—how they were stronger spiritually—how energized they were—and how they turned outward and were the driving force in helping their communities.

On the Sunday after Easter, I preached at Iglesia Luterana de la Reconciliacion—Reconciliation Lutheran Church. They told me that their town—Leavittown—had never flooded before. But with Maria massive amounts of water came down the mountains behind them and the storm surge came from the ocean in front of them. Like the words of Psalm 69, the waters rose up to their necks and even when the waters receded there was so much mud—so much mire.

But the people of Reconciliation Lutheran Church did not stay stuck in their despair. They were so grateful that no one in their community was killed. The hurricane came on a Wednesday—and they gathered for worship on Sunday—5 days later. Like us, the church has a food pantry—and in the week following the hurricane, they collected the most food they had ever collected—at a time when it would have been natural to hang on to the food you have, church members shared generously.

The whole community was without power for 5 months. The church got a generator from Lutheran Disaster Response. They used it to power a fridge. And that fridge served the whole community—it was where everyone could keep their medicines that needed to be refrigerated.

The pastor says that he'd never seen anything like the response of the people—and that they were much stronger as a church. I don't know what they were like before but I can attest to how alive they are now.

As I think about our connection to this psalm of lament, I don't want to falsely equate the devastation of Hurricane Maria with the challenging financial situation we are facing as a congregation. We've talked some about it and you'll hear more in the congregational meeting. We have a large deficit in the budget we are proposing. Many hardworking leaders have been going over our budget—or as I like to think of it, “our mission spending plan”—cutting back wherever possible. And, there are new ways of generating income through the use of our buildings that we want and need to keep working on.

Especially for the people at the center of this, there have been some real moments of feeling like the waters have risen up to our necks—and that we can't get a foothold to get out. But as hard as it is, this is a moment when it becomes clear that we can't do this ourselves—that we need God's help. Even as we do our very best to figure out a way out, we depend on God to hold us like a swimming noodle as we spend some time in these deep waters.

And we know that God *will*-- because that is just who God is.

A number of years ago, David Blakemore said some words that I have never forgotten. I don't remember the specifics of the situation but it was about the continued existence—the long-term survival—of the church. David said, “When it comes right down to it, I know that the existence of the church is not in my hands. This is Christ's church.”

That is the truth that our laments ultimately come to. If you read the rest of Psalm 69, you'll get there, too. It's in the final verses: “Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own who are in bonds. Let heaven and earth praise the Lord, the seas and everything that moves in them.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.