



Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

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Preaching: Jim Best

Psalm 130

“I’m Sorry”

It is funny how our lives change, isn't it? About six weeks ago I had a long talk with Gina Armstrong about Heifer Project and how we could work it into the worship service. I looked at the Ezekiel reading and knew that it was an easy tie in. I was all set to preach on how we are meant to be the breath of the Lord, sending life out into the world...and then Valentines Day came along, and the tragedy at NIU. And everything changed.

In deciding on what readings to use for worship, this church follows the lectionary. The lectionary is a three year plan giving four readings for each week; an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a story from the Gospels, and something from the letters. The idea is that by following this plan, a church will hit all the main points of the Bible in the three years.

And so, as I was beginning to finalize my plans for this service, time and again I found the Holy Spirit drawing me away from the Ezekiel text, and back to the

Psalm for this week. Psalm 130; a Psalm of anguish and guilt, but most of all, a Psalm of forgiveness.

Today's Psalm starts with a cry from the depths, an analogy for the chaos of the world. The Psalmist is saying that his life is in turmoil and that in the midst of his troubles, in the midst of all he has done wrong, he is Sorry, and he is waiting for the Lord to come and help him and to forgive him. The Psalmist never once doubts that the Lord will forgive him. He says "Lord Hear my Voice!" He says "I am sorry and I need you Lord. I know I have done wrong, but I also know that you will forgive me." Forgiveness...a much used theme in the Bible.

As most of you know, my niece Ryanne was one of those who died at NIU a few weeks ago. And I know that there are all these stages that people are supposed to go through when they experience a loss like this. And while I saw members of my family in those various stages, for those first days, all I felt was sadness. I didn't hate the gunman...I didn't know him, and he was gone anyway. I didn't hate the press for calling the house and coming by looking for interviews or pictures, they were just people doing their jobs.

But then, Saturday night, I get the call telling me that members of the Westboro Baptist church were planning to protest across the street from the Memorial Service. Their reasons; to let the world know that what happened to Ryanne and the others was God's punishment for the sins of the world. I very quickly moved into the stage of anger at that point. When one person asked me how I was feeling, I replied that I wanted a pillar of God's own fire to descend upon them and scour them from the face of the earth! I think you could say that I wasn't feeling very forgiving at that time. No, I was more like the Psalmist who wrote Psalm 137 verse 8 where it says "O Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!"

So Monday morning came, the day of the memorial service, and as we drove up to the church, we saw a literal Wall of snow plows along fourth avenue, blocking the park from the church. The mayor had decided that that might be a good place to park them for the day. It seems he had gotten a call from a member of this congregation, who had asked him to help out.

Then people began arriving and showing their support and sharing their condolences. Church members came and helped direct traffic within the church letting people know where to hang up coats and making coffee and greeting people at the doors, and soon Baker Hall and the hallways of this church were packed with people. Hundreds of people there to remember Ryanne and to let us know that they were praying for us.

Midway through the visitation, I did the thing we had been telling everyone not to do. I went outside and looked at the protestors. And the anger all melted away. Standing there in a tiny roped off square, surrounded by police in full riot gear, were three lone protestors, huddled against the cold with their hand drawn signs.

Christianity is not easy, is it? If we are to truly follow Christ's teachings, then there is an awful lot expected of us; Feed the hungry, tend to the sick, aid the poor, and spread the gospel, the good news of the Lord. In short, to breathe that breath of life out into the world. And on top of all this, we are told to forgive our enemies.

Jesus was all about forgiveness, wasn't he? He forgave the sins of the lepers and lame. He told parables of forgiveness such as the Prodigal son, and he taught us to pray. Here at this church we lift up our voices in the Lord's Prayer every week. Every single week we say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." But when was the last time you thought about what those words really mean?

As a child, when I heard that prayer, I used to picture people cutting across other people's yards, even though there were no trespassing signs. But that's not the kind of trespassing we're talking about here, is it? There are many different versions of the Lord's Prayer. Some churches say "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" and others say "Forgive us our Sins as we forgive those who sin against us." And that is really what the prayer is talking about. We are asking God for forgiveness for the wrongs we have done. But I think the important thing to remember here is the second part of that sentence "...AS we forgive those who trespass against us." In the book of Matthew, the writer phrases the prayer differently. He says, "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" When you say it like that, the forgiveness of others suddenly becomes a whole lot more important, doesn't it?

As I stood beside the snowplows that day, and I looked at the small, pitifully cold group of people protesting in the park, I realized that I didn't hate them anymore. I felt sorry for them. I felt sorry that they saw God as this destructive, vengeful, tyrant that would destroy His children to punish the sins of the world. I felt sorry for them, and while there was still a little anger left in me, I still forgave them, because I believe that is what the Bible tells us we should do.

And this would be a good place to end the sermon, wouldn't it? A sad story followed by an uplifting conclusion...but the story, doesn't really end there. I had

a really hard time writing this sermon, more than any other I've worked on over the years, and not just because of the immediacy of the subject matter. I had a hard time because I started thinking about all the little trespasses. All the little slights and insults, real or imagined, that we carry within ourselves. We all have them, these things that are so much a part of who we are and how we see the world. Maybe it is a boss or co-worker who put you down one time when you didn't deserve it. Maybe it is a childhood memory of a bully on the playground, or cruel words said in a school hallway that still play through your mind some days. Or maybe it is something more immediate, but no less troubling. All the little hurts that we carry with us and continue to dredge up, like picking at the scab on a scratch that never heals.

As I was preparing this sermon, I realized that in many ways, the big hurts, the big offenses are easier to forgive than these little ones, because we are often unaware that we need to offer forgiveness. But the prayer does not say Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the really big trespasses against us. Jesus wants us to forgive All trespasses, no matter how small. And that is a much more daunting task, because for the most part, these little hurts are not caused by enemies, but by people we see everyday. William Blake once said that it is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend, and I think he is right. For as I prepared to write this sermon, I realized that while I was able to let go of the big things without a problem, the little ones required much more effort. For while it was easy for me to forgive the protestors that I had never met, it was much harder for me to forgive the inconsiderate actions of a friend.

Right now, we are in the season of Lent; a season of reflection and renewal, and a season of repentance. Lent is the perfect time to be talking about forgiveness. It is a time for us to say, "I'm Sorry" to God, "please forgive me" as the Psalmist does today, but I think it also needs to be a time when we forgive others. A time when we reverse the prayer and say "Let us forgive those who have trespassed against us, just as you have forgiven all our trespasses." For Lent is the season building from Ash Wednesday to Easter; building to the final celebration of Christ's triumph over sin and death.

So as I stand here, delivering this sermon, the question you may be asking is, have I succeeded? Have I succeeded in forgiving all the trespasses in my life, big and small, real and imagined? And I'm sorry, but the answer is no. Like the Psalmist, I am still caught in the depths of life, crying out to the Lord. But like the Psalmist, I know that despite my iniquities...despite the iniquities of the world...God still loves us, and we are all forgiven.

Amen.