

“A Lenten Lament”

Lent 1B-18

Psalm 25: 1-10

Mark 1: 9-15

2/18/18

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I share before I begin that this morning’s sermon will become a bit... different. Different... not in a good way or bad way. But different in, well, a more visceral sort of way. And I’ll repeat this caveat before we get to the more visceral part... but I share it here and now, as there may be parts of the message—the second half, in particular—that could be hard to hear. For in the second half, I’ll speak about Parkland, FL, and the epidemic of gun violence in our culture.

But even before we go there—to that specific place—we need to first acknowledge the uncomfortable place Lent puts before us this morning. It’s where our worship always places us on the first Sunday of Lent... with Jesus in the wilderness. His 40 days in the wilderness, mirroring the 40 years Israel spent wandering from Egypt to Canaan. 40 days in which Jesus was stripped of all the earthly identities and securities he’d ever known, as he was forced to come face to face with who and whose he was.

It’s not easy—the wilderness. It’s a place of questioning... of wrestling... of crying out to God for answers that don’t often seem to come. It’s territory that forces us to face feelings, questions, insecurities we haven’t faced before.

Which is why no one *wants* to go there. No one actually seeks the wilderness out. But we find ourselves there from time to time. Upon traumatic news we never saw coming... Upon the loss of a loved one that sends us reeling... Upon a life-shaking event that’s left us questioning things we hadn’t pondered before.

So in order to ensure Jesus could understand the depth of our struggles there, the Spirit didn’t just send Jesus to the wilderness after his baptism... Mark says the Spirit *drove* him there. Where he was tested... and tempted. Tempted in many ways, I’m sure... but ultimately, I think there are two primary strands of temptation.

The first strand of temptation is to assume the role of God. To believe that life is up to us... that it’s up to no one other than me, myself, and I to secure my well-being. It’s why we save our money... thinking money leads to security. It’s why we buy guns... thinking guns lead to security. It’s why we buy insurance... thinking insurance is at least a fail-safe if the first two don’t work. This temptation is also why we so often abandon the way God has shown us in Jesus Christ for different pursuits we think will lead us to fullness of life. It’s the temptation not to trust in God, but to trust only in what we can accomplish for ourselves.

The second strand of temptation, conversely, is the opposite side of the coin—to assume we’re powerless to affect real change in our lives or the lives of those around us. This is the temptation to believe that nothing we do will make a difference... so why try? Better to just resign ourselves to defeat and throw up our hands. It’s the temptation of apathy and indifference.

Now, to be clear, Mark doesn't tell us exactly how Jesus was tempted, but the other gospels suggest his temptations were along these lines.

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Our first lesson, meanwhile, is a different but still very traditional Lenten lesson. It's a psalm of lament. It's a prayer to God, in which the psalmist is crying out for help. Beseeching God's presence... searching for God's answer to prayer.

Now... Psalms of Lament can be communal. The book of Psalms contain prayers of lament to God not simply on behalf of one person, but an entire community. There are even national laments, in which the nation of Israel cries out to God in prayer.

But Psalm 25 is a lament from an individual. We don't know the specific details of what's wrong, but we can gather that the psalmist knows some significant pains. The pain of shame. The pain of loss. The pain of confusion. The pain of deep insecurity. So the psalmist cries out to God, asking for the world to make sense again, begging God to ensure the world might have some measure of fairness and justice to it. The psalmist asks why can't only good things to happen to good people and bad things to bad people. It's a plea... and a cry... for understanding in the midst of pain.

Frankly, I can think of no better lessons for us this morning than these two. As Jesus' own time in the wilderness demonstrates, the Christian faith is no escape from the violent ills of this world. We know this, of course, having seen what's been emanating from Parkland, Florida, on the heels of Marshall County Kentucky, on the heels of Las Vegas, Nevada, on the heels of so many other others. So this Lenten wilderness... it is the place for us to voice our pain and ask our questions and wrestle with our faith.

Just as the lament—the prayer of lament—is the vehicle for us voice our pains, to lob our complaints, to beseech God's presence in a world we struggle to make sense of right now.

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So this morning, for the remainder of my time in this pulpit today, what I share with you is precisely my prayer of lament. My personal, and be forewarned, at points visceral prayer of lament. Please note, the language will be... visceral.

I also share up front, there may be parts of my prayer you disagree with... maybe even strongly disagree with. And that's okay. You don't have to agree with what I'm about to pray. Good people of faith can disagree.

But there may also be parts of my prayer you do agree with... parts that resonate with you. If so, perhaps some of this prayer might prove to be part of your prayer, as well. That's something wholly possible when it comes to prayer, you know. One person's prayer can become another's.

Regardless, I share all of that because, from here on out, I don't really have a sermon for you. What I have... is simply prayer... and lament.

O God of Parkland, FL... God of Marshall County, KY,
 God of Las Vegas, NV... God of Baltimore, MD,
 God of Towson Presbyterian Church,

It happened again. It happened *again*. And you know it. I know, even now, you grieve it, as you tend to all those crying out amid the pain of children taken. Innocence stolen. Caregivers killed. Unspeakable violence hurled against your people in places we assumed they'd be safe.

For how much longer will this go on, Lord? How many more need to die? How many more parents and siblings and children will be forced to lose a loved one? For how much longer will this go on, O God? For how much longer will we worship at the god of guns and violence? Answer me! Speak up! I want to know! How much longer? 'Cause I'm sick of seeing it. I'm sick of reading about it. I'm sick of looking at the faces of terrified children running from their schools. And I'm even sicker of seeing the photographs of children who've been taken from this world too soon... I'm sick of seeing the unspeakable pain of parents weeping uncontrollably amid unfathomable loss. And I'm sick of feeling completely and utterly helpless to do a damn thing about any and all of it. I'm sick of it all, O God.

And I'm disgusted that in these moments of horror and pain and anger that I also feel a sense of gratitude that it didn't happen at one of my kid's school. How selfish is that, O God? How inward is my perspective? How confused is my heart—repulsed to tears at the violence and yet shakingly thankful my children are safe? Speak to me, Lord, for I can't make sense of it. Not one horrific bit of it.

So hear me, God, and feel my anger. Feel my fury that this has happened... yet... again. As if anyone didn't expect it to happen again when we keep doing nothing about it. Hear my anger at a society that keeps allowing this to happen. Hear my anger at a government that refuses to take culpability amid this problem while bowing at the feet of special interests. Hear my indignation at a culture that stigmatizes mental illness to the point that people are afraid to talk about it or deal with it transparently. Hear my rage at a culture that teaches weaponry leads to safety. That you solve problems by having more weapons than the next guy. Hear my anger at all of it.

And particularly, O God, I ask that you hear my anger at myself. Hear me voice my anger at myself for my own culpability in this problem.

You know me, Lord. You know the thoughts I think... the words I say... the actions I take. So tell me, God— what have you seen me do to reduce gun violence in my own community, let alone this nation? Where have I spoken out, Lord? Where have I acted to mitigate the systemic issues that lead to violent crimes in the first place? What have I done in pursuit of a better education system in Baltimore City? What have I done to alleviate the systemic poverty that creates conditions ripe for violence?

You know and I know, God, that I have not done enough. Not nearly enough.

So I lay myself bare before you, asking that you look upon me with justice and mercy. My guilt is before you—how I could espouse to care about this issue and yet, before this past Wednesday, have no idea that there had already been 17—17 shootings on school premises in 2018 alone. And it was only two weeks ago that I learned that Baltimore had the 4th most violent crimes among American cities in 2017.

How hypocritical, O God... how hypocritical for me to say I care about something, but then do so little about it. How pointless are my words of prayers when I don't back them up in the way I live and the actions I take.

So hear me, God of justice, as I lay myself at your feet, pleading for your mercy... as well as the strength of your Spirit. And hear me as I ask for your help as I grow in the conviction that I can and must do something about this...

Be with me, Lord, and all those who're participating in the upcoming seminar in two weeks at NEXT church, where we'll spend at least some time exploring ways of preventing gun violence in our communities. Let that be a place where wisdom is shared, and courses of action are plotted that will make a difference.

And help me, dear Lord, be one who does not condemn those who disagree with me. But rather, may I learn how to build better bridges of understanding with those who hold a different understanding on the origins of gun violence. That even if we disagree on some things, we might still plot a path towards tomorrows where school shootings are a thing of the past, and mass shootings are only read about in the history books.

For while I feel angry and guilty... while I grieve amid this national trauma, O God, I also cling to the hope I have in you... and your promise to never abandon this broken world... wherever we might find ourselves within it. And I cling—I cling to the peace of knowing you are already in the midst of Parkland—that you were in that school shedding tears with those who suffered, and embracing the departed into the arms of your salvation as soon as they passed. And I trust that you will continue to work your grace into those who will continue to suffer from the trauma of gun violence... in Parkland, Marshall County, KY, Las Vegas, and every other place innocent lives have been innocently gunned down. Be with them all, and all those tending to them.

And hear me, Great God, as I find the faith to voice my hope, my trust, my conviction that we—your children—your body of Christ in the world today—will be not just a voice, not just a vessel, but a *force* for peace in this world. That we might be a people who not only speak peace with our words, but create communities of peace on our way to establishing your kingdom of peace. Peace where weaponry is laid down and tools for harvesting are picked up. Peace where the shackles of abuse, and poverty, and illness are dealt with openly and honestly, without fear or judgment. Peace where people who disagree on the government's role in all of this can unite in the pursuit of something bigger than any one of us—the common good.

Hear me, God. Answer me. And be with each and every soul who seeks to pursue the peace of your kingdom, and the grace of Jesus Christ. My Lord. My Savior. I thank you for him. And I plead for his kingdom here and now and always. Amen.