

## Jeff's Reflection – Sept 19, 2021

During Covid, we have listened to 'public' lectures or presentations through an online media platform. Sometimes the organizers of online talks invite viewers to electronically submit questions in advance, or invite listeners, during the talk, to post comments or questions in the 'chat box'.

I invite us to imagine that we are listening to an online talk by God. What are some of the questions or comments we might submit to God?

Maybe:

-Thank you for the amazing sunset I saw yesterday!

-Thank you for giving us senses of humour.

-Why did you create mosquitoes?

-How long will it be before we can live like we used to live?

-Why do people suffer? Why do I have cancer?

-Please get rid of the bully at my school.

-Help me! Help me!

In the Bible, the closest thing we get to a God 'chat box' is the book of Psalms.

The writers of the Psalms praise God, challenge God, and plead with God.

The writers express a range of emotions and experiences.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has described the Psalms as 'the working theological tradition of Israel.'

I take that to mean that the writers of the Psalms don't edit their comments to be theologically correct. They don't try to be 'nice' or 'polite'. They aren't trying to recite a sanctioned creed.

Many Psalms are written by people in crisis - a time when all their good beliefs come up against suffering and loss.

For the Psalmists, theology – belief in and awareness of God – is a work in progress and the psalms they write give us a chance to listen in as they are trying to work out their theology, their relationship to God.

The Psalmists write in the midst of the daily mess and daily wonder of life. They write as they attempt to make sense of what is going on.

I think that is why the Psalms remain so powerful and helpful and relevant to us today. Our contexts are not the same as those of the writers, our culture, our world, our daily lives are not the same as the writer's. What we share, what we do have in common, is our humanity – we are human creatures who react with fear, and anger; with gratitude and graciousness; we are human creatures who are trying to live with other human creatures while also trying to live as part of a world created by God.

So the writer of 54, addressing God, doesn't try to be cautious or diplomatic. The writer speaks unedited words from a place of need:

The Psalm begins, "Save me, God!"

We don't have to know why the Psalmist says 'Save me, God' because many of us have been or have had loved ones in a place where they felt that someone had to save them; a place from which we say, "I can't take this any longer. I see no way out of this, I am at the end of my resources, at the end of my strength – I can't cope! – SAVE ME!

But the writer does give a glimpse of the experience driving this psalm. The writer says, "Save me, O God, by Your name, and vindicate me by Your might."

Save me by your name – I need 'You' God. I need someone of authority, someone everyone else has to listen to, has to obey, I need someone important, - I need someone with a name that means something.

Save me by Your name and vindicate me – vindicate – show, prove, demonstrate that I am right, that those who are against me are wrong – justify me, stop the accusations and inuendoes and establish that I am innocent, that I deserve better.

Again, without being specific, the writer talks of 'the insolent' who have risen against him/her, of the ruthless who drain all the joy out of the writer's life, of the people who are making it difficult to endure life- of these people who are 'evil.'

Whatever the context and details, the Psalmist feels attacked, degraded, discouraged; feels that her/his reputation and life have been deliberately abused.

So the Psalmist turns to God – surely God knows how unfair and wrong this is: when no one else can do anything to change things, surely God is "the upholder of my life." God will protect me.

God will be faithful, so, says the Psalmist: "in your faithfulness, God, put an end to them." The writer wants God to stop the insolent ones; to end whatever power and influence they have; to give the Psalmist back a life free of troubles and fear.

Save me, God.

The Psalm doesn't tell us how God responds, or whether God responds. What the Psalm gives us is the writer's cry for help, the writer's expression of hope, and the writer's promise to God.

Says the writer, "With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you, God, I will give thanks to Your name, for your name is good."

The writer moves from asking to presuming – I will sacrifice, make an offering, donate to your favourite charity God, and I will tell everyone how great You are, God - after You have done what I ask, what I expect."

After God has acted, the writer says then, "I will be delivered from every trouble, and my eye will look with triumph on my enemy,"

The last part of that comment, looking with triumph on my enemy, conjures for me the image of a boxer, standing over the body of their opponent as they lay on the canvas, triumphant, raising their arms in the air.

Looking with triumph on your enemy may not be the most humble of acts, but it is one that, again, many of us can relate to – we don't only want to be free of the people who are mean to us, we want, just once, to stand over them and have them know that that we won in the end.

Psalm 54 is a one-way conversation. We don't know if the Psalmist's request was answered or if the Psalmist ever got to look with triumph on the insolent ones. We don't know how God responded, or if God responded.

In that way, the Psalms remind us that today we are still working out, still creating and re-creating the theological tradition of the church.

The Psalms encourage us to be honest with ourselves and with God as we work out our theology. There may be times for politeness and statements of belief, but there are times when all we have is a deep cry to God to somehow save us.

Today we have a reading from the Gospel of Mark to place alongside Psalm 54. A lectionary committee selected passages of scripture to be read during worship services on this Sunday. The passage from Mark doesn't seem to me to easily connect to Psalm 54.

This is the second story in Mark's gospel of Jesus feeding thousands of people at one sitting!

Previously Jesus had fed over 5000 people in a Jewish region near Nazareth. The people who were fed were Jews. You may recall that a couple of Sundays ago we considered the story of Jesus being confronted by a Gentile woman who challenged him to bring healing and hope not solely to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. After that

meeting, Jesus and his disciples entered land inhabited primarily by Gentiles.

In today's story Jesus feeds at least 4,000 Gentiles. Jesus seemed to agree with Walter Brueggemann in understanding that our theology is a work in progress, and God will lead us into new understandings and new practices and a wider sharing of God's love.

The story says that Jesus 'again' sees a great crowd without anything to eat. He tells his disciples that he feels compassion for the people who are hungry, so they should feed them.

The disciples, who, in Mark's Gospel, only a few chapters earlier, witnessed the feeding of the 5000, apparently don't expect that to happen again. They say, "How can we feed them when we have only seven loaves of bread?"

Maybe that's not so different from us – sometimes we experience there being more resources available than we expected, we experience what seems to be a dead end and discover an unmapped pathway; we have run out of options, and an unexpected gift comes our way. Like Jesus' first disciples, we may find ourselves thinking, "Yes, God does offer miracles sometimes, but we're not sure that God makes a habit of doing so. We're not sure we should rely on the unexpected."

After receiving the bread and a few fish, Jesus performs four actions – he takes/receives the offering, he blesses, he breaks the bread and he gives it to be distributed.

These are the actions the Christian church practices during communion – take, bless, break and give.

A familiar four actions, and perhaps actions offering an insight to our relationship with God. The blessing is given, but it is followed by brokenness. Perhaps sometimes the blessing we receive is a blessing that invites us into our own brokenness, our own sense of powerlessness, of unravelling, of needing to be saved: invites us into a place, where, like the Psalmist, we pray, "Save me – I want out of the place I am in."

Jesus, after blessing, breaking and sharing bread and cup with his disciples at the time of the last Super, would go to a garden, aware that his enemies were closing upon him, that a cross was looming before him, and he would pray, "God, remove this cup from me, I want to be saved, to be out of this place that is approaching...but, not my will, not what I want God, but Your will, whatever happens, God, I trust that You will be with me, that I will remain in Your love.

For me, these two passages speak of both our humanity and our faith. The Psalm affirms us in naming our pain, our fear, our lostness; affirms us in calling to God to save us.

The Gospel reading affirms that our experiences of life, and our experiences of God, are experiences of differing and yet somehow related actions – we will experience receiving, AND we will experience blessing AND we will experience breaking and brokenness, AND we will receive being given, poured out; we will sometimes discover that it is the sharing of our places of brokenness that provides strength to others who hunger.

I don't think faith is easy. Faith asks us to trust God, even when it seems to be more logical and practical to place our trust somewhere else.

Faith says that we can discover God not only in sunsets, but in parched earth. That we can discover God not only in flower gardens, but in cemeteries; that we can find God not only in a church sanctuary, but in a basement laundry room.

Prayer is our chat room with God, which we enter not to manipulate God into giving us what we want, but to reacquaint ourselves with the Holy Mystery that is God, with God who hears our cries and whose love somehow embraces us in our times of receiving, of blessing, of breaking and of being given.

We are not alone. We live in the Holy Mystery of God's love and grace.

AMEN