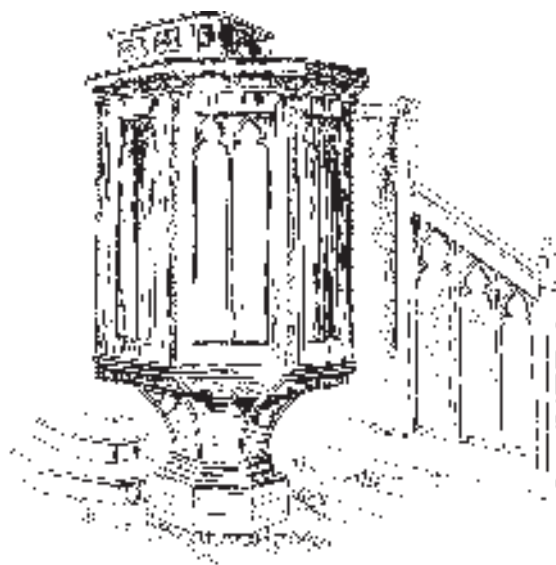


April 18, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Crying Out to God

by The Reverend Kay Davis-Dudding

Psalm 80: 1-7

Disney World was our honeymoon destination almost 10 years ago. This was in a large part because Fred and I love riding roller coasters. I know it's not for everyone, but we rode every coaster there, and in the front seat whenever we could.

Why? I guess it's likely a perversion of the pleasure-pain principle. We are drawn to them even as they incite fear, get our hearts racing, turn our knuckles white, and toss us around mercilessly. When the ride would be over, we would jump right back in line.

It's the ups and downs that thrill us, that keep us going back. Ups and downs. What about ups and downs, not only on coasters, but in our lives? And where does God fit into them?

Let us pray. With you alone O God are wisdom, truth and light. You are wisdom in a world full of folly, truth in a world content to play fast and loose, and light in the darkness we sense around us. Silence within me all voices but your own, and speak to us, we pray, the very word we need to hear. And when we leave today, give us, we pray the grace to respond as your glad and faithful people. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

"It's been a rough year," Molly thought. It all started with Dad. He'd been forgetting things more and more frequently lately, and that was worrisome given his age, but Molly had hoped for the best. After all, she knew that there were a number of reasons for memory loss other than the one she most feared. But just to be sure, she'd had him checked out in the hospital.

After several days of testing, the doctor had given her the news. Molly remembered those life-shattering words as if they'd been spoken yesterday, "While we can't be a hundred percent sure a person has the disease, we've ruled out enough other possibilities that we believe your father has Alzheimer's."

Molly's mom's bones were getting brittle, so it wasn't much of a surprise when she broke her hip. And although Molly hated to do it, she'd brought up the subject to her parents about going into an assisted living facility. Her mother cried. Her father yelled. And her siblings were no help at all. "I can't believe you'd put Mom and Dad into one of those places. Can't you help them a little more so they can stay at home?"

"How did I get stuck with all of this?" Molly wondered, "Caring for Mom and Dad, and for Bob's mother until she died, for that matter."

It's not like her plate wasn't already full. What more could go wrong? Her son's marriage was on the rocks. Her daughter had been one of the first folks laid off by her company. And Molly's husband, Bob, only five years from retirement in his firm, had heard rumors that he might be laid off too. And it was simply getting more and more difficult to live the way they had for years.

Molly looked up at the plaque a friend had given her. It was hanging on the kitchen wall. She laughed bitterly as she read out loud, "God won't ever give us more than we can handle—with his help," it said. Molly took the plaque off the wall and threw it across the room. As it sailed through the air, her bitter laughter turned to tears. The plaque cracked, and as the tears streaked down her face, Molly sobbed, "It is more than I can handle. God, when are you going to help?"

Molly's story is that of a woman "fed up." Fed up with what our psalm, in its bitter, ironic poetry calls "the bread of tears." The community which brought Psalm 80 to words knew what it meant to cry out to God, "When are you going to help?" They knew what it meant to be fed up. And they even said it in worship: "How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure."

Put in the context of Israel's history, "You have fed them with the bread of tears . . ." is really a striking poetic turn of a phrase. Striking because the people of God also knew what it meant to be filled with *good* things. They had been given manna in the wilderness. Their priests had eaten the Bread of Presence. They could remember a time when everything was fine, and right, and good—when people ate, and were satisfied.

But things were different now, in a northern kingdom that was under threat of siege. Things were different in an Israel that had become a laughingstock to its neighbors. And things were different for the nation in exile. Now their tears had become their *only* food and drink.

Of course that's what grief does to us, too. Everything is happy, things are going smoothly, and then, a loved one dies and we become so consumed by grief that we are even unable to eat. Nothing sounds good. Nothing appeals to us, and we realize that life will never be the same again. And, for a time, our tears alone sustain us – they function, in some mysterious way to keep us going.

Sometimes we eat of the bread of tears, when an image of ourselves, or the way things might have been for us...if only... dies. After all, we are the sort of people who expect to do well in new situations, the sort of people who work to be great parents, to have satisfying careers and wonderful marriages. We are, we think, the sort of people who can handle anything and everything that comes our way.

But then, something happens, and our image of ourselves, or of God, or the world around us, changes. What we expect of life, isn't what we get. And we are left, with the bread of tears. Many of us have, and many of us will, one day, eat of that bread.

Manna tastes much better!

So what do we do with the bread of tears? Of course, tears are a gift of God, they can be nourishing in their own way, and they deserve more of a place in the church. Often following the death of a loved one, people will tell me they just can't come to church. They know they will just sit and cry, and that makes them uncomfortable. You know, it is alright to cry when something sad happens to you—and what better place to let it out than in church, among understanding brothers and sisters in Christ?

What do we do when we're fed up? When we expected manna, and got tears? When our roller coaster goes through its ups and downs? When it all seems more than we can handle, with or without God's help? What do we do when we're fed up with the bread of tears?

The Psalms teach us to cry out, to complain, and to get angry with God. A full third of the Psalter is devoted to lament psalms: psalms which cry out to God. Even Psalm 80, which ascribes Israel's fate to God's wrath, is bold to complain. The community doesn't deny its fault, but it does let God know it is fed up with the bread of tears. And through it all, the people of God remain in faithful communication with God.

What if the church cried out that way, telling God we are fed up with the bread of tears? I wonder how many small, dying churches which were once thriving and now are struggling for survival, have had their fill of the bread of tears? "God, our church home is slowly dying. It is not the place it once was. We expected something different when you called us together in Christ's name."

And what of the church universal? We who are called to witness for Christ, and yet find ourselves plagued by the conflict and division we bring upon ourselves? When our efforts do get off the ground, they so often seem inconsequential in the face of unjust social structures. Is that not to eat of the bread of tears? Why not cry out?

We proclaim Christ's victory, and our witness is laughable. We claim God's grace, and can't quite seem to lay hold of it in our lives. We give our love to people, and lose them. We want everything to be fine, our own "fine" of course, and things fall apart. We count on success, and we fail. We expect manna, and get the bread of tears.

How really fortunate it is for us that Jesus Christ did not meet the expectations of the people of his day. They expected an earthly King. He came as a suffering Servant. They didn't expect God in human flesh. He came as the Incarnate One. In Christ, God identified with our humanness, our loss and suffering, our dashed expectations. We do *not* stand alone.

The lament Psalms, those communal and individual cries to God in the wake of dashed expectations, share a common structure. They most often begin with complaint, and end with thanksgiving. But there is a gap between the two. We account for the gap by saying that in the context of worship, the priest pronounced what is known as a "salvation oracle" after the lament, and before the thanksgiving.

The "salvation oracle" represented the word from God through the priest that announced deliverance. It was not unlike the assurance of pardon following the prayer of confession in our liturgy. In that context, the worshippers often had to wait on that word, and its fulfillment.

Friends, we often find ourselves between the bread of tears, and the manna of thanksgiving. Jesus Christ is the salvation oracle enfleshed, the Bread of Heaven, which bridges the two. The good news is this: in life, in death, in life beyond death, in dashed expectations, anguished cries, and fervent hopes, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.