

Pentecost 13, Proper 18, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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One of the difficult things
about preaching on the psalm lessons each week
is that the readings jump all over the place. There is no real continuity. Two weeks ago
we read
a pilgrim song,
traditionally sung
as people went up to Jerusalem for the big festivals.
Last week
we had our third section of psalm 105,
a call to give thanks to God, to search God out, and to respond to God's call.

This week, we jump all the way to the end of the book of Psalms, to the second last one, one of
five psalms that all begin the same way,
"Hallelujah!"
a Hebrew word that is often translated
"Praise the Lord."
It's almost as if
these psalms were put there
as a deliberate bookend,
a response to the very first psalm,
Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.

The psalms begin by inviting us to meditate on God and God's word;
they end
by inviting us to praise God who we have come to know.

But of these five final Hallelujah psalms,
today's one is the most troublesome.
The other four
are full of unadulterated praise, inviting the whole earth and all its creatures
to celebrate the goodness of God.
This one

begins the same way,
 Hallelujah!
 Sing to the LORD a new song;
 sing his praise in the congregation of the faithful.
 Let Israel rejoice in his Maker;
 let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.
 Let them praise his Name in the dance;
 let them sing praise to him with timbrel and harp.
 For the LORD takes pleasure in his people
 and adorns the poor with victory.
 Let the faithful rejoice in triumph;
 let them be joyful on their beds.
 Let the praises of God be in their throat

Total
 whole-hearted
 praise of God, rejoicing in the God who has created them,
 who loves them, who cares for the poor.

But then it changes, halfway through verse six.
 Let the praises of God be in their throat
 and a two-edged sword in their hand;
 To wreak vengeance on the nations
 and punishment on the peoples;
 To bind their kings in chains
 and their nobles with links of iron;
 To inflict on them the judgment decreed;
 this is glory for all his faithful people.
 Hallelujah!

Suddenly we've gone from celebration and thanksgiving and joy
 to violence and destruction and vengeance.
 And that's probably not what you came to church today to hear.
 For many of us, church is a refuge, an oasis of relative peace
 in the craziness of our lives.
 We come to get inspired, to be renewed.
 The last thing we want
 is the same violence and fear
 that dominates the news;
 we have heard and seen too much this summer
 of rockets and guns,
 bombs and beheadings.
 And most of those things

have happened far away from us here in St James,
 in the deserts and hills of Gaza and Israel and Syria and Iraq.
 We can't imagine ourselves
 doing those sort of things.
 We
 are civilized.
 We
 are Christian.

But have you ever been really really angry?
 Have you ever felt
 like you hate someone?
 Have you ever wanted to hit someone or something?

This is not something we talk about a lot. After all,
 we're good church people; we shouldn't be like that. Should we?

I think, if we're honest, that most of us have felt like that
 at one time or another.
 When we're grieving, when we're hurt, when we're humiliated,
 all that stuff comes spewing up inside us.
 As children, our immediate response is to yell and scream, and to hit things - or people.
 As we get older, we learn to keep it under control.
 More or less, anyway.
 We hold it at bay, we push it down,
 we "deal with it."
 We don't want to feel angry or violent or vengeful.
 And so we try to shove the feelings back down,
 to pretend they are not there
 because if we admit they are
 then we have to admit to ourselves
 that we're in a much greater mess
 than we would like.

And you know what happens then.
 The feelings sneak out.
 They suddenly erupt. Sometimes
 in the context where the hurt happened.
 But all too often
 somewhere totally unrelated.

Because anger and violence and vengeance
 love to lurk in the dark corners of our minds and souls, slowly poisoning us from the inside

and then spreading their toxic contagion
to all those around us.

Isn't that what Jesus was talking about in the reading we had a few weeks ago,
when he talks about the things that defile us, the things that come from our mouths and hearts?

So what do we do about all this stuff inside us?

Recently I was talking with a therapist who recommends throwing ice cubes at a wall when
you're angry or frustrated.

Apparently

it sounds pretty similar
to breaking glass.

I personally prefer a whacking weeds with a machete.
both of them are physical ways
to release your anger and frustration,
so that it can no longer hide and fester and poison your life.

But they only work so far.

That's why we end up seeing therapists -

people who allow us to say the things that we've been keeping deep inside
in a safe place,

people who let us voice our deepest fears and hurts
and help us, eventually, to find some healing.

They didn't have therapists

in the time of the psalms.

But what they did have

was that same knowledge

of healthy ways to deal with anger and hurt and frustration and grief.

To speak it,

to speak it to the only one

who will not be hurt by our words,

the one who can bring complete healing

in our lives.

It's the same One that we pray to

at the beginning of every service.

Almighty God,

to you all hearts are open, all desires known,

and from you no secrets are hid..."

All of us have secrets, I suspect.

All of us have things

we'd prefer no one to know.
But here, here as we worship, here in the presence of God,
we cannot hide our secrets.
We cannot hide our secrets
from God.
And one of those secrets
is the human inclination
to violence.

It is that
which this psalm gives voice to.
The anger and violence
that so easily take over our lives
and corrode
our souls.

Therapists today
and the psalmist thousands of years ago
know the same truth.
Denial doesn't work.
The only way to free us from that inclination to violence,
that thirst for vengeance,
is to speak it, to entrust it, to a trustworthy listener.
And that trustworthy listener
is God.

That's the secret
of confession.
Whether it's in a communal setting, like when we confess our sins to God each Sunday in our
liturgy
or individually, sitting with a priest
who is there as a visible sign of the listening ear of God.
We speak those dark and horrible secrets to God
in a safe and structured way,
and in doing that,
it frees us from their power, frees us from their toxic claim on us,
frees us
to live a new life of praise and worship of God,
as that same prayer we pray at the beginning of our service says,
to "perfectly love God" and "worthily magnify" God's holy name.

Remember how often, when Jesus is asked to heal someone
he begins by saying,

“Your sins are forgiven.”

It gets him into trouble with the religious leaders
all the time.

Healing people’s bodies is okay;
healing people’s souls
is God’s business.

And that’s why Jesus does it.

He knows
that it is our souls
that most of all
need healing.

And that’s what he offers.

So here we are.

A psalm that speaks violence and vengeance and fear.

That gives us the words
that may indeed

be truly in our hearts.

that releases our wounded speech

and our wounded selves

into the hands of the God

who will not be disgusted by us

but will reach out in arms of love,

heal our wounds,

and kiss our souls

better.