

Faith Mennonite Church
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Imprecatory Psalms: Holy Cursing or a Cry for Justice?
Psalm 35:1-8, 22-26; 139:19-24

How many of us have known or experienced a bully? How does it make you feel? There's a word for those feelings, and the words we might attach to them: imprecation.

When I was developing the idea of a worship series on the Psalms to share with the worship commission, I knew that I wanted to include the uncomfortable, imprecatory Psalms as well as the beloved, comforting, thankful ones, because if we're honest, we've all had these feelings at some point in our life. Over the past 10 years or so, I've had occasion to take part in the daily praying of the Psalms, the "liturgy of hours," at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville. The monks at the Abbey pray through the full cycle of Psalms several times a year in their communal morning, noon, and evening prayer. They don't edit out the imprecatory verses—the ones that call for wrath against the enemy. Living together in close community, they know they must be honest with their emotions, even when those emotions are raw.

Back in 2001, on September 11, as the news of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers was beginning to travel from New York to the Midwest, my husband Gerald was preparing to lead a classroom discussion of the book "Jihad vs McWorld"—about the effects of globalization. He couldn't have planned it. Little did I know when I placed "Imprecatory Psalms" on the calendar for today, November 15, that earlier this week there would be new attacks on unsuspecting innocents in Beirut and Paris. The internet in the past couple days has filled with imprecation, some of which makes the language of the Psalms seem pretty tame.

What do these ancient Psalms of imprecation have to say to our current world? What did they say to Jesus when he prayed them? Can we find good news here? Good news of peace?

I am turning to James Waltner, the author of the *Believers Church Commentary on the Psalms*¹ to be our guide this morning. I'd like to share some points that Waltner makes about the Psalms of imprecation.

- 1) "Yearning for vengeance is present in the psalms," because they are the honest reflections of people who have "experienced hurt, terror, and pain." Vengeance is a natural human response to trauma. Naming and accepting that is the first step to dealing with it in a healthy way.
- 2) "Speech of vengeance" is not necessarily equated with "actions of vengeance." The Psalms of imprecation are usually addressed to God, not directly to the enemy. To pray, Waltner says, "when one is in the depths and besieged on every side," is a way to both *express* anger and also to *rein in* that anger. "The prayer becomes a vehicle for the inner fury of the oppressed, a way to deal with one's anger," without actually acting out the feelings.
- 3) "Vengeance belongs to God" not us. As Paul wrote to the Romans, quoting from the book of Deuteronomy: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:17-19). Now some of us feel uncomfortable with the notion of an angry, vengeful God. But Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says that we may understand the vengeance of God as "the other side of [God's] compassion—the sovereign redress of a wrong." If we believe that God's divine character is one of love and justice, then we must believe that acts of terror are as abhorrent to God as they are to us (or more so, for God sees all). This is not to say that God will redress wrong in the way that we would or the exact ways that the Psalms ask for, but if vengeance is to be meted out it is the work of God, not of humans and their armies.

¹ James H. Waltner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Psalms*. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2006 (755-757).

- 4) Waltner reminds us that the prayers of imprecation are part of the whole scripture canon that includes a persistent call to, and a vision of, peace. In Psalm 85 we hear:
 “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; Justice and peace will kiss each other.
 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from the sky.”
 We have to hold all these scriptures together, as Jesus did when he taught love for enemy in the Sermon on the Mount.
- 5) Waltner says that the Psalms of imprecation can “help us hear the deep human pain in the cries of brothers and sisters in the faith, [and] others who may legitimately cry for vindication and even revenge.” We hear these cries in the Black Lives Matters movement, in the cries we heard this week from students at the University of Missouri. Donna Minter, Joan Kreider and I heard these cries as we watched the movie *Suffragette* two weeks ago. The movie is set in England in the early 20th century when women had almost no rights. They worked in slave-like conditions in the city laundries. At one point in the movie when the vulnerability of those women was most intense, Donna began to utter words of imprecation, which I won’t repeat here. Now you all know that Donna works to help people break cycles of trauma and violence. But in the moment of being powerfully drawn into the reality of human injustice in the movie, her very appropriate response was to call for drastic action against the powerful perpetrators of evil. Again from Waltner: “Those who pray the psalms of enmity are shouting out their suffering because of injustice and the hubris of the violent. Thus, the texts can draw us into solidarity with those who feel they have no recourse to the injustice they have faced than to call out in protest.”
- 6) Finally, we read and pray these Psalms in light of the life and death of Jesus, and the experience of Christian martyrdom. Jesus, and Stephen in the books of Acts, both prayed for the forgiveness of their enemies as they were facing death. Jesus spent his years of ministry among people who were most down-trodden by society, living at the margins, yet he did not lead a bloody revolt to liberate them. He knew that true liberation comes through the in-breaking of God’s kingdom, transforming the world through self-giving love.

Waltner concludes his discussion of the Psalms of imprecation by again quoting Brueggeman: “there is a way *beyond* the Psalms of vengeance, but it is a way *through* them, and not *around* them. . . . Our rage and indignation must be fully owned and fully *expressed*. And then (only then) can our rage and indignation be *yielded* to the mercy of God.”

So what is the good news?

- 1) It is not wrong to feel angry at injustice, at senseless violence, at systems of oppression, at being bullied. Feeling angry, in fact, suggests that we are either experiencing one of these directly or we have arrived at a place of solidarity where we can truly hear and understand the cry of those who are suffering, without turning away. Feeling anger is a gift. It means we know that something is wrong.
- 2) Justice and vengeance are not the same. One of the things that Donna teaches in STAR is that when people suffer trauma, they often confuse vengeance and justice. Justice seeks to right the wrong and if possible restore the relationship, bringing restitution and health to all. Vengeance seeks only to hurt as one has been hurt. But, ironically, inflicting more pain never helps to seal a wound. Healing comes in accepting mercy and seeking restorative justice. I like the way that the words of imprecation in Psalm 139 are followed with the prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart...” It seems to exhibit a turn from vengeance toward justice.
- 3) We are never alone in our suffering or our solidarity with those who suffer. God, in Christ, is ever-present in the suffering and pain in our world. Jesus walked and walks this path through Palestine, and Missouri, and Paris, and Syria, all the way to the cross. The resurrection, of which Ry preached two weeks ago, is God’s yes to the power of that determined love.

Let us be angry, and sin not. Let us pray for and be instruments of God’s love, justice, and mercy.