

August 13, 2023
“Kissing Cousins”
Psalm 85:1-13 / Matthew 14:22-33
Pastor Tim

Scholars tell us that the 85th Psalm was most likely a community prayer offered up upon return from Babylonian captivity and exile – a period of roughly 50 years in Jewish history. Captivity and exile that followed the Judeans’ defeat in war and the destruction of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.

That’s the best guess, but in truth, the actual historical context is unknown. Which, frankly, lends itself well to universal application.

Psalm 85 is a prayer for restoration, a plea for spiritual renewal that within the present moment looks – as we often do – both to the past and to the future.

Oh, how we can relate to a prayer for restoration!

Variations of the word “return” are scattered throughout the Psalm – from the Hebrew, also meaning restore or repent.

O God, you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You turned from your “hot anger.”

Restore us again, O God of our salvation.

Will you not revive us again?

And then verse 8, at the start of our reading this morning: “Let me hear what God the Holy One will speak, for God will speak peace to God’s people, to God’s faithful, to those who TURN to God in their hearts.”

This is a prayer for the turning and returning of the people; remember, that’s what repentance is, turning and returning back to God, to each other, to ourselves. Turning back to love. In our hearts, as the Psalmist says.

But this is also a prayer for the turning and returning of God. In the context of captivity and exile, the theological perception was that God had turned away from God's people because they had been unfaithful to the Covenant. Captivity and exile were punishment for their unfaithfulness.

That theological premise, of course, continues for many. The belief that our suffering – individual or collective – is somehow divine punishment for our sin, for our lack of faithfulness to the covenant of love, for our turning away from love.

It is not.

And conversely, the belief that our prosperity – individual or collective – is somehow divine reward for our faithfulness.

It is not.

I cannot, will not, believe in a god who is temperamental, angry, judgmental, vindictive. Who turns away from us when we turn away from God.

I have said many times before, and will repeat many times again, that the love of such a god is conditional – and if God's love is not UNconditional, endlessly compassionate, it is no different than ours. And there is no God.

Such theology has been and continues to be used to explain and justify all manner of human suffering. In the name of God, justifying cruelty as cause of human suffering – including cruelty to ourselves, causing our own suffering.

Or justifying indifference in response to human suffering – including indifference to our own suffering.

You know, people – peoples – getting what we believe they deserve. And sometimes WE getting what WE believe WE deserve.

God's will, or some such nonsense.

But God's will is simple: For each of us, ALL of us, to LIVE – and to do so abundantly. And to LOVE – to love fully and to be loved, fully.

THAT is what we deserve. That in God's eyes, is what each of us, ALL of us, deserve.

That doesn't mean we won't suffer. We do, we will, in the natural course of our mortal lives – though, again, we manage to bring all manner of suffering on each other, on ourselves, on the planet.

What it DOES mean is that God is with us in our suffering. God does not turn away from us. Ever. It is we who turn, and so we who need – constantly – to RE - turn. To repent. To be restored.

But I do get the feeling. I suspect we all get the feeling in our lives – when God FEELS distant, when love feels far from us, when we are isolated and alone, when we are struggling, when we are barely holding on, when we are in pain, when we are exhausted, when our faith is fragile, our hope fading. The feeling that God has abandoned us.

So we might pray, IF we pray, as the Psalmist does, that God would turn back to US. That God would restore our fortunes. That God would forgive and pardon us. Cause that's how it might feel.

But the truth is, we need only turn back to God. We need only turn around. God is right there, right HERE, in ever-faithful, covenantal love.

But I digress.

Theological reflections aside, the Psalmist takes us in prayerful, poetic fashion, on a spiritual journey from PAST (you restored us before, verses 1-3) to PRESENT (won't you restore us again, verses 4-7) to FUTURE (you WILL restore us again, our reading this morning, verses 8-13).

Out of suffering and alienation, wilderness, comes a future filled with hope. And not only that, a future marked by peace and justice.

Hear the poetry: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Hear that!

Steadfast love, the Hebrew word, *hesed* – combining love, generosity, commitment. Loyalty motivated by profound personal care and compassion.

Lovingkindness and faithfulness will meet.

And understand righteousness as right and mutually right relationship; not the rightness of some self-serving moral high ground, but the rightness of relationship. With God, with each other, with ourselves. Rooted in love. Rooted in loving intention.

And understand righteousness, too, as justice – from the Hebrew word, *tzedek* – which we know from our friends at Kol Tzedek, meaning "voice of justice." Justice as right relationship on the scale of community. Common good. "What love, as Cornel West has said," looks like in public."

Justice and peace will KISS each other.

When love meets faith, when our faith turns us back to God, to each other, to ourselves, IN love, justice and peace WILL kiss each other. Justice and peace WILL embrace, as some translations put it.

These are divine attributes anthropomorphized, personified, brought to life.

Love and faith – and more specifically, thoroughly, STEADFAST love and faith meet in the street. Righteousness or justice and peace will kiss each other, will embrace.

No one-armed, half-hearted hug. We're talking about a full embrace. Bear hug.

Like old friends. Like lovers.

And not only that, these divine attributes are brought to life in the flow of Creation.

"Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness (or justice) will look down from the sky."

Hear the vision, picture it, IMAGINE this holy vision, of God's goodness, God's love, God's justice, bursting forth from the earth like a flower or a tree, shining down from the heavens like the sun.

God's love and God's faithfulness meeting in the street. God's righteousness, God's justice embracing God's peace.

The Psalmist's prayer is a plea for restoration. And it is a prayer we know all too well. It comes up a lot.

As you have restored us before, restore us now. Restore us again. When we pray to our God, we pray to the God of restoration. The God who breathes us into life and calls us back to it – again and again and again.

But restoration only happens if we do our part. Some prayers can only be answered when we pray with our hands and our feet.

When WE turn around and allow divine love and faithfulness to meet in US. When we turn toward God, toward each other, toward ourselves, and allow righteousness and peace to kiss in US. Justice and peace to embrace in US.

And as IN us, so AROUND us. So faithfulness and love might spring up from the ground, and justice and peace might shine down from the heavens.

When we – in our faithfulness and with our love, and in our commitment to advocate and organize for justice and peace – blaze the trail, as the Psalmist concludes, and make a path for God to follow.

“Righteousness (justice) will go before God, and will make a path for God's steps.”
Making way for the divine Way of Love.

Imagine it. Imagine it. This is the Psalmist's prayer, and this is a faithful vision of what heaven WILL look like on earth. Not just might look like, WILL look like.

When we, with God, bring it to life.

Faith is very much at the heart of our reading from Matthew's gospel. Faith and fear, that is.

The disciples are out in a boat by themselves, without Jesus – who's off alone, to pray.

It's getting dark. The winds pick up. The waves pick up. Taking them farther and farther from shore.

In a different story, Jesus calms the storm. In this story, early the NEXT morning (picture the disciples in the wind-swept, wave-tossed boat ALL night), early the next morning, Jesus walks out to them on the boat. On the water.

Who can say for sure?

They freak out. Who wouldn't? They figure it's a ghost. They cry out in fear.

And you know, whenever Jesus senses fear, he tells them – us – not to be afraid. It's OK. It's OK.

And then the story turns from fear to faith. Peter, the disciple we admire because he seemed always ready to get his feet wet (in this case literally), asks Jesus to prove himself. Prove that it's really him talking and walking toward them.

Command me to come out on the water with you. Jesus does, and Peter does. He takes his first steps, walking on the water – in faith – like Jesus was. Walking toward Jesus.

But then he feels the wind again. He loses his focus. He loses his faith and turns back to a different fear. Because there is always a different fear if we give it our attention.

Peter sinks. From fear to faith and right back to fear again, he sinks. Jesus grabs him and questions his faith, his lack of faith.

Why doubt? Never doubt. It's OK. It's OK. Don't be afraid.

This is not a story about walking on water. But it is a story about miracles, because it's a story about faith, about believing the impossible. And getting our feet wet to make the impossible possible.

For God, for Jesus, impossible is a bad word. "For God, all things are possible," Jesus says elsewhere.

From doubt, faith. From despair, hope. From fear, love. From death, life. That is the story of our sacred scriptures. That is the story of the prophets. That is the story of the Gospels. That is the story of Jesus.

Believing, IN faith, WITH love, in God's faithfulness. In God's love. In God's impossible dream that all might live abundantly, and love – and be loved – fully.

That's God's will. That's the dream. And we are called to do whatever we can to make that dream possible. Real.

That is the prayer of the Psalmist. And it is ours. A prayer for restoration. God restore us. Take us from destruction, isolation, exile, wilderness to RESTORATION.

Where steadfast love and faithfulness are strangers, how might we arrange a meeting? Where justice and peace aren't speaking to each other and haven't for a long time, how might we bring them together toward the possibility of embrace, a holy kiss even.

Because justice and peace are cousins. They are related. They are family.

We all – we ALL, including our precious planet – need them to kiss. To embrace. Because injustice anywhere, as King famously said, is a threat to justice everywhere. Because there can be no peace that is LASTING without justice that's RESTORATIVE. Life-giving.

Allow me to offer one concrete example.

You may by now have heard the story of Shamayim Harris, otherwise and affectionately known as "Mama Shu." I just heard about her through the latest issue of YES! Magazine, on the theme of "Growth."

In 2007, her two-year-old son, Jakobi Ra, was killed in a hit-and-run in their Highland Park community – just outside Detroit.

"I literally thought that I wouldn't be able to function or be alive or anything," she says of that experience. So many, so many mothers and fathers and families know how she feels. God, hear our prayer.

A grief she would experience again just two years ago, when her 23-year-old son, Chinyelu, was shot and killed while doing a neighborhood watch in his community. Grief upon grief.

In the midst of her profound grief, and in the midst of a decaying neighborhood, she had an instinct to turn her nightmare into a dream. A dream about a particular block she would drive past in her neighborhood, Avalon Street.

"I was devastated about what I would see walking around Highland Park," she says. "I wanted to live in a beautiful city. I wanted flowers. I wanted thriving businesses. I felt that that is what we deserved.

"I would look at this block like, 'Wow, man, if we just clean up this block and do this and do that.' I saw crystal clear what it could look like."

Six months after Jakobi Ra's death, she managed to buy an abandoned house on the corner with money she didn't really have. And tapping into her savings, taking out loans, appealing for donations, she continued buying up lots on Avalon Street.

She had a dream and she shared that dream with her neighbors. And for the next eight years, she and volunteers worked to clean up the block. Some houses were taken down, some rehabbed.

The block is now known as Avalon Village, a nonprofit Mama Shu started in 2016 as a restorative, self-sustaining eco-village – and now quoting from the YES! article, "using land and property revitalization as tools to create safe, nurturing and culturally affirming spaces within" Highland Park.

She and Avalon Village now own 45 lots of land across three blocks.

"I needed to ... change grief into glory, pain into power," she said in a CNN profile earlier this summer – honored as part of the ongoing online feature, *CNN Heroes*. "I just tried to transform it into something bearable and something beautiful."

From grief to glory. Pain to power. Brokenness to beauty.

From doubt to faith. Despair to hope. Fear to love. Death to life.

Restoration is our prayer. Right relationship is our prayer. Steadfast love is our prayer. Justice and peace are our prayers.

And God, to be sure, is ready whenever we are to dream the impossible dream. And make it so.

May it be so.