

To the leader: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

1 O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.

2 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.

3 My soul also is struck with terror,
while you, O Lord—how long?

4 Turn, O Lord, save my life;
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.

5 For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

6 I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.

7 My eyes waste away because of grief;
they grow weak because of all my foes.

8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

9 The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror;
they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame.¹

¹ *NRSV*

Some have suggested that we are among the first in history to live in an age of technology, and greed, and power so advanced that we could easily wipe ourselves off the face of the planet without any need of God's help. That fundamental reality is with us everyday—driving our kids to school, watching the news, taking the subway. The fact is, the world is warming at a rate that cannot be sustained, wars rage in many countries, drought and famine are widespread in many of the earth's poorest regions and the threat of biological and nuclear terror hangs over us everyday. The fact that at any moment the cosmos of infinite possibility might reach down and snuff us out whirls in the back of our minds. Our finitude haunts us day and night and it is not content to be manifested in our sagging skin and shrinking brains. No! It wants our parents, and our kids, and our partners, and it wants each of us—all of us.

This fear and haunting is exactly where we enter into the lament of Psalm 6. The language used by the psalmist indicates grave illness.² The psalmist does not say specifically what the ailment is, but it is so severe that shockwaves of terror pulse through the psalmist's body and soul. The first seven verses of Psalm 6 are spoken to the LORD, because that is who brought on the illness. In this psalm, all matters begin and end with Ha Shem; there is no affliction that the LORD did not appoint, and there will be no cure unless it comes from the LORD. The adversaries mentioned in vv.7-10 are pawns in this

² Mays, 59.

suffering. They poke and prod at the psalmist's vulnerability, but they did not bring it about.³ God is at the root of this catastrophe.

Note the Psalmist's lament in vv.6 and 7, which the Tanakh translates, "I am weary with my groaning; every night make I my bed to swim; I melt away my couch with my tears. Mine eye is dimmed because of vexation; it waxeth old because of all mine adversaries." (*TNK*) Water imagery is significant throughout the scriptures, and here the Psalmist senses those primordial chaos waters jumping their banks. The Hebrew verb translated, "melt away," is *māsá*, which might also be translated, "dissolve." The psalmist cries cold, acidic tears that burn like sulfuric acid and fall upon crumpled sheets in fiery droplets. Like those chaos waters, whatever these tears touch, they consume.

However, chaos is not the final condition into which the psalmist is being hurled. Sheol is the psalmist's fate—the grave, nothingness. Scholars suggest that ancient Israelites experienced the world in "totalities" that dichotomized life and Sheol; illness and misfortune were experienced as an encroachment of Sheol onto the plains of life, pulling human being down into nothingness.⁴ "Turn, O Lord, save my life... For in death there is no remembrance of you." (vv.4-5) It is important to note that Sheol was not simply a place for the wicked. In our text, the Psalmist never confesses any wrongdoing and the language implies that the psalmist is ill. "All go to Sheol without moral distinctions because the grave is our common end. There is no clear case of punishment in Sheol

³ McCann, 61.

⁴ Johnston, 417.

because this is not applicable to the grave.”⁵ The psalmist assumes that life is the “natural order” and that death is a glitch in God’s plan. But, what makes life any more a part of God’s plan than death? Can you ever have one without the other?

How do we talk about death and mortality in a culture so addicted to youth and a church so obsessed with immortality? It feels like singing the LORD’s song in a foreign land. In the modern world, we try to control our mortality, to reduce it to manageable parts that we can precisely diagnose and medicate. When our finitude can’t be diagnosed or managed, we numb ourselves to it. Like the psalmist, we swat away the hand of death; we deny our finitude because we fear what’s on the other side. We fear that *nothing* is on the other side, no matter how much we claim to believe otherwise.

And what are the forces in our world that keep us so fixated on youth and immortality? German philosopher Martin Heidegger refers to them as “das man.” Das man is the “anonymous rule of public opinion” that strips away the distinguishable attributes of individuals in order to make us interchangeable.⁶ Das man seeks to standardize the experiences of life and death, all the while giving the illusion of abundance. Das man attempts to create and control our desires and our instincts in order to reduce us to diagnosable, manageable, marketable units. Das man doesn’t imagine any limits for itself, only for others, and it attempts to lure us into its false portrayal of

⁵ Harris, 134.

⁶ Ireton, 255.

eternity.⁷ Das man knows our fears and our finitude and exploits them, like the psalmist's adversaries. I don't have to tell you who das man is and I couldn't really if I tried because it's too pervasive. There's das man in each of us—fighting our finitude, denying our mortality. Das man knows exactly what buttons to push because das man is nothing more than our corporate attempt to live and be young forever.

However, there is a reversal at the end of Psalm 6 that could mark for us the way beyond this death-denying cycle. Three times the psalmist announces to the enemies the LORD's vindication. Where the psalmist was terrified in v. 2, the enemies will be the ones left afraid and ashamed in the end. "They shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame." (*NRSV*) What brings this reversal about is the faith of the psalmist: faith that the LORD has heard the psalmist's weeping call. The psalmist does not say, "I'm not going to die anymore," because that's not deliverance, it's denial. The Psalmist's acts of faith are to cry out to God and to denounce the enemies. Faith is what we're capable of that das man completely lacks: faith that a life lived in praise of He Shem is validated and valuable in God's commonwealth; faith that we are not interchangeable parts that the LORD simply replaces every seventy-or-so years; faith that God is the only source of meaning and vitality, and that the illusions and delusions that das man might be able to sell us will never satisfy us.

⁷ Ireton, 255.

What *will* satisfy is a life lived in God's praise. In musical terms, vv.8-10 form a Picardy third: a harmonic moment when the tune, which up until this point has been in a minor key, is transformed by resolving into a major key. The melody is given a lift that does not negate its heavy past, but sends the rest of the piece soaring off into a brighter future. With death not at all ruled out, the psalmist is sure of the future. In vv.4-5 we discover what was really at stake: a life of praise. In the grave, the tongue is silent. Worse yet, the life is silent. In this life and death moment, the psalmist seems to realize that the true value of life is in the day-in, day-out faithfulness that culminates in a lifetime of witness. Not that the anxiety surrounding death is removed, but that it is transformed into the realization that neither *das man* nor death can silence the testimony of a life lived faithfully in eternal God's praise.

So, what if our language and mindsets about dying could be transformed?

Borrowing an image from the literary master, Rainer Maria Rilke (RYE-ner): What if we conceived of death as a fruit within us from the very onset of life? Death: not as a distant event that will one day happen *to* us and that we presently avoid at all cost, but death: *within* us, growing, ripening, taking shape in our lives—our “own-most” possession, in the words of Heidegger.⁸ Rather than always pushing back or pulling the covers over our heads, what new possibilities might emerge in the lives of people shaping their own deaths—writing our own eulogies in every word and deed that spans the lifetime?

⁸ Ireton, 253.

What does this kind of authentic life towards death look like?⁹ It looks like freedom from the youth addiction. It looks like ministers who don't try to keep going and going and doing and doing: never empowering or equipping others, never realizing our own limitations. It looks like a commitment to responsible stewardship of limited ecological resources and a proper realization of humanity's place *in* the web of creation, not at the top of it. It looks like legislation that doesn't regard human life as interchangeable, but knows that every lost soldier and civilian is an irreplaceable person in the Commonwealth of God.

By the 5th century, this psalm was one of Christianity's seven Lenten Penitential Psalms. The psalm's meaning became spiritualized, referring to sin: the illness from which we all suffer equally. In Christian ritual, Psalm 6 took on the form of a confession and assurance; the first seven verses were the confession, and the last three verses were words of assurance.¹⁰ In many ways, it's helpful if we understand the Psalm on both levels: sin and sickness. When we consider the roles that we all play in our environmental plight and the ways that each of us is guilty of hogging and hoarding control over last Sunday's worship service, we know that we've all got some confessing to do. And we need those words of assurance from the LORD and from our community that all can be set straight. But, do we confess when we get sick? Do we ask for forgiveness when cancer invades our bones? Perhaps we should; and this is sensitive, so hear me. Perhaps, we should confess

⁹ Ireton, 259-261. Heidegger's concept of authentic living is integrally related to his concept of "being—towards—death."

¹⁰ McCann, 61

that we are finite people, who have not got forever to live and have not made the most of the time we have had. Even before illness sets in, we should confess that we have lived like there would certainly be a tomorrow, and the day after that, and that anyone who tells us otherwise is just an enemy and a less faithful person. But the words of assurance that come after a confession like that don't always feel so reassuring. "You're right. You have lived like there would be no end, and like you have no limits. But, the LORD gives death to *all* the living, not so that we would suffer, but that we would *live*." And in that assurance, we might all truly be able to pray in unison with Rainer Maria Rilke, "Oh Lord, give to each [their] own death. The dying that issues from the life in which [we] had love, meaning, and need. For we are but the shell/rind/skin and the leaf. The great death that each has within, that is the fruit around which everything turns."¹¹

¹¹ Ireton, 182.

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