
WHAT SHALL I CRY?

ISAIAH 40:1-11

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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So often the Bible is presented as an answer book as if it has all the answers to all of our questions, as if the life of faith is only about answers. But what I've been reminded of over the last several years is that the Bible is also a question book and the life of faith includes questions. Faith is actually a quest. What would change, if we saw the Bible as a question book, probing human life, querying God and through which, God questions us? What if we embraced questioning as a vital part of faith and discipleship? Because, the Bible doesn't just have answers, it has questions, literally. It points us to living in the unresolved, the unknown, the uncharted roads, the unmarked alleyways. It leads us to live the questions and embrace an interrogative spirituality.

Remember, "having right answers does not mean one knows God" (Fred Craddock). Perhaps, we find God in the questions. One of my mentors, the late Vanderbilt University professor Dale Andrews, was known to have this mantra: "I have more questions than answers, more problems than solutions. For this, I give God praise." What does it mean to give God praise for more questions than answers? What does it mean to thank God for inhabiting the realm of disequilibrium? This is an honest acknowledgement of the truth and the freedom that comes from abiding in the truth of uncertainty and incomprehensibility, rather than trying to inhabit citadels of certainty that will one day crumble and fall. "I have more questions than answers." Isn't that the truth?

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this to his 19 year old protégé:

...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

The Bible is a question book. It has its own questions for us, to us, about us. We don't have to make up questions; they are right there in God's word. God's word includes questioning from the mouth of God and human beings. Questions like: Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Why did it yield wild grapes? Why have you forsaken me? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Who is worthy to open the scroll? Why do we fast, but you do not see? Is there no balm in Gilead? Why are you afraid? How can this be since I am virgin? Will he find faith on earth? Why are you weeping? How can I sing a song in a strange land? Which commandment is the first of all? And who is my neighbor? Where have they come from? All types of questions straight out of the Bible for the life of faith. We have to live everything, including the questions.

And no truer question has been raised in 2020 than the one we hear today from Isaiah. "What shall I cry?" We are living that question right now. What shall I cry when there are over 270,000 deaths in the USA due to the coronavirus? What shall I cry in the face of the devastating rise in unemployment and the anticipated economic fallout from COVID-19? What shall I cry? Is the vaccine going to work? What shall I cry? I'm tired of wearing masks, weary of social distancing and hand sanitizing, and being afraid of an unseen virus. What shall I cry? I yearn to be hugged again. I'm lonely, isolated, and desire to gather in groups and see faces without masks. Can't things just get back to normal? What shall I cry?

There are so many things to cry out about. And we can't make sense of what to cry because of all of the many voices speaking and crying out, telling us what to cry out about. Very much like this Bible passage, there has been a crazy cacophony of cries racing through the tunnels of our ears, minds, and hearts, in the morning, throughout the day, in the middle of the night so we can't sleep. Hearing voices crying out for justice for those who have been unlawfully killed and imprisoned. Voices crying out for vote recounts. Voices crying out with conspiracy

theories about elections and the coronavirus. Voices saying wear a mask, don't wear a mask, get this type of mask, cloth mask, plastic mask, designer mask, this mask works, that one doesn't work, cover your nose, wear it like this, your nose isn't covered, put it on now, take it off now, wear a mask, wait six feet, you're not six feet, and wash your hands like this.

It can be so confusing to discern among the voices you hear what voices to really listen to and then determine what you should say, if anything. What shall I cry in this moment of history, in this season, during this Advent? We are living this question now.

There was a similar problem in Isaiah. So many voices were speaking that it's hard to make sense of who's actually speaking and who's saying what and when. Everyone was getting a word in at a time of Babylonian exile. God's people had been devastated, ransacked, hurt, placed at a huge distance from home, made strangers in a foreign land, serving a term to pay for their penalty of sin. And at the turning point when we learn that the exile will be ending, which begins with Isaiah 40, multiple voices speak into the situation. The first voice is God's. "Comfort, O comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." The next voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God..." Then another voice says, "Cry out!" Then the next voice rings out in response, "What shall I cry?" Then a voice continues with the recitation about grass and fading flowers and tells Jerusalem to bring good tidings and proclaim, "Here is your God."

There are at least five voices crying out in eleven verses! Among so many voices and perspectives on the ancient near eastern cable television network, it can be difficult to know what to cry out and what to say at such times. What shall I cry, especially when everyone else seems to have something to say? Aren't there enough voices speaking already? But let me say, blessed is the one, who having nothing to say, avoids giving us wordy evidence of that fact. We don't need another careless conspiracy theory. We need the truth, even about ourselves. What shall I cry?

The truth is "I" am grass. We are grass. The people are grass. The grass withers. The flower fades. Maybe a healthy and honest sense of self is what's needed first in order to cry out anything. What shall I cry? Well first, let's recognize who we are in the grand scheme of things, in our grassiness, our finitude, our frailty, compared to the breath and word of the Lord. As grass, all I can do is cry. All I can do is raise questions because I am not the answer. I am not God. I am a fading flower in the field. Withering grass in Duke Forest. A pandemic reminds us of our fleeting mortal nature. Put it on your tombstone and tell the truth—"I was grass."

This voice of truth is not doom and gloom and despair but actually a portal to God's presence. When you know you are grass, when you see yourself for who you truly are, this is an indication that you've encountered God. A truthful assessment of oneself tells me you are standing in the light of the truth of God. We recognize who we are when we are with God when God is present. This is what happens to Isaiah when he has the vision of God in the temple. When he encounters God, that is when he says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips..." In other words, I am grass.

Knowing that we are going to fade, to die, should shape how we live, including our speech. If you are a flower fading, what do you want to do and say with this one life on earth? What speech habits do you want to cultivate? What good news or good tidings can you offer the world? Even grass is given the gift of sharing some good news. From this humble lowly posture, close to the ground, one is ready to speak, not of self, but of God. The grass withers and the flowers fade but the word of our God will stand forever. What shall I cry? Or better, *who* shall I cry?

Jerusalem, Zion, is told to lift up their voice with a megaphone on the mountaintops with good tidings and proclaim, "Here is your God." God is the good news. God is coming. God is the heart of proclamation. God in your mouth, in your vibrating vocal chords, in your piercing cry in the wilderness. Speak of God, O Jerusalem, speak of God, Duke Chapel, because this is the good news. The good news is God news. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once

said in a sermon that people are more interested in going to movie theaters and sporting events than the church, because the church talks more about trivial things than God. I thank my *doktorvater*, Paul Scott Wilson, of the University of Toronto, who made a deliberate turn to God in his scholarship and stressed that God should be the center of sermons, the center of our homiletical cries. If anything should be on our lips this Advent season, it is the phrase, “here is your God.” The church is a theological entity. God should be on our lips, the word of God in our mouths, because it is what lasts. It is forever. We don’t last as grass. God and God’s word are eternal, so why not offer the good gift of God to those around us this season?

There are good tidings to share even at such a devastating time in human history. These are the times in which God thrives. The song writer put it this way: “Got any rivers you think are uncrossable? Got any mountains you cannot tunnel through? God specializes in things thought impossible. God will do for you what no other power can do.” According to Isaiah, there is good news, a good word, even for those who’ve been suffering a long ways from home, even in the face of all that we see happening around us. The good word is a God word. The word of God about God.

What shall I cry as a believer, not a political pundit, but as a follower of Christ? What shall I cry this season? What message will be on your tongue?

“Here is your God.” This is what we should cry. “Here is your God.” There are many voices clamoring for our attention in this moment of history. But I haven’t heard many people speaking of God. God won’t win high media ratings but we aren’t after high ratings in the church, as far as I know. We are after faithfulness. We are after the truth, the truth that is God.

And what God’s people hear in Isaiah is that their long midnight of exilic suffering is going to turn into an eternal day. The joyful proclamation is that they, that we, haven’t been abandoned forever. Here is your God. God doesn’t forget us even in tough times. God has come. God is here. God is coming. I know it’s been hard. I know it’s been long. I know we want to get back to ‘normal’ to a place of rest and comfort and peace and familiarity, away from all of the turmoil and angst and bitterness and fear, get back to the good ole days.

But don’t miss God’s presence among all the tweets. Here is your God, coming with might and strength, feeding the flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs in his arms, carrying them in his bosom, gently leading them home. God, both strong and gentle, is the only one who can ultimately deliver us, even when we’ve been lost and don’t know what to say. “God specializes in things thought impossible. God will do for you what no other power can do.”

What shall I cry? God. God is coming. God seeks us out, even as we question. God wants to be with us and will caress and carry us home. But when God comes, it may not look like what we expect and God may come in a form we never imagined—a highway in a desert, a valley lifted up, mountains made low, crooked ways straightened out, rough places smooth, a mighty warrior as a tender mother. God comes but may do so in unexpected ways, which is why we may miss God among us.

You might have heard about a religious man who was once caught in rising floodwaters. He climbed up on the roof of his house and trusted God to rescue him. A neighbor came by in a canoe and said, “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we’ll paddle to safety.”

“No, thanks,” replied the religious man. “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure he will save me.”

A short time later the police came by in a boat. “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we’ll take you to safety.”

“No, thanks,” replied the religious man. “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure he will save me.”

A little time later a rescue services helicopter hovered overhead, let down a rope ladder and said, “The waters will soon be above your house. Climb the ladder and we’ll fly you to safety.”

“No, thanks,” replied the religious man. “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure he will save me.”

All this time, the floodwaters continued to rise, until soon they reached above the roof and the religious man drowned. When he arrived in heaven, he demanded an audience with God. Ushered into God’s throne room, he said, “Lord, why am I here in heaven? I prayed for you to save me, I trusted you to save me from that flood.”

“Yes, you did my child,” replied the Lord. “And I sent you a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter. But you never got in.”

Get into God this Advent. “Here is your God,” rescuing, delivering, during a global pandemic. Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear?

For when God comes, God also cries out among all of the many voices. And remember, it’s the word of our God that will stand forever, not anyone else’s. And when God speaks nothing is left the same. All things are made new and transformed by an eternal Word—deserts, valleys, mountains, uneven ground, rough places, and people. In your wilderness, terror will be transformed into glory because the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And what does God cry to those in exile who we never hear speak at all? What does God cry even if you don’t cry? A double portion of comfort for all the craziness. Comfort, O comfort, my people. Or as fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich said, during her own experience of a pandemic, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Live the questions, but never forget, God is the ultimate answer.