

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
24th Sunday Ordinary(?) Time
September 16, 2001

“When Chaos Breaks Loose”
Psalm 74; Revelation 21:1-7, 22-25

We all have come here this morning, with the horrendous images of this week engraved indelibly in our minds. Over and over, this week, we have watched the implosion of those towers – on TV, and then at night when we close our eyes, we have watched in restless sleep. A dark cloud has settled over our land, as if the smoke from the skies over New York and Washington have drifted across the country and covered us all.

Many of us have come here today in mental and emotional exhaustion, in confusion, in grief, in anxiety, with a thousand unanswered questions. If you’re like me, you’re tired of hearing about and talking about terror, but you also all know that we have no choice any longer. It is part of the American landscape in our day.

Out of multitude of questions that plague our minds, I want to ask just one this morning – albeit an enormous one. I think here in this sanctuary today, in the gathering of our community of faith, we can at least begin to answer one question:

How shall the church be faithful in these days of national crisis?

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As the church, we turn to the scriptures to find language for grappling with our questions. Today, we turn to a Psalm that you may never have read. Psalm 74 is a communal outcry by the people of Israel to their God. It is a Psalm of Lament. Lamentation is something you do when you are suffering.

Lamentation is something you do when you don’t understand why life has turned out the way it has, and more to the point, *why God has let it turn out that way!*

Lamentation is what you do when you cannot reconcile what you *believe* on the one hand (that there is a sovereign, omnipotent God who is loving and good) with what you *see* on the other hand (that there is hideous evil in the world and that chaos reigns in the creation, and that there are many things that do not seem to work together for good).

Psalm 74 is a lament that arises from a time of national humiliation in the life of Israel, a time when all of God’s promises to Israel seem to amount to very little. The holy city of Jerusalem is sacked, and the enemies of God enter the Temple and hack up all the beautifully carved wood with hatchets and smash up the sanctuary with hammers. Then they set fire to the sanctuary and burn it to the ground. All the symbols of Israel’s faith are destroyed, while the enemies of God’s people scoff at Israel and at the name of the Lord.

Israel is stricken with grief. They cry out to God, saying,

“...there is no one among us who knows how long.

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Why do you hold back your hand?

Why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

The world is falling apart around them, and the faithful strain to see some sign of God, any sign at all.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has suggested that one of the reasons the world suffers from so much violence and abuse is that people have forgotten how to express their rage to the very one who is big enough to take it – to God. We have been told that our prayers have to be nice and polite and inoffensive, as if God’s feelings have to be protected. Brueggemann points to these Psalms of Lament as a desperately needed remedy to the bottled up anger which, without a proper outlet, will poison our souls or lead us into violent lashing out.

So here is the first thing the church can do – must do – in these days of national crisis:
We can be a place for desperate people to pray desperate prayers.

We can be a place for real people, with real fears, real anger, and real grief to pray real prayers; prayers that lay it all out there at the feet of the one who is big enough – and good enough – to take it.

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But lamentation is not the only form of prayer we find in Psalm 74. At the center of the Psalm – at it’s heart – there is a very different kind of prayer. Out of the blue, the tone of the Psalm changes from agonized bewilderment to confident praise. The content changes from the evils of a chaotic world to the hymnic affirmation of the sovereignty of the Creator God. In fact, if you skipped from the end of verse 11 to the beginning of verse 18, you would have a pure Psalm of Lament. But right in the middle of her lamentation, Israel breaks into a song of praise.

The middle part of the Psalm is a song that reaches back – way back, centuries back – into the most ancient images of Israel’s faith and worship. The Psalmist begins to recall the ancient story of God’s decisive victory over chaos in the creation of the world. This song of praise remembers back to the beginning of time, as it is told in Genesis, when “*the earth was a formless void*” – that is, it was a big mass of chaos – “*and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind of God swept over that face of the waters.*”

For Israel, the act of creation was an act in which God subdued chaos and ordered it and bounded it. Here in this Psalm, God’s ordering of the creation is told in terms of mortal combat with the sea, and the creatures of the sea...

*“You divided the sea by your might,
You broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
You crushed the heads of the Leviathan;
You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
You cut openings for springs and torrents;
You dried up ever-flowing streams...
... You have fixed all the bounds of the earth.”*

In the contest against Leviathan, the sea dragons, the sea itself, as well as springs, torrents, and ever-flowing streams – all ancient symbols of chaos and evil – Yahweh runs up the score and achieves a near shut out. Evil is contained, held in check by the sovereign power of the creating God.

It is in this odd reversal of speech – from lamentation to praise of the sovereign God - that we find the second answer to our question:

How shall the church be faithful in these days of national crisis?

By holding fast to our proclamation...

the proclamation of the truth about who God is.
the proclamation of hope to a world in despair.
the proclamation of the future that God has planned.

It is a vision of that future that is held up for us in the last chapters of the Revelation to John. A vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell among mortals...

God himself will be with them;

he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.*

And the one who was seated on the throne said,

“Behold, I am making all things new.”

* * * * *

It is this vision of God's future that calls the church to its third response in these days of national crisis. And this third response may indeed be the most difficult. As the stewards of the mysteries of God, as the bearers of this vision of God's future, the church must maintain its prophetic voice.

In this vision of God's future in Revelation, the holy city comes down out of heaven, and it is a city whose gates will never be shut. All the nations of the earth will walk by its light – all the nations. And all the nations will enter the city.

In God's new heaven and new earth, people are not ultimately defined by national boundaries – God did not create national boundaries, and the loving purpose of God does not recognize them. God created all the earth, and every human life matters to God.

In these days when we talk of war, the church must declare the sanctity of all human life, not just American life. Every human life, and therefore every human casualty, matters. Every human casualty is the destruction of the image of God, and grieves the heart of God.

In maintaining our prophetic voice,

The church must stand against the sentiment expressed by the man on the streets of Pittsburgh who, when asked about military action, said, “Nuke ‘em all. Wipe them off the face of the earth. Turn Afghanistan into a parking lot”.

The church must stand against those whose passion have gone awry, leading them to paint all Arab peoples with a single brush, and all Muslim peoples as terrorists. All Arabs are not terrorists, and all Muslims, by far, are not terrorists.

The church must ask the question, “Why do Palestinians living in refugee camps dance in the streets when they hear of an attack against America? Is it because we have been insensitive to their plight, in which the casualties of the World Trade Center are a drop in the bucket of blood in comparison to their losses?”

The church must poke and prod at the nations – even our own American nation – and ask the questions that arise when we compare our present circumstances with the vision of God's future.

And if we support our nation's use of force, we cannot do it in a spirit of vengeful hatred, but only in a spirit of anguish and mourning for the destruction of those who are created in the image of God. Our love must be like God's love, and extend even to our enemies.

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When chaos breaks loose in our world, we who profess the name of Jesus Christ are not without hope. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is seated on the throne. And he declares "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

His kingdom will come. God will dwell among mortals.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for our God will make all things new.

So, let the church pray.

With every fiber of our being let us pray

to the One who is enthroned in heaven –

pray for the families of the victims in

New York and Washington and Pennsylvania.

pray for the leaders of our nation – and all the nations –

for wisdom and courage and God' guidance.

pray for peace to come to our broken world,

and for violence and hatred to come to an end.

And let the church proclaim

the hope of God's future to a world in despair,

let us proclaim the good news that God still sits on the throne,

and that God's purposes will be accomplished.

And as the ambassadors of the One on the throne,

let the church lift up her prophetic voice among the nations.

And as we close our eyes at night we do not have to see buildings imploding,
and smoke rising to the skies

we can look higher than even those buildings and those columns of smoke

and see instead the throne of heaven, exalted and glorious,

and every knee of every nation bowed down before it,

in wonder, love, and praise.