

3.20.2024 Lenten Midweek Prayer

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Psalm 44:1-10, 13, 17; Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 23:37-39

“The hiddenness of God”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Thank you for gathering this evening. Tonight’s readings help us to see that suffering and disaster strike not only individuals, but also entire communities and nations – the entire human family. Amid broken communities and nations, “communal lament” reminds us of our need for one another in the face of shared human suffering. Instead of cynicism and despair at a world that seems out of our control, communal lament helps us voice our shared needs with God.

Tonight’s psalm struggles with communal feelings of abandonment by God. The Psalmist is expressing moments when an entire community feels the hiddenness of God. The Psalmist writes, “*All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you or been false to your covenant.*” The plural pronouns in “you have rejected us” and “we have not forgotten you” describe the plural lament of communities struggling with God’s hiddenness. Reminding us of God at the center of human community, verse 26 reads, “*Rise up, come to our help, Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.*”

Though Psalm 44 was written over two and a half millennia ago, the words and feelings remain very human. These could be the collective sighs and laments of nations today who have been destroyed by violence and war as well as challenged by natural and human-made disasters. Though humanity struggles with God’s hiddenness, we always live before and with God.

Like you, I have experienced many occasions of communal lament. The 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks; the 3/11/2011 Tohoku Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown; and the 10/27/2018 mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh are times of communal lament that I remember.

The 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was an act that led to an outpouring of global lament, as 2,977 people from 93 nations were killed. The 3/11 Tohoku Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown was a natural and human-made disaster that killed 19,759 persons with 2,553 people still missing. The 10/27/2018 Tree of Life Synagogue shooting killed 11 people because of the antisemitic hatred of white nationalism.

There have been and are today many more natural disasters and ongoing human-made tragedies of hatred and war in our world. Despite our modern progress, hate and violence aren’t

going away and natural disasters seem to be of greater intensity because of our human greed and inability to manage our environment.

At the time of 9/11, in contrast to the patriotic flags that appeared overnight on cars, I remember the prayer of a church member in Chicago, who remembering that the people of 93 nations had died, said, “O Lord, though we often say, ‘God bless America,’ today we must also pray, ‘God bless all nations.’”

At the time of the 3/11 Tohoku Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, I remember that the initial communal lament in Japan was voiced as *tenbatsu*, meaning the “judgement of heaven” or “divine judgement.” Yet quickly, the lament of *tenbatsu* was rearticulated as *jinsai*, meaning a “human [created] disaster.” In other words, everything can’t be blamed upon God, humanity bears responsibility for its mistakes, greed, and the suffering it inflicts upon others.

At the time of the 10/27 Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, I was interim pastor in Evanston Illinois and attended a prayer vigil at Temple Beth Shalom in the neighboring community of Skokie which was attended by Jewish and Christian sisters and brothers of faith. Our shared lament was sadness over humanity’s ongoing religious and racial hatreds that continue to burn in this world, senselessly killing innocent people.

These three events symbolize for me the ongoing communal laments around the world today in places like Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and many others, not to mention our own nation’s communal laments over racism, gun violence and political enmity.

In tonight’s gospel from Luke, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, saying, “*If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*” Jesus’ words remind us that we know what makes for peace among nations and peoples. His words remind us that when we do not do the good we know we should do, God is hidden from our eyes.

In tonight’s complementary gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus also laments, saying, “*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*” Prophets of peace continue to be sent among us in this world. We continue to hear voices lifting our hearts and eyes upward to envision and see God sharing in our human suffering.

Yet humanity continues to ignore responsibility for its violence, foolishness, and neglect of our neighbors. Instead of listening to prophets of peace, we listen instead to voices that steep our anger and frustration at everything while ignoring our own complicity in the world’s

brokenness. Afraid of our neighbors, we close our hearts to Jesus *in* our neighbor, and God remains hidden from our eyes. Jesus continually seeks to gather us together, yet we remain unwilling to gather with Christ for our neighbor.

So Jesus says, “*You will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’*” These words are the terrifying reality of our lament: Jesus withdraws hidden from us because we do not welcome the one who comes in the name of the Lord. He hides himself in the cross that we neglect to carry; he hides himself in our neighbor, whom we neglect to embrace as a sister or brother; and the things that make for peace are hidden from our eyes.

We continue to kill the prophets and crucify Christ in our neighbor. Because we do not see God visiting us in our neighbor, stones are not left upon stones as communities are destroyed. God is hidden in plain sight, and yet we blame God for our blindness and misfortunes.

As we face Holy Week, may we do those things that make for peace. Instead of brutalizing our neighbor, may we welcome our neighbor in whom Christ hides himself.

May we say, “*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*” May Christ heal our blindness allowing us to see Christ hidden in those whom he sends to us.

May Christ free us to love him and serve our neighbor. Amen.