

“Olive Tree Faith” | Rev. Michele Ward | July 24, 2022
July Sermon Series: It Is Well With My Soul | Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church | Baltimore, MD
PSALM OF THE DAY Psalm 52 (NRSVue) Rev. Michele Ward

The second reading today is Psalm 52. Listen now for a word from God.

To the leader. A Maskil of David, when Doeg the Edomite came to Saul and said to him, “David has come to the house of Achimelech.”

Why do you boast, O mighty one, of mischief done against the godly?
All day long you are plotting destruction.
Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery.
You love evil more than good and lying more than speaking the truth. *Selah*
You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.

But God will break you down forever; God will snatch and tear you from your tent. God will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*
The righteous will see and fear and will laugh at the evildoer, saying,
“See the one who would not take refuge in God but trusted in abundant riches and sought refuge in wealth!”
But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.
I will thank you forever because of what you have done.
In the presence of the faithful
I will proclaim your name, for it is good.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

PRAY

We find ourselves in the fourth week of our sermon series on hymnody this morning - this very hot, humid, July morning. That final stanza of Psalm 52, which speaks about being like the green olive tree in the house of God, fills me with so much longing. Wouldn't we all like to be an olive tree right now? I know I would much rather be an olive tree on the banks of a river on a day like this!

And while we might dream of cooler weather and gentler climates in the heart of summer, this is not what the psalmist writes about for us to explore today. The writer of this psalm directly addresses someone named Doeg the Edomite, a man who led a military action against 85 priests and their families, killing them all, by the order of King Saul, the first king of Israel.

Doeg tells King Saul that David, the prophesied soon to be king of Israel, has taken shelter in the home of a sympathizer of the new king - a priest by the name of Achimelech. After Doeg tells Saul this news, he commands Doeg to commit a terrible act - he commands Doeg to kill Achimelech, dozens of other

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priests, women, children, and livestock in the city. Doeg does this for King Saul, ultimately killing 85 priests and their families because they were hiding the “usurper” of the throne.

The psalm begins by directly addressing Doeg, asking “Why do you boast, O mighty one, /of mischief done against the godly?” After grieving the senseless violence Doeg and his followers commit, the writer then warns them that goodness will eventually defeat them. The psalmist describes the actions of God, a God who protects and fights for the very people that Doeg oppresses.

Now, both the minor prophet reading from Amos and this Psalm may be entirely off putting to some of us because of its explicitly vengeful and retaliatory language. It is true that words like these in Amos and the Psalms give justification to oppressors. One of the most common reasons why I hear from people explaining they cannot believe in God is because of passages like these. Something like these questions come out of their mouths: “Why is God so violent and why do people use God’s name to justify their violence? I could never believe in an angry, violent God.”

I want to challenge us this morning to consider something else - an image of the oppressed saying and hearing these words, not the oppressor saying and hearing these words. Damon Garcia, practical theologian, argues, “there is another image of vengefulness, that doesn’t justify oppression, but empowers liberation.”¹ It can be easy to dismiss this kind of language in the Psalms and the Prophets if you have never been an oppressed individual, if you have never had your livelihood or your neighborhood or your personhood systematically torn apart. If you find yourself in a position where you do not need to liberate yourself from subjugation or maltreatment based on your social location, then these types of psalms may fall flat or feel entirely foreign to you.

For a moment, I would like you to close your eyes. I want you to imagine a time that someone has wronged someone you love. Imagine what that felt like in your body when you learned that something terrible and unjust happened to your loved one.

What emotions come up for you?

What thoughts rise to the top of your mind?

How do you imagine responding to support this loved one?

What words do you say to them to comfort them?

¹ “Liturgy that Matters: July 17, 2022,” Commentary written by Damon Garcia, courtesy of enflashed: spiritual nourishment for collective liberation.

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Come back to the present and to the text with me. Now, I want you to imagine that you are a parent, and someone has harmed your child. This is a better place to begin as we think about this psalm and its portrayal of God’s vengeance. We also find this kind of imagery in the minor prophet Hosea. In chapter 13, Hosea describes God as a mother bear, who, robbed of her cubs, attacks the kidnappers, and rips out their hearts.

This is the kind of God that the psalm writer is thinking about when they pen the following line - “God will break you down forever;/God will snatch and tear you from your tent;/God will uproot you from the land of the living.” This is a kind of justice based vengeance, a righteous anger, that gives favor to and stands up for the oppressed. This is not a battle hymn. This is a liberation hymn. God does not condone the violence committed by Doeg. God and the psalmist condemn it. God protects God’s people from further harm. God does not cause harm.

In beautiful symmetry, the psalm ends with the image of the olive tree - a vision of deep roots, a strong trunk, confident branches stretching towards the sky, abundant fruit growing on the limbs. This is a person who will withstand all sorts of attempts to discourage, dissuade, and destroy them. They will not be moved. They will stand tall, take courage, and trust in God.

The olive tree is a powerful symbol in Judaism. Olive oil lit the lamps in the temple, and is said to be “a symbol of light for the world,” according to Midrash Tanchuma.² To refer to oneself as an olive tree is a bold and powerful statement. Olive trees remain green year round, and they can last thousands of years. My parents had olive trees on our ranch property growing up. Long after the house I grew up in no longer exists, those olive trees will still be there, I imagine, rooted deeply into the soil, standing the test of time. The psalmist says that we, as God followers, are like those olive trees.

Always green, never moving, strong,
full of life, thriving against the odds.

This self identification with strength and connection to God in the face of adversity relates to our hymn for this morning, “It Is Well With My Soul.” The psalm writer and the hymn writer had both experienced and known deep loss

² [Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6:3](#)

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and senseless tragedy. In the early 1880s, Horatio Spafford, a successful Chicago lawyer and Presbyterian layman, sent his four daughters and his wife ahead of him to cross the Atlantic Ocean by boat while he was detained on business. They were bound for a vacation in Europe, and he insisted that he would join them in a few days' time in Paris. In the middle of the night, another boat crashed into the boat carrying his wife and daughters. All four of the daughters died in that boat accident. Only his wife survived.³

Horatio, distraught, embarks on a transatlantic journey to join his grieving wife as she waits for him in Paris. He wrote the words originally as a poem to express his grief.⁴ He did not know at the time it would become a classic hymn reprinted in thousands of hymnals around the world. The refrain of the hymn reminds me of the psalmist's lines about being like an olive tree. The refrain goes, “It is well/it is well with my soul.”⁵

This refrain echoes through his poem, through our hearts, and in our ears today. No matter what happens, he writes, it is well with his soul. An astonishing statement to make any day of the week. But imagine making this statement after losing your four children, pieces of your heart, and being able to say this - what rock solid, stalwart faith it would take to say and believe this.

In my doubtful moments, I wonder if he wrote this line aspirationally. Perhaps he wrote this as a way of bringing this kind of belief into being inside of himself. I am reminded of the father asking for healing for his child in Mark 9 who cries out to God, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Don't we all express something like this at some point or another in our spiritual lives? I wonder if this prayer-poem Horatio wrote during his personal dark night of the soul came from a similar place as this father in Mark 9, or the psalmist who writes of the vengeance of God and the solidity of their faith. Whatever it was that inspired Horatio to pen these words, I am grateful that he did.

I am grateful because these words - “It is well, it is well with my soul” - can be a balm to the spirit in times of sorrow and loss. They can be a prayer you repeat to yourself no matter how you feel, no matter how lost or afraid you may feel. They can be words you cannot sing right now because they do not feel true. The pain is too strong, the grief is too real, the loss is too much.

I want you to take a minute and look at the person next to you, behind you, in front you. These are the people who can sing these words when you cannot.

³ *Glory to God PC(USA) Hymnal*, 2013, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation (Louisville, KY).

⁴ Daw Jr., Carl P., *Glory to God: A Companion*, 2016, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation (Louisville, KY).

⁵ Spafford Gates, Horatio, https://hymnary.org/person/Spafford_HG.

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These are the people who will pray these words when you cannot pray. These are the people who will believe these words when you are unable to believe they are true. The community you see and feel around you - they are with you. They are the olive trees in your life when you cannot and do not feel like an olive tree. And you may be an olive tree for someone else, someone you may not even realize needs you to be an olive tree for them.

As we sing “It Is Well With My Soul,” imagine yourself like an olive tree, tall and strong, unmoveable, standing the test of time, lighting the temple of God with your gifts, providing shade and sustenance to those around you.

Whatever our lot, God has taught us to say, it is well, it is well with our souls.

May it be so. Amen.