

The ancient people of faith, those who produced the Psalms, knew something of our times also— of a social system in turmoil, with a history of slavery to overcome, questionable rulers seemingly corrupted by power, and workers struggling to make ends meet. They knew about racial strife and refugees, ethnic divisions and violence, a temple destroyed by marauding armies who have no respect for anyone else’s culture or history or religion.

Their songs come to us in the midst of their efforts to prosper in a land of promise—to raise their families faithfully... when they keep getting pounded by the news of one atrocity after another. They’re not sure what the future will hold. They’re close to despair when the psalmist gathers the religious community to recite the story of the people of faith. They begin with brutal honesty before God:

*If it were not for You, O Beloved,
YOU who make all things new,
Fear and chaos would reign in every heart;*

Is it confidence in God do you suppose or are they trying to convince themselves that they believe?
We will trust as the community bound together in faith.

Maybe they’re stating how they feel currently, or maybe its aspirational language. Maybe they’re reminding each other of their shared experience.... the way they do every year around the Seder table, reciting their history and the God who has delivered them again and again.

*When doubt threatens to overwhelm and separate us,
when anger makes us blind,
Then You, O Merciful One, are ever-ready
to awaken the holy, the sacred within me, within us;
Then do your Living Streams of Grace enfold,
then, grace bind us up together.*

Perhaps, the way we get through what we’re facing in *this* time and place, perhaps the only way to get through, is to be faithful, to remember our calling is to love, to be part of the solution, to tikkun olam, (Hebrew) for repair of the world. Which requires that we examine our own unconscious bias, – that we refuse to ignore the biased attitude within, as well as the racist joke made by another. – to lean into the difficult conversations with colleagues and friends, – to learn to recognize the way our systems discriminate, and – to admit how we have benefitted from the prejudicial system which help create this great country.

Perhaps we too must pray with that ancient community of faith:
*Blessed are You Holy God, a very Presence to us, a comfort to troubled hearts!
Grant us the strength of eagle wings, the courage to soar to new heights!
Break within us the bonds of fear that we may live with love!*

The Psalms were originally sung not read, to be ever ready on the tip of a tongue to encourage... to be sung in community to remember whose we are. To be sung over and over again, so that their faith could move from the head to the heart to the rhythm of our existence.

With the Psalms as the soundtrack of our lives, we just might, on this labor day weekend, acknowledge that this country was built on slave labor. And that’s true not just of the plantations and cotton fields of the south, northerners are part of the history of exploitation, (although we may not know our history as well), of sugar and the ports on our eastern coast.

Singing the Psalms, we might resist the urge to blame an entire race for the actions of a few who cried out in frustration with violence, or an entire religion when a misguided subsection twists its' basic tenets.

We might refuse to demonize an entire profession of those called to serve and protect because we have all drank from the same water of prejudice. So that the question some are asking of the police force about examining its unconscious bias and taking steps to act more equitably, that becomes a question for all of us.

I suspect that our resistance to do the work that would make us better anti-racism allies, is because it is work. The call to repentance is difficult (for the early followers as well)—it has always been easier to point the finger elsewhere rather than turn our attention inward.

But if anyone should have a leg up in this work, it is Christians, we, who have repentance woven into our worship and into our theology. Each week, we reaffirm the promise of forgiveness to free us from the burden of guilt. The baptismal waters renew us and free us from fear of death because we have already died with Jesus and are now raised with him to new life. And in our baptismal vows we promise to “resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”

This week, the photograph of a little boy, lifeless, on the beach in Turkey came to signify thousands who have died trying to escape the everyday of bombs, shooting, and starvation of life in Syria, and other conflicts.

Scott Simon, commenting on NPR said: “there’s been lots of fine reporting about the thousands of lives lost, the millions uprooted and the many who now camp in foreign train stations” trying to escape the violence. “But we can grow numb to numbers. One little boy can be a human story.”

But a lot of things grab for our attention. . . . We look, and feel, then look away, to go on with the lives we have right in front of us. Until the sight of a little boy on a beach reminds us that looking away can cost lives, too.¹

Maybe the scripture can move us beyond the statistics, beyond just feeling sick when we see those images. Maybe it can counsel us of ways to move beyond apathy and the fear that we are powerless to do anything. For we *are* bound to the suffering of the world, but we are also bound to one another in faith, we are bound to hope because in our holy word and in our lives, death does not have the final word. This is our prayer Holy God, this is our belief O Counselor, Our guidance comes from You, not from the 24hour news outlets, from social media, from the naysayers and unbelievers and cynics of the world.

*Our guidance comes from God.
Blessed are You, O Rhythm of Life!
Beloved of our heart!*

1.<http://www.npr.org/2015/09/05/437610677/a-familys-tragedy-captured-on-camera-focuses-attention-on-crisis>