

## Among the Living

### Psalm 66

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;  
sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise.  
Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe  
before you.  
All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.” Selah

Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.  
He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him,  
who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let the rebellious not  
exalt themselves. Selah

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,  
who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.  
For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.  
You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs;  
you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have  
brought us out to a spacious place.

I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows,  
those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.  
I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make  
an offering of bulls and goats. Selah

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me.  
I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue.  
If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.  
But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.  
Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

Occasionally, people are curious about how I go about writing a sermon. Like, is there just something I'm interested in and then I just figure out a text that seems to fit? Or do I have a bunch of ideas and write them on little pieces of paper and pull them out of a hat? Or maybe something more scientific like a ouiji board? Well, even though I don't do EVERYTHING they taught me in seminary, when it comes to starting a sermon, I pretty much do what I was taught. Every Monday morning I sit down with the four readings listed in the Revised Common

Lectionary. And I sit down and read through them slowly, straight through. Then, I'd love to tell you the lights dim and the wind picks up and the voice of God begins to rumble, but it doesn't. I normally just kind of feel around inside myself for a sense of connection to one of the readings- a fondness towards it, a sense of, "Yes, there's some good news that I want people to hear about." And really? And when I find that, that's about 85% of a sermon for me. Once I've figured out that much- once I've formed a sense of connection to a text, the rest of it, the studying and the writing- all that's just fun.

The problem for me is what happens when that sense of connection doesn't happen. Yeah, the problem is when I read all four texts, and when I get to the end I'm like, "Really? Are you serious?" Sometimes, and this week was one of those weeks, I'll even check the lectionary again in the vain hope that maybe I was just looking at the wrong week or something. And it never is.

No, the weeks where I just don't feel that sense of connection- well, you can't force it. You can't make it happen any more than you can make yourself love someone you don't. So on these weeks- I do something different. As strange, as un-pastor-like as it may sound, I go with the text I dislike, the one I hate, the most. I go with the text that makes me the most uncomfortable, the one with the language that makes me want to close my ears, the one with a theology that makes me consider converting to some other faith tradition like Buddhism where I could wear more linen and study kung fu and eat Thai food and call that church.

There was a time when I tried another strategy, when I would go with the text I least disliked- but I actually think that's the worst of all. If you don't have a sense of connection with

a text, and you don't hate it- then you really don't have too much to say about it. And believe me, I can tell you from painful experience that makes for a LOOOOG fifteen minutes.

So, some weeks I have to go with a text I really don't like- and this week turned out to be one of those. And this week the winner for least popular text turned out to be Psalm 66.



When I first read this Psalm in my office, I literally groaned. Now to be fair, it starts out OK. Make a joyful noise to God. Sing to God all the earth. Blah. Blah. Blah. Lots of Psalms start out that way. Then it tells you to tell God how awesome God is- that God is so awesome God's enemies are cowering somewhere. And this kind of thing definitely begins to make me twitch a little bit. I've never understood why on earth the Bible is so insistent on telling us to tell God how Great God is. It makes it seem like God has a self-esteem problem. Personally, I find it extremely tiring being around people who need you to continually affirm how great they are telling them how marvelous their every thought and action is. And the thought that God might be remotely like this is deeply unsettling to me. And not to mention the whole cringing enemies thing. It just begins to paint a picture of God that feels like this insecure bully- needing constant approval and obeisance. But honestly, I can deal with this kind of stuff. It's not how I think about God, but it seems to work for the Psalmist here and there, so I can chalk this kind of thing up to different folks, different strokes.

No, what stopped me in my tracks and elicited my groan comes three stanzas in- when the Psalmist begins to give thanks to God for bringing suffering and pain upon the people. The Psalmist says thank you God for trapping us in the net- a Hebrew euphemism for what happens when another nation comes in and destroys your cities and enslaves your people into captivity.

The Psalmist says thank you God for placing heavy burdens on our backs. Thank you for making us walk through water and fire- another image from the exile. And maybe my favorite of all- the Psalmist says thank you God for allowing men to ride over our heads. Scholars are actually not entirely sure what this means- some people think it refers to literally being run over by chariots, and some think it's a metaphor for disease. Well, either way- it's definitely not a good thing.

The psalmist here in this third section appears to just be thanking God for visiting suffering after suffering upon the people. The psalmist seems to be thanking God for pain. And this- well I just have a huge problem with this.



Now, it used to be in the church that everybody all thought that God was responsible for everything in the world, like God is this cosmic puppet master, and everything that happens- whether good or evil, well God is ultimately pulling the strings. And theologians like my good friend John Calvin would say things like: “Hey folks, you can't have the good without the bad. If you believe in God you have to think he's responsible for everything- the mosquitoes and poison ivy, too.” (I'm paraphrasing, here.) Indeed, folks like Calvin went so far as to say that there really isn't even such a thing as a bad or evil thing in life- because if God is behind it, why then it only must SEEM bad now, but later, down the road, sometimes a LOOOONG way down the road, we will understand that really it's all good.

Now, like I said- it used to be that pretty much everybody in church kind of believed this way. But then, mainly because of World War II- this easy belief in God sitting in front of a computer screen like in that Far Side cartoon where there's this guy walking along with a piano

hanging over his head and God has his finger poised over a button marked 'Smite' - well people started to question this image. People looked honestly at the horror of World War 2, at the horror of Auschwitz, and we started to say- you know there's just no way to look at what we did to one another and say that a good God either made it happen or sat back and allowed it to happen, at least in an easy way. No one with any kind of conscience could honestly study that time period and say, "Well, yeah the holocaust looks bad on the surface...but surely in time we'll see the silver lining and God's plan behind it all."

And interestingly, churches and seminaries began to shift. The idea of God being like a puppet master has really faded to the point that today if I took a poll hardly any of you would say you believe God sends tsuanamis or floods or tornados at people. Almost all of you would believe humans have free will and that our choices matter. And yeah, we'll always have the Pat Robertsons of the world who will keep trying to tell people tragedies are a result of an angry God, but today, even your most conservative Presbyterian tends to be embarrassed by talk like that.

No, today we've become much more nervous about the idea that God brings pain into our lives. In fact when you take a pastoral care class in theology it's almost a new orthodoxy to teach seminarians never to tell someone in pain that it's part of God's plan. I mean go get coffee, sing Amazing Grace, heck do a liturgical dance- anything but tell someone you believe God might have something to do with the pain they are experiencing.

And believe me, I totally get this. I do. And I agree with this. When tragedy strikes and someone asks me whether God is to blame I'm extremely comfortable saying, "I. Don't. Know."



But. As I sat with this stupid psalm this week. This stupid psalm that I did NOT like. And I read it over and over and I thought about it more and more. And after a while I found myself in a different place- I found myself realizing that not all pain is the same. Not all pain is the same. And I began to wonder if this new orthodoxy where we went from thinking God created tragedies to test our faith to believing that God has NOTHING to do with pain EVER- I began to wonder if we haven't gone too far.



Not all pain is the same. You know ever since last October I've been hitting the gym. A lot. I've stuck to my diet fairly well, although I will admit to you that last week after so many of you told me that my sermon made you want a bear claw, I myself actually ate a bear claw. I thought I might feel bad about that- it was glorious. Well, since last October I've been working out like I've never done, and I've been living in a constant state of mild pain. I tear myself up during the week, and then during the weekend let everything heal. And then I do it all over again. And I remember one of the first conversations I had with my trainer after I hobbled in one day whining about the nearly incapacitating hurt he had put on me.

His face clouded over with concern. "Well, is it good pain, or is it bad pain?"

I looked at him like he had just asked me whether I had been bitten by a good deadly venomous rattlesnake or a bad deadly venomous rattlesnake. I was like what do you mean good pain or bad pain? There's a good pain? And he looked at me like wow, you really haven't done this before. And he explained to me one of the most absolutely crucial and important lessons

about the body I probably should have already known- good pain is the burning you get when your stressing your muscle tissues causing the micro tearing in them necessary to spur them to grow back longer, thicker, and stronger. Good pain is the soreness you feel the day or so after a good workout known as DOMS, delayed onset muscle soreness. Good pain comes on gradually is like a slow burn.

Bad pain on the other hand- is entirely different. Any kind of pain you experience in a joint, for instance, is bad- and you either want to change the angle your working or just stop. Bad pain is a sharp or shooting pain in a muscle- this indicates tearing, pulling, or separating and it means you should stop immediately. When you experience bad pain and keep going- it isn't productive, it's certainly not macho or tough, it's injurious and it's setting your body back months and wasting all of the time and work you've put in.

Well, this was a revelation to me- bad pain is pain that's destructive, pain that should be avoided at all costs. Good pain is necessary, vital for creating a healthier and stronger body. Bad pain literally makes less of you, while good pain actually makes more of you.



So, what does the psalmist have in mind? Is he thanking God for bad pain or good pain? Well, the psalmist gives us a real helpful clue when he sings that God has tried and tested the people like silver. "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried."

Silver was first worked in the Middle East during the Bronze Age between 4 and 3 thousand years before the Common Era, before Christ. In general silver does not exist in a pure form- people didn't stand in the Bosphorus and pan for pure little nuggets of silver that would wash down. No, you tend to find it in ore- in rocks that are partially silver but partially lead and

other stuff. The ancients discovered something really cool- if you create a hot enough fire and you stick one of these rocks in there something amazing happens. The stuff you don't want- the lead and the other metals and minerals oxidizes and burns away leaving you with this stunningly beautiful metal that shines like the moon and is a dream to work. This process is technically known as cupellation- here the translators stick to the more common term: trying. The silver ore is tried by the fire- at the most literal, physical level, this means you heat the ore up to an extraordinary degree not to harm it or destroy it- but to actually get rid of the impurities, to strengthen it, to make it more of what it was made to be.

When the psalmist is giving thanks to God for the pain the people have endured- he's not giving thanks for bad pain. He's not offering us some terrible theology that would have us believe God is an angry god sending tsunamis and tornados at people, hurting and destroying God's own children. But he is offering thanks for good pain- for challenges met and faced, challenges that ultimately make more of us.



I'm glad that most of us here today would recoil at someone who tried to tell you that God visits tragedy on people. I'm glad we see through this. But I do wonder sometimes if we haven't gone overboard a little bit to the point of believing God isn't mixed up in our pain at all, believing that pain itself is just a bad thing to be avoided at all costs.

You can't blame us for thinking this way, I suppose. Pain relief is largest component of the pharmaceutical industry. The pain relief market was worth 18 billion dollars in America in 2000- in 2005 it nearly doubled to 30 billion. And every year since then that number has only increased. Any night you turn on the TV you will see at least one advertisement for pain relief. And in terms of sheer numbers we are part of an American cohort today that is the most

medicated either through prescription meds or self-administered medicine from the liquor cabinet. By any measure you choose, we are the most numbed to pain Americans there has ever been. And this is a problem.

Brené Brown teaches social work at the University of Houston, and she is one of the most fascinating and best speakers you will ever hear. She cut her teeth researching shame. You know, sometimes I get frustrated when people ask me what I do and I'm honest and they recoil at the word pastor- like I can see the words 'judgmental' and 'narrow minded' flash across their eyes as they go back over the conversation trying to remember if they said anything "bad". But being a shame researcher- I think that's actually worse.

One time, just after she published her first book, she was asked to speak in front of an audience of highly successful professional types who paid a boat load of money to be there. She was really nervous and arrived at this swank country club early, and introduced herself to the tiny, tiny impeccably dressed woman running the show, and had this little exchange. The woman examined Brene then said: "Well, you don't look like a researcher. I'm going to introduce you. I need your bio." Brene thought to herself that this was a strange twist on "Hello, nice to meet you," but you never know with some people. The woman scanned Brene's bio and her eyes widened. "It says here you're a shame researcher," she said like she was picking up a dead rat by the tail. Brene goes, "Yep." "Do. You. Study. Anything. Else?" Brene: "Yeah, I also study fear and vulnerability." Then she writes: "[The woman] shraped, which is like a combo shriek and gasp." The woman then proceeded to tell Brene people were there for something positive and that she would NOT speak about shame, they were eating after all, and that she would give them nice, happy thoughts or she wouldn't give them anything at all. See, the woman had been told that Brene's work is about being more joyful and wholehearted, which

it is, but what she didn't understand is that the path to living wholeheartedly, the path to pain, is laden with painful moments. And the path doesn't curve around these painful moments- it goes right through them. It goes right through pain- good pain.

Brene has interviewed thousands and thousands of people, and one of the most challenging things she has learned is that our natural response to pain, whether it's good or bad, is to push it away and numb it. The ways we numb are as varied as we are- some of us medicate, some of us shop and spend, others eat, others pursue success, some get lost for hours on the internet, and others decide to have an affair. Anything we do that takes us away from the pain of life for any period of time but leaves us with nothing to show for it- this is numbing. And here's the terrible truth she discovered: we cannot selectively numb. We cannot just pick the one thing we're afraid of, the one thing that hurts- and just take the edge off of that feeling. When we numb- we numb all of our feelings: our joy, our passion, our ability to love and connect. And these are the very things that make us feel alive- that keep us, as the Psalmist says, in the land of the living.

And so, according to Brene and the thousands of people she's interviewed, pain, good pain- when faced with courage, and faced with friends, actually makes more of us after we realize it really won't kill us.

This is what the psalmist knew to be true. All of those hard times- when the people knew what it was like to carry heavy burdens around, to carry shame, to carry humiliation. All the times when the people felt trapped in a net and had to watch while others rode over their heads on their way to the top while they languished at the bottom. All of this ultimately turned out to be good pain to the psalmist, because, at the end of the day, they survived- they were still alive,

alive and writing poetry. God had set them down in a good place- a broad place, a wide place. They had their families. They had their songs. And it was all enough.



This week we will all know pain. We will all be hurt. Someone will say something, or not say something. Someone will do something thoughtless, or forget to do something so meaningful to us it makes us ache inside a little, although we never mentioned it. The question we must ask ourselves is whether the pain is good pain or not. Is it making more of us or not? And if the pain be good my prayer is that God will give you strength to endure. But if it's not- may God give you the wisdom to stop, leave, or find another way. **Amen.**