

Roll Down Justice: Renouncing Evil

Psalm 13

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March 5, 2023

One of the most powerful images to show up on the news and in social media after the shooting at Michigan State last month was a photo of The Rock - a 147-year-old landmark on the school's campus. Much like the rock on Michigan's campus, students paint The Rock with political statements, social commentary, or just announcements of upcoming events. After the shooting on the night of February 13, someone painted MSU's rock black and then painted these words in red, "How Many More?" On the ground, were bouquets of flowers to honor the lives of the three students who were killed and the five injured that night.

I think many in our country share that feeling. No more so, I suspect, than the students for whom this is the second mass shooting they have survived in their short twenty years of life. On Michigan State's campus were students who survived the Oxford High School shooting, the Parkland High School shooting, or the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. One student from Oxford said, "We just went through this fourteen months ago. How can it be happening again?"

Those three words - how many more - hold in them the despair, the outrage, the sense of helplessness that so many of us are feeling about gun violence in our country. It is inconceivable that in the first two months of 2023, there have been 97 mass shootings with 137 people killed and more than 300 injured. It is incomprehensible that our government, designed to protect us, has become so dysfunctional that they can't seem to do anything to stop this slaughter. Our despair is in part the festering grief which never gets resolved from one shooting before the next shooting happens and the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that, despite so many young lives lost, nothing has changed.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent, and we are continuing in our Lenten sermon series entitled Roll Down, Justice. Much of this series will be about how we, as people of faith, can help to build a more just society. Yet, before we go any further down that road, we will stop here and acknowledge how emotionally exhausting it is to live in a world of so much pain - let alone to try to change it.

There are seasons in life, sometimes in our individual lives and sometimes in our communal life when the enormity of grief, of loss, of fury simply becomes too much to hold. When it feels as though we absolutely have to release it or become numb to it because to live in it feels unbearable. These are the seasons of life which so many of the Psalms are about. They are called the Psalms of Lament and they make up about 70% of the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 13 is one of them. "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?" You can hear in those words that same desperation and impatience as in "How many more?" Typically, in the Psalms of Lament, there is an individual or community experiencing deep grief, sorrow, or regret because of some crisis. There is a sense that the crisis is undeserved and unjust. The speaker is

calling out to God for deliverance. What is interesting is that the specifics of the crisis are never mentioned - as if getting into the details of who did what or who is at fault detracts from the sheer anguish that needs to be expressed by the speaker and heard by God. Plus, the lack of specifics makes them universally applicable. No matter what your own crisis might be, you can find how you feel expressed here.

We can imagine one of those Africans on the slave boats we talked about last week, watching others dying of illness or starvation around him, suffering his own physical agony, and crying out, “How long, Lord?”

Or perhaps a woman in an abusive marriage struggling to endure another beating asking, “How many more?”

A Ukrainian learning of another friend’s death, another victim in a senseless war, or the people of the West Bank as yet another round of conflicts heightens tensions and feeds the fear there will never be a resolution.

“How long, Lord? How many more?”

This level of despair can so quickly turn to poison. The poison of hopelessness that leads to giving up. The poison of resentment that leads to lashing out. The poison of cynicism that leads to isolation. The poison of anger that leads to misanthropy. And once the poisoning starts, we can easily succumb to it, becoming paralyzed, unable to continue trying.

That is why it is so critical that we express our feelings of grief and sorrow or anger because expressing them lessens their intensity. Putting them out into the world helps us connect with others who may be feeling the same. Hearing them spoken aloud can lead us to recognizing that we don’t want to be stuck in them. And that makes room for something else.

One of the most fascinating things about Psalms of Lament is that many of them make a complete reversal in tone part way through. They begin with the agony of the speaker, the injustice of their circumstances, their feelings that God has deserted them. And then suddenly, in the next stanza, the speaker is suddenly full of praise and gratitude for God. Psalm 13 is a great example of this. We begin with “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?” and end with “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise for he has been good to me”.

Scholars believe that this points to how the Psalms were used in worship centuries ago. Between the outpouring of grief and the sudden turn to praise there was a sermon or an exhortation from the worship leader or some kind of ritual act meant to help the people return to their faith as a source of comfort, strength, and courage.

So, I wonder what such an act could be for us. Obviously, there are steps to take when you are feeling overwhelmed by the injustices of the world. Therapy can be immensely helpful. Finding a group of friends who have similar feelings can be affirming and even inspiring. Reading stories of how humanity has done good in the world or remembering your own experiences of receiving the kindness and compassion of another person can help shine the light of hope into your pain.

Yet, I also think what we do here in this space can be healing and can open our broken hearts to God's light and love. When we pray together for each other, our community, and our world. When we sing together drawn by God's spirit in the unique experience of connection and expression that comes only with music.

And, of course, in the sacraments we celebrate together. In the sacrament of baptism, we are reminded of God's gift of new life, of hope and renewal, that comes with God claiming us as God's own. But, we're also reminded of the vow we make in baptism and in membership to "accept the freedom and the power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves". In repeating this vow over and over again in our lifetimes, we are reminded that injustice does not leave us powerless or helpless. It needn't overwhelm or paralyze us. Because God gives us the freedom and the power to resist.

In Communion, we pray the Great Thanksgiving, a prayer that tells the stories of God's goodness and love for us and the history of Jesus's life and teachings, death and resurrection. The prayer then calls on the Holy Spirit to bless the bread and cup so that they can both nourish us as we continue to seek justice in this world and bind us together as a community of love and support.

These two acts help us to find our identities as Christ followers again and to recognize how much bigger and more powerful God is than whatever evil of this world has caused us such pain. And they give us the strength to do something, to act, to call out injustice, to influence change.

I promised you that at the end of each of these sermons I would offer you some practical suggestions for action against injustice. Today, I have several. The first is that when we celebrate Communion in a few minutes, you close your eyes during the prayer. Let the words of God's love for you and Jesus's love for all people flow over you. Then, when you come forward and receive the elements of Communion, remember that in taking these elements, you are part of a movement to change the world started by this savior we choose to follow.

On a practical level, I invite you to learn more about what you can do to help address gun violence. On the church's website, there is a page dedicated to action steps you can take, organizations you can work with, and resources for more information. Also, as Jenaba mentioned last week, the Michigan Area of the United Methodist Church is putting together an Advocacy Day on March 22 when you will have an opportunity to interact with elected officials to talk about possible pathways toward change. There are trainings planned between now and the Advocacy Day to prepare you for having those conversations. You can learn more by googling Michigan UMC Advocacy Day.

The grief and outrage we feel each time another person dies in a mass shooting needn't paralyze us as long as we recognize it is real and legitimate and needs expression. As long as we make space for it and name it. When we do, God can take our anger and turn it into action. God can help us change the answer to "how many more?"

Thanks be to God. Amen.