

## Yelling at God

(readings taken from Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Psalm 79, 1 Timothy 2:1-7)

Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Sept. 22, '13



So here's a question for you: let's say you're going through a serious crisis that shakes you at the very core of your being. What is usually the first thing religious people tell you? All too often we're told to "be strong". And if we're just a blubbering mess and obviously *not* very strong, we are often told to "seek strength" through prayer.

Now I'm not saying this is bad advice; life can be tough in the best of times, so we can always use more strength. But "strength" is not always the only thing we need. Sometimes we just need... to *vent* - at God, "to let it all hang out" so to speak. And there's nothing wrong with that.

In fact, if all you can think of is shaking your fist at God and scream "why?!", you're in good company. You're in the company of all those prophets and writers in the Bible who were not afraid to "let it all hang out" and who told God how it really was, warts and all.

Jeremiah wished his head were a water well and his eyes fountains of tears so he could weep day and night. He's crushed and sick to the pit of his stomach and he screams he can't take it anymore.

The author of the 79th psalm sees his world fall apart around him; the Temple is destroyed and desecrated, and the people of Israel are the world's laughing stock; "How long do we have to put up with this?!", he screams, "Aren't you supposed to save us? God, give us a break!"

These people poured out their grief and their anger and their frustration to God. They did not pretend to be "strong" when they weren't; they didn't pretend to be "faith-filled" when they felt more like "fear-filled".

But as they wailed out their fears and their worries, their anger and their hopelessness - they somehow found the strength they thought they didn't have; and their lament sustained their relationship with God. And that, too, is what prayer is for and what it can do.

When I am talking to people who have just experienced a personal tragedy or are right in the middle of one, I sometimes come across someone who never thought of taking those gut-wrenching honest feelings to God in prayer. Maybe because they feel it's not right to complain to God; maybe it's a Canadian thing, it's just not - polite to complain. So they bottle it up and keep it to themselves. And that's a very sad, lonesome place to be.

But as I hope you now can see: yelling and wailing at God, even shaking your fist, is an important part of an honest relationship with God. It's an essential part of the journey through the valley of death and the valley of disappointment and anger and grief and hurt, and all of those other very raw and real feelings that leave us feeling wrung out and drained.

And then there are those who are struck by tragedy, and it just destroys their faith in a God of love. "If there really is a loving God, why didn't he stop these horrible things from happening?", is their reasoning. For them, God is a form of life insurance, magically protecting them from all the bad things in life. And if it doesn't work out that way, well, you cancel the policy.

Which brings us to Kim, someone from our congregation we pray for every Sunday. This bright, young woman is in hospice with terminal brain cancer. If anyone has the right to give up on God because of the raw deal life gave her, it's Kim. And yet, whenever I see her in her hospital bed, she always asks me to pray with her. Yes, of course there is lots of anger and fear and despair. But also a deep awareness that that if anyone knows what it means to go through hell, it is Jesus. Or as Kim once put it, "At least Jesus knows what I'm griping about". She gets it. She knows the value of yelling at God.

People like the prophet Jeremiah also get it. His grief and pain for everything that's wrong in Israel cannot be stopped, just like a waterfall cannot be stopped, it just keeps flowing. There is injustice and corruption and people are suffering; there is a serious famine because of crop failures and people are dying; and on top of that the country is on the verge of yet another destructive war and people will be butchered. It seems as though with every with every opportunity they get, the people of Israel move further away from God's dream for them - and it just kills him.

Yet we realize that as a prophet, Jeremiah is also speaking on behalf of God. Not only do *the people* feel abandoned - *God* feels abandoned. So Jeremiah's painful lament becomes a call to the people to invite God into their our lives once again, and to be who God envisions them to be.

It's 587 BC, and the holy Temple, together with all of Jerusalem, is destroyed by the invading Babylonians. Thousands are killed, and those who survived are carried off into exile; an entire nation is displaced.

The 79th Psalm was written for one of the most traumatic and most defining periods in the history of the people of Israel. And in the midst of all this despair the author *screams* out, accusing God of abandoning everyone. "Where are you when we need you?!"

And then he realizes that faith is not about finding shelter from the harsh realities, but that God can in fact be found in the middle of those harsh realities, offering hope - if only we'd make the effort to open ourselves to it.

And that brings us to the letter to Timothy and the challenge in it: the challenge to Timothy and his church to pray for others, especially for those in authority, the people in charge.

So what's the big deal about praying for the people in power, you may well think. Worst case, you haven't voted for them and complain that they are ruining the province or the country; in fact, you may not even like them. But okay, if that's the challenge, you can bring yourself to hold them in prayer, you tell yourself.

But when we read the letter to Timothy we have to keep in mind that the political situation of his day was very different from our own. He was not living in a democracy, but under a repressive regime that was persecuting all of the followers of this Jesus of Nazareth, trying to kill them off.

So essentially, they were encouraged to pray for their mortal enemies!

So just like yelling Jeremiah and the lamentful Psalm, this passage, too, shows that the purpose of faith and prayer is not to shelter you from the world's harsh realities, but to be a living witness of God's dreams for a better world. Now *there's* a challenge...!

These three passages call us to take a serious look at the question: "What would the world look like if it was fully Christian?" "What would the world look like if the poor had jobs and were fed. When there is no need for Food Banks and outreach initiatives like our Grow-a-Row? What would the world look like if there were no wars, no greed and no oppression?

Some people lean back and pray to God to make that happen, to fix this broken world for us. Others, others realize that God passionately wants us to be involved with that; that we need to make our hand dirty because we're in a *covenant* with God who says, "I'm there for you, if you're there for me. Together, we can work miracles, together we'll make the impossible possible!"

So let's come to God - not just Sundays, but each and every day with all that we have and are, sharing our deepest hurts and feelings in prayer; yelling at God, if need be. And let's also come to God pleading for our deepest hopes and longings, in prayer.

And as we pray honestly and sincerely, be prepared to be changed and transformed in unexpected ways - and sometimes uncomfortable ways. And once we have been changed, we will believe that the world will be changed, in fact it's already happening as Jesus keeps reminding us; and we will live life accordingly. Amen.