

Imagine, if you can, the disciples on the evening of that day. It is the Sabbath. Their Lord, the teacher whom they have followed for a year or more, has been executed as a revolutionary and a blasphemer. He had said he would be, of course, but they never actually believed him. He was the Messiah – he would rescue the Nation, kick out the Romans and restore the monarchy. Now he is dead, at the hands of those same Romans.

He was betrayed by an informer from the inner circle and this informer is surely able to identify them as well. Peter has already had to deny Jesus to save himself. The Romans have crucified thousands of Jews – they certainly would be willing to crucify a dozen more if it will keep the city calm during the Passover. Symbolically and in fact, the Roman fortress looms over the Temple, offering a vantage for Pilate to see everything that is going on. His spies and informers are everywhere.

And so the disciples wait. Will the Romans come tonight? Are they already on their way? They have no respect for the Sabbath. Or will they wait until tomorrow, or the next day or next week? The future is uncertain, but doesn't look promising. The disciples are very afraid.

To calm themselves, to cry out to their God, to seek God's favor and guidance they might have turned to the scriptures. Remember that the disciples are not Christians – there is no such word, yet. When they speak of scriptures, they are the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. The New Testament does not yet exist. The first New Testament writings are still years, decades away.

Their hymnal and prayer book, the record of their praise and lament is the Psalms. Probably composed over centuries, the Psalms were the chief worship resource of the People of God.

When David was parades victorious into Jerusalem, they sang the Psalms. When they sat and wept in exile by the waters of Babylon, they sang the Psalms. When they returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, they sang the Psalms.

I think it is fair to say that we don't really understand the Psalms and because we don't something in our faith is missing.<sup>1</sup> Many of the Psalms, and particularly the ones we will be reading tonight are called Psalms of Lament, Psalms in which we cry out to God that "something is wrong." The disciples are crying out that something is wrong – this Messiah whom they have followed and loved is dead. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," asks Psalm 22.

But the Lament Psalms, as we will see tonight, have a particular kind of movement that does not simply end with the lament itself. In the second step, we submit our claim, our distress to God. "Redeem me, O Lord and have pity on me" says Psalm 26. If we cannot submit our distress to God, then we must keep it for ourselves, and we do this far too often. When we retain our distress, when we keep it to ourselves, we keep God at arm's length, we give God no room to operate, no chance to heal us. But when we submit our claim to God, when we give our distress to God, then two things happen. First, we give God room for mercy. Second, we give over our distress, we relinquish it – it is no longer ours, it is God's.

There is the story of two monks who come to the river. A woman is at the river and asks them to carry her across. The monks are not allowed to touch a woman, but nonetheless, one monk picks her up and carries her across the river. The two monks go on some distance, when the second turns to the first and says, "You know that the order forbids us from touching a woman." The first replies, "Well, I let her down on the other side of the river, but you have been carrying her all this way."

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<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to Walter Bruggemann for this insight. See his *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (1995) Augsburg Fortress.

A service of Psalms is entirely appropriate for this darkest night of the liturgical year. The Psalms we will recite indirectly trace the horrible events of this Good Friday so long ago.

But the Psalms can also speak to us, today. Many of us carry our distresses along with us, many of us keep our problems to ourselves, so much so that we cannot even recognize them as our own. As you listen tonight, or as you speak, hear the laments of the Psalmist as your own lament. What distress would you give to the Lord? What problem, what trouble, what pain can you give over to God? What regret, what secret shame can you give to God?

Most of the recitation will be done by the pastors and the choir – congregational parts are in boldface in the Triduum bulletin. The page numbers in the green Lutheran Book of Worship are listed for your convenience if you would like to follow along.

This service is a Tenebrae service, “Tenebrae” meaning darkness. After each set of readings, a candle will be extinguished and the lights lowered. Please don’t be concerned – we will raise the lights before you exit, in silence.

Amen.