



First United Church of Oak Park

Right Beside Us

Selections from Psalms 74, 75, and 85

The Rev. John Edgerton

July 11, 2021

O God, remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago. Have regard for your covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. Your foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them". But it is God who executes justice, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed. God will pour a draught from it, and the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs ... Lord, you were favorable to your land, restore us again, O God of our salvation. Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Let me hear what the Lord will speak ... God speaks peace to the people, to the faithful, to those who turn to the Lord in their hearts. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

These words from the Book of Psalms were the exact words that I spoke from the lectern of the United States Senate on April 25, 2013. I was there at the invitation of Massachusetts senior Senator Elizabeth Warren, to open that day's session of Senate business with prayer. Senator Warren showed me the inside of her desk, where every senator who had ever sat there had carved their name in the wood of the base, going back over a century, including Ted Kennedy. Senator Harry Reid made a joke at my expense, asking if I had a hall pass to be out of school. I was 31 years old at the time. A staffer congratulated me, saying, "What an honor. Most pastors wait their whole careers to be invited to open the Senate in prayer."

I smiled through it all. But instead of savoring the experience, all of this was like ashes in my mouth, because of why I was there. I was there because the church I was pastoring at the time was a quarter block from where a terrorist attack occurred just ten days prior, at the 2013 Boston Marathon. Two bombs were set off, lives were lost,

scores were injured, hundreds left deeply traumatized, including members of the church where I served. A mom of four whose family are pillars of the church had tickets of a lifetime in the grandstand, right at the finish line: a dream turned into a nightmare as she dragged her four kids through a panicked city. Another member was wounded, and the physical and mental impacts from the blasts lingered for years. And the church building itself, well, it was a part of an FBI crime scene covering a square mile or more. The closest I could get to it for weeks was to stand at police barriers a half mile down the road, each of the wooden sawhorses covered in candles and stuffed animals as an impromptu memorial. On the outside, looking in, to our own church home, a crime scene.

We were displaced from our sacred space, just at the time when we most needed to feel the presence of God. And while we were still displaced from our sacred space, before we could even clean up, before we would reenter our building like an eerie time capsule to the world just before it all changed, before all of that, I was invited to open the United States Senate in prayer. "What an honor," a staffer said. "Most pastors wait their whole careers to be invited to open the Senate in prayer." An honor? An honor? I wanted to scream.

O God, remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago. Have regard for your covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. Your foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them." But it is God who executes justice, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed. God will pour a draught from it, and the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs ... Lord, you were favorable to your land, restore us again, O God of our salvation. Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Let me hear what the Lord will speak ... God speaks peace to the people, to the faithful, to those who turn to the Lord in their hearts. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

The raw emotions of the Psalms were the truest words I could muster. Their anger, grief, displacement from sacred space, hope for return, a hope that return would be not to what was, but to something new and better. A hope that on the far side of grief is a place where righteousness and peace share a holy kiss.

We did, of course, eventually return to our sanctuary. The danger passed, the crime scene tape came down, the police presence abated. In returning to sacred space, I felt something I hadn't expected. In reentering that sacred space, it felt like God walked in beside us. I learned something through all of that. If sanctuaries are the center of where humanity seeks God, then ordinary life is the center of where God seeks humanity. When we were displaced, God departed with us. And reentering sacred space found God entering right along beside us. And with God at our side, there was hope, hope that return would be not to what was, but to something new and better. A hope that on the far side of loss is a place where righteousness and peace share a holy kiss.

One year, four months, three days, less about an hour or so, but who's counting. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant the longest displacement from sacred space I have experienced, by far. We have lived, are living, through history that will be studied for a century or more. To try to find reference that can make sense of this, to stand alongside it, I find my mind casting back over long centuries to find displacements suffered by the faithful that would be equal to this one. I think of European cathedrals and monasteries destroyed in the world wars that took decades to repair. Yet still God was faithful, and God was still glorified even without the vaulting arches of stone and wood.

I think of Black churches in this country, burned down by white supremacists and terrorized against rebuilding for years. Yet still God was faithful, and God was still glorified. In house churches and tent meetings, still God upheld them.

I think of Scripture, too, where we read of displacement time and again in the stories of the faithful:

Wandering in wilderness for 40 years, no place even to stop, much less to settle. Yet with tents in the wilderness, still God was faithful to them. I think of the Babylonian exile, the people driven from their sacred places for 70 years. Yet even by the rivers of Babylon, God accompanied the people and was faithful in a strange land. I think of the destruction of the temple, the central locus of religious life, where even Jesus said of that place it was his father's house. Destroyed and never again rebuilt to this day. Yet in the hearts and spirits of anyone reaching out to God, new temples spiring up, glorious and imperishable, God still faithful, always faithful to the people.

Throughout the history of the faith, displacement from sacred place is a constant refrain. And what we see time and again is that God is faithful through it all, that return to sacred place is an experience where God walks in beside us, back into sacred space beside us, because God has never departed from our side. If sanctuaries are the center of where humanity seeks God, then ordinary life is the center of where God seeks humanity. And we have reentered our sacred space today. Thanks be to God for walking in beside us.