

Sermon: Belmont UMC
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Few parts of the Bible make me feel as connected to our spiritual ancestors as the book of Psalms. It is so deeply human and filled with really big feelings. There is joy and rejoicing, surprise and delight at God's faithfulness. There are incredibly direct complaints, deep sadness that feels like it might be fatal, sorrow, betrayal, doubt that God is even listening. And, there is anger. All of these feelings shaped into poems, prayers, and songs reveal that the Ancient Israelites who wrote and sang these words shared a close intimacy with God. This kind of expression of feelings and frustrations requires you to trust that who you are speaking with cares about you enough to listen and respond.

Have you ever had to tell someone that you are angry with them? I personally don't have a lot of experience with it, given that I was raised as a woman in the South. Anger isn't something that nice girls are encouraged to feel, let alone express. It has been one of the biggest lessons of my adult life to learn how to actually feel my anger, along with all the other emotions that are not "happiness". The task of feeling my own anger is so challenging for me that I have needed the help of a mental health professional, a resource that I cannot recommend enough. And my therapist taught me that anger is normal to feel. Did you know that? It has taken me a while to begin to accept this fact, that's how much I had repressed any feelings I deemed unpleasant, including anger. Apparently, feeling anger can actually give you information about your life, relationships, and what you need. Apparently, anger can reveal to us when there is an obstacle to our goal.

My therapist illustrated this idea to me by saying, "You know when you are driving and someone cuts you off and you feel a flare of anger?" And I replied, "Yes of course," She said, "That's because their doing so is a threat to your goal." To which I said oh yes, my goal of getting where I want to go. And she said, well yes, but also your goal of staying alive. Oh, I thought, we are talking very primal goals, got it!

The anger of Psalm 12 seems tied to a similar goal. It sounds like there are people acting with evil intent in their community who promise one thing and do another. It sounds like these people think that they are the ultimate authority and that they don't have to answer to anyone about their selfish and immoral actions, even God. The actions of these people are not accidentally negatively impacting the poor, but the word used in the NRSVUE translation is "despoiling" the poor, which means plundering, robbing, stripping something of its value, usually by force. These people the Psalmist says are "ungodly and unfaithful" and "uttering lied to each other with flattering lips and deceitful heart" are actively harming and oppressing those in society who have less

power than them. In a very active way, these boastful people who think they have no master are creating obstacles to others in community being able to live and thrive.

The Psalmist is angry about this. Maybe they are one of the people who are pushed to the margins without enough to live because of other people's selfish ambition. Or maybe the author of this psalm is witnessing this happening to their neighbors and is angry on their behalf. Either way, in this Psalm crying out for help, imagining God responding with action. The Psalmist envisions that God will rise up and take care of the oppressed.

God rising up in verse 5 reflects a plea echoed in several of the Psalms that come before it. For example, Psalm 10:12-18 says,

Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.
Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, "You will not call us to account"?
But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands...
O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed so that those from earth may strike terror no more."

Psalm 12:5 sees this plea for God's reaction coming to pass. In Psalm 12 God is the one who says I will now rise up to take care of those society has pushed to the margins and oppressed because of our own selfish ambition.

By nature of being a human being, through the course of any life there will come a time when we will feel the Psalmists cry bone deep. We will relate to the anger and lament that cries, "God when will you rise up? When will you answer me and do what you promised to do?" Perhaps it will be in a time of personal tragedy or communal crisis. At some point or another it will probably be because of both. The Psalms set the precedent that it is okay to bring our anger and lament to God. That we do not have to push it down or button it up to pray, to demand God do something to help.

This act of expression is a helpful and healthy thing in its own right. The truth-telling helps us through, even if our circumstances don't change right away. But the prayers of the Psalms also possess another function, they shape the identity of those who pray them.

The path paved by the Psalms that goes from anger—or sadness, or betrayal, or lament—to identity and faith goes like this. Air out the anger to God. Even direct that anger, or whatever emotion, at God. God can handle it. And expressing it to God is in itself an act of faith, an affirmation that God is present and God cares. That reminds us that we are not alone, that actually we have never been alone because the Love of God hems us in, behind and before. If we can remember that God has always been with us,

then we might just recall all the times God has been faithful before, to us personally, to our community, to our ancestors. That reminds us who God is, someone who cares about and fights for the oppressed and the marginalized; a God who is faithful and just. And that reminds us who we are, God's beloved, who is never alone.

Over and over again the Psalms of lament and anger follow this pattern. I think this is a reason why the Psalms helped shape the identity of the Ancient Israelites, helped them hold onto the hope of God's faithfulness and the hope of their identity as beloveds even when their worst case scenario, that of exile, was happening. Holding onto their identity and connection to God is part of what scholars think helped them survive exile. It is because of the stories, the laws, the myths, the prayers, the genealogies, the prophets, the psalms that were preserved and written down during this time of Exile that the Ancient Israelites were able to cling to a sense of their own identity. It reminded them who God says that they are and how God would have them live and that God remains faithful to them even when they cannot sense it or change their circumstances.

What if we followed this same path back to identity and faith that the Psalms blaze for us. In many Christian traditions, we are encouraged not to be angry, not to feel it or act on it. But what if acting on anger in the way of expressing it to God, as is done in the Psalms, can actually bring us closer to God?

On this Pride Sunday, you don't have to look very far to see there is a lot to feel angry about when it comes to how our LGBTQIA+ siblings are being treated. Psalm 12 can feel pretty on the nose when you think about it this way. There are many hateful people whose own selfish ambition is impeding the survival and flourishing of queer people in our society. Feeling anger at this reality is not a bad or sinful thing. But anger can be coercive if we get stuck there. If we stay in our anger and focus only on the oppressive people and systems causing that anger, then we ignore a vital truth: that there is something, Someone, bigger than all the things we are angry about! We need to air it out and be honest about it to others and to God.

Pride is a necessary act of resistance because it does not stop at anger. It can follow the thread from feeling anger to expressing it, to remembering God's faithfulness, to remembering our identity as beloved children of God. I think pride for a queer Christian comes from the insistence on the identity that God has given us, that we are beloved exactly as we are. And when the church celebrates that with us it is an act of faithfulness.

We have to cling to the identity of belovedness because the world, and sadly many other Christians, will tell us it is not true. But who are they to argue with God? Who are they to say God's own creation is bad or sinful? Who are they to put boundaries on God's declaration that every person is made in God's image and it is good? Pride is a necessary counterweight to such hollow arguments. It is a

metabolization of the anger, lament, sorrow, and even joy, that creates resistance rooted in the truth of God's love.

Benediction:

May we feel anger at injustice

May we express it to God with brutal honesty

May we remember God's faithfulness

May we remember our Belovedness

And insist on that identity with Pride