

“Vengeance is Mine...” Psalm 58

If you happened to grow up in what often are called “mainline churches” – that is Anglican, United, some Presbyterian and even Catholic churches the word “lectionary” is probably familiar to you. For others, “The Lectionary” is a 3 year Bible-reading-cycle that many mainline churches follow, which focus primarily on the church year - that is - Advent, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Christmas and so on) and also attempt to give a very general overview with the readings of the Biblical narrative using an Old Testament passage, a New Testament passage, a Gospel passage (something from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John along with a Psalm. If you worshipped long enough in a mainline church that follows the lectionary (even as short as 3 years) you might turn to your neighbour periodically and say, “I’ve heard that story before” and on the rarest of occasions you might even say, “I’ve heard that theme before and on the rarest of occasions say, (as one friend told me of a church he worshipped in) “I’ve heard that sermon before.” Yes, you guessed it... exactly three years apart. With just 52 weeks in a calendar year not all Biblical stories are told or retold of course and in our case not every Psalm is read as a possible Psalm for your Psummer playlist. And after reading Psalm 58 you now know why.

Psalm 58 is a hard Psalm to read and even a harder Psalm to preach from and it’s understandable why it is not included in the Lectionary. In fact – be honest with me – was it not hard to say the words we often say at the end of our responsive reading, “Thanks be to God” after you said the words, “smash their teeth to bits” just a minute or two earlier? Or maybe not. This is an uncomfortable psalm, especially for good church people like us. What we read are words more familiar to an angry teen who’s been bullied in school, the comment of a wife who has been betrayed by her husband or the screams of a World War 2 Jew in a 1940’s German concentration camp. These are not the words of God fearing, Bible believing, loving Christians... or are they. Well, here they are, undeniably present, halfway through our Bible, and we cannot say they are not there because we see them with our own eyes and spoken them with our own lips. But I’m glad they’re there. One thing the Bible (our entire Bible) does not deny is honesty and authenticity. In other words, if any of us were writing our own family history, for example, we would leave out parts – you know the story about jail time or abuse or other dark family secrets, because those things not only embarrass our family but us in the process. But the Bible leaves nothing out. The Bible speaks honestly and authentically about all the dark family secrets of our ancestors like lying, betrayal and murder and that’s only in the first paragraph or two of our family history and we haven’t even gotten to Psalms which may just be the rawest of human emotions. Even with the possible excuse of blaming those in political power (as we

are often so good in doing) as Psalm 58 begins we cannot blame politicians for all things (most things yes) but not all things. What we can see are the true feeling of a Psalmist (who is maybe David) saying terrible things about others and not necessarily under his breath. So what do we possibly do with the vengeful words of Psalm 58 and a number of others too? Do we simply leave them out, as the Lectionary does – leave them out of our Bibles, our churches, our lives? We could, but to do this is dangerous, not uncommon, but dangerous because 1 Timothy 3 reminds us, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) “All scripture... To include all Scripture in our Bibles avoids the danger and accepts the hard work of not clinging only to parts of scripture we are uncomfortable with and ignoring others but allowing “all Scripture” (even those passages we do not like or understand) to “teach, rebuke, correct and train” – like the hard words of Psalm 58 that chances are pretty good (if you are anything like me) have said such words (maybe under your breath) against someone who has hurt you or wronged you. And if you have had those feelings, according to Walter Brueggemann you can do one of three things with them.

You can first **act out those vengeful feelings**. Now such action are the stories that appear on our nightly news. A gun-toting extremist who enter a University in Montreal to target women or a religious fanatic who overtakes a plane and crashes it into one of the world’s most famous sites or more recently a mentally unstable man who runs a rental van onto a Toronto sidewalk. And these actions are the most severe cases but no different than the everyday situations of road rage or yelling over a neighbour’s fence or even as I personally experienced just a short time ago, “someone becoming irate in our grocery store line with someone else who had a “few” more items than they were supposed to have in the express line. I honestly thought it might come to blows. And the more common occurrences are people no different than you and I - in fact it may have been you and I. Most “vengeful people” are ordinary, hard working people who simply get to a point where everything comes out and they act upon their angry feelings. Others, maybe the majority of us here, do not act on our feelings but rather **deny those vengeful feelings**, which is the second thing we could do. In other words we have these vengeful feeling but we push them below the surface - either thinking we shouldn’t be thinking or doing those things. So we deny those true, very human emotions. The trouble with this is that it becomes the age old analogy of what happens when we shake the pop bottle. What happens is that after awhile the pressure must be released and when it is finally released we move back to the first response which is act out those vengeful feelings. Our friend wonders why their “insignificant” comment has angered us so, but it wasn’t their comment per se that made us so mad

but everything else that has happened over the past week that we held onto. To deny our feelings, even those natural feelings, is almost as unhealthy as acting out our anger. So we can act out or deny. But there is a third way, the way of the Psalmist.

The author of Psalm 58 does not act upon his anger – at least we do not see anywhere within our Psalm the Psalmist actually “breaking teeth” and by the Psalm itself we see that he also didn’t deny his feelings either. So what did the Psalmist do, according to Psalm 58? Well there is a third option and it’s what that the Psalmist did, and I believe, invites us to do likewise. Now for this answer we need to once again be reminded of what the Psalms are at the heart. Psalms were originally for personal devotions and later for public worship. They were poems and hymns to God. They were words directed to God. And therefore the invitation or the third response is to **give over these feelings of vengeance to God**. We were not to act upon those vengeful feelings or deny them either but instead use them as an act of worship - giving them over to God; for God to take them for us.

Maybe the best analogy to help us with this comes from Walter Bruggemann once again. He tells the story of something that I know well and chances are, so do you, especially if you had siblings growing up. What happens, for example, when two brothers are in the back yard wrestling? The end result is always the same and one I need not tell you about, but I will. One gets hurt. And of course no matter the hurt it is always severe (especially to the one hurt) – even if it’s a scratch that needs only a bandaid. But to the person hurt it is not a scratch but a puncture that could cause sure and immediate death if not immediately attended to. So the brother (usually the little brother) comes running to... running to who? The oldest brother? No! The sister? No! The one hurt comes running to the parent. And even with all the commotion, even with the sight of blood, what is the typical response of the parent? Do they angrily look for the other brother (the hurter) and return and eye for an eye. Do they take their longest finger nail to the arm of the “un-hurt” and gouge them with a similar depth and length scratch? Of course not! Does a good parent laugh at the child and tell them to grow up. Maybe. But that ought not be the response of a good parent. What does the parent do and say in the sight of this exaggerated claim of the child – which is similar to the response of the Psalmist. They look directly into the child’s face and says, “I will handle it.” No matter how many suggestions the hurt child may make of how to settle the matter, no matter how severe the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” might be the good parent, the loving parent, the gracious parent says, “I will handle this.” So why would we expect anything less of God when it comes to our desire for vengeance?

Although we might not like this? Although we might not agree with this? Although we might like to declare, “Vengeance is mine...” we forget how the verse in Romans 12 actually continues. Romans 12:19 says, “Vengeance is mine... says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19) We would prefer that is say

otherwise because we love to be both judge and jury. Someone has wronged us. They need to pay. Someone has hurt us. They need to get what is coming to them. And if God is going to do it, do it immediately God because if you don't I will do it for God, as God's representative here on earth. Sure we know the story of Jesus overturning the money changer tables in the Temple and we like that, no we admire this strong Jesus. (Matthew 12:13ff) We prefer this kind of Saviour. But in truth who is this Jesus we read of in scripture? If Jesus truly is "God in the flesh" does Jesus' life not give us a better glimpse of God up close? So yes, we see Jesus' righteous anger in Matthew 12 when others misuse God's house of worship. And we see Jesus' raw emotions as he wept over Lazarus' death and later as he wept over Jerusalem. We also see Jesus frustration with the disciples as he had explain and then explain again things they should have known and yes we see Jesus' playful side, even his humourous side when Jesus give Peter a new nickname. And of course there are countless stories of Jesus' love of the unlovable and grace given to those who were undeserving. And when we put all these stories together we the very human side of Jesus - not acting in a sinful manner when it came to anger but also not nor denying any of his emotions either but in true humility seeking the Father in all things just as we too are invited to do.

Some of us, even here this morning, have been deeply hurt, so hurt in fact the words of Psalm 58 (or words like them) have become our morning prayer and evening meditation. We cry out to God, "smash their teeth," "spill their lives," "dissolve them into snail slime." Some of us have actually acted on these feelings and others of us have bottled them up in the darkest part of our lives. This morning, I pray you have learned another way of dealing with your vengence – and that is to turn this anger over to God so that he might take it for you and from you so that you mght be free to psing a new psong to the Lord. Thank be to God.