**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**August 14th, 2022**

**The Parched Vineyard**

1. A Story within a Story

A simple, one time reading of this section of Psalm 80 would make nearly anyone shrug their shoulders and go onto the next psalm. At first glance, there’s God as Shepherd, God as Creator and Gardener, and then a historical blaming of God for not keeping up with God’s perceived promises. It’s another lament psalm, or so it seems at first.

The reality is that there is a story within a story – the psalm does not come out of nowhere. It is tied to the experience of the Israelite people and the thought that they are the chosen people of God. To be fair, this is how we read our historical Scriptures – there’s a sense that Israel is the destiny that God sees unfolding and Israel are God’s people.

In one example, from Joshua 8, we see a landscape where the Israelites are massacring the people who worship an idol called Ai. They killed 12,000 people and they saw this as necessary, a killing of the ‘heathen’ for God to continue to do God’s work. Israel must prevail.

And so we go back to the psalm where the psalmist is using the vine as an example of Israel and it is parched and withering. The Psalmist is incensed – why have you forsaken us, why have you left us out to rot, when we followed your Word. You abandoned us.

1. Chosen

And yet, we know, that the story is so much more complicated than that and here’s where the rubber meets the road – the psalmist has a narrow view that Israel are the chosen people and God has not fulfilled his part of the covenant.

But you and I – we have history on our side in the sense that we know Jesus and we know that this idea of ‘chosenness’ is convoluted. God chooses everyone – male and female, Greek and Jew – we know this, we know that God calls all beloved. In this psalm though, we see the dangers of forgetting it.

1. Modern Application

In our modern day lives, we have to face this difficult reality: the story of some people’s liberation and salvation can be for others an account of misery and destruction. We see it in colonization throughout our history and we see it today. Let’s name some of the real and hard things we witness and participate in our lives.

We’ve been made keenly aware of our native siblings struggles through the Baltimore-Dakota Presbytery partnership and the Stepplings testimony to the work. We have treated the native as less, we have forced them to assimilate, we have dressed them in English clothes and stopped their traditions and languages and their ability to thrive. Again, this is a historical narrative, but one that continues into the present day and one that we are seeking to expose and change for the betterment of all. God loves all – native and pilgrim.

I’ll give you another very humble example that I just experienced on my trip. Bryan is a fluent speaker of French, but I didn’t learn any French before our travels. When you go to France, even the big cities, there are many people who do not know English. I blindly went in thinking, “Why don’t they speak English – it’s the common man’s language?” And then I had to have a moment with myself and ask, “Why should they? Why should they have to assimilate for me and my lack of knowledge of the French language? Why is my way better?” It’s not. It’s just different. God loves us all – the French speaking and the English speaking and so on – and I have sinned, even subconsciously, when I cannot see beyond myself.

You can find example upon example, the stories of colonization and beyond. We need to sincerely ask ourselves, “Why have we written some people, especially conquered people, out of the whole story and our history textbooks? What are we going to do in light of that fact?”

1. Blaming God

The other question we need to consider, especially in this psalm is, “Are there times when we hold God, not human beings, responsible for the difficulties and atrocities that beset individuals and communities?” The painful answer is – Yes, yes we do. The bigger question becomes – why do we blame God and how do we reckon with the reality of our actions.

God is really easy to blame. Unfortunately, God is an easy target. When life doesn’t go my way, when the crops literally don’t grow, when we are hit with a storm, when we find ourselves in conflict – it is so much easier to look up to the Heavens and say, “Why did you let that happen?”

Here's the difficult reality – free will is a blessing and curse. There may be things in this life that for our own good, God does not and will not control. It’s a blessing, in the sense that we have the opportunity to pursue our own direction, we make our own mistakes, we can be creative and explore and create our own story.

The downside is that because of free will, we have to reckon with the responsibility of our actions and choices. We are human, we are bound for wonderful things, but we also are bound to mess up – we are not perfect, nor were we ever created to be. But unfortunately, you can’t simply accept the blessing of free will and toss responsibility to the side. As the quip goes, “You can’t have your cake and eat it too.”

V. Where do we go from here?

So, we are left with a Psalm that has transformed from some meaningless or lament psalm into one that has much more in store for the human heart, mind, and spirit. It’s asking some important questions of us, one’s that we need to mediate upon this week and beyond.

Again – our history textbooks do not reflect the reality of the stories of all people. But if all people are called beloved by God – it’s important for us to hear those stories. Where do we begin? Here’s a few steps forward: We can go to the library and pick up a book by an individual we would never have naturally been drawn to, but read it with curiosity and open minds to see another history and another person’s story and reality. We can look at our government and we can do the hard, but important work, of looking at issues of equality and equity throughout our history and where changes can be created today. We can find out how we can be part of a purposeful change that illuminates all of God’s beloved children. And so on – there are different means to the end of this question, but it is important to seriously consider the abundance of stories that lies among God’s people all over the world.

The second question I leave you with is more of a consideration of your mindset – how do we not look to God and blame God and take responsibility for our own actions? I’ll tell you, first, if you need to yell and scream at God and get angry – God can handle that, God loves us, and God will meet us where we are in our feeling and emotion. Yet on the other side of this equation, we have to reckon with our responsibility, admit sin and harm that we have created, and ask the God who forgives again and again to enter into our hearts and renew us and restore us to be better disciples.

This Sunday, there’s been a presentation of real, difficult, and often conflicting questions that we can find in this psalm. My prayer for you is to meditate upon it, see where God might be calling you amid the psalm, and instead of going onto the next psalm, maybe stay here in the moment a while with the questions. Amen.