

**“Praying When Troubled and Angry”**

**Summer preaching series: Part 7- “Encountering God through the Psalms”**

**Psalm 102**

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: August 23, 2009**

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden**

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We are continuing our summer preaching series called “Encountering God through the Psalms with Part 7 today – “Praying When Troubled and Angry.” We will look at, but not be confined to, Psalm 102 as our biblical text.

Some people have grown up in families that have discouraged the display of emotion, especially anger and tears. When it comes to human relationships that might be appropriate in some cases, though certainly not helpful in all cases. I want you to listen carefully to my next statement and try to understand it: **When it comes to our relationship with God, discouraging the sharing of our emotions through tears and anger, is a most unhelpful idea.**

I would be dismayed if I opened my heart to God and cried out to God from the depths of my pain or disappointment or heartache or suffering, only to hear a voice booming from heaven, “Take hold of yourself. Get over it. Grow up. Stand on your own two feet. Stop crying. Wipe your eyes. It’s all over.” I would hate to think the trouble and anger that I need to express to God are dismissed because I have to “get my act together” or act more maturely or exercise more self-control over my emotions.

Now look with me at Psalm 102 and notice that the psalmist is someone who is deeply troubled. In the Good News Bible the title of this psalm is “The Prayer of a Troubled Person.” That sounds all very prim and proper. The Hebrew title, on the other hand, which is given in the footnote of the Good News Bible is much more to the point, describing the psalm as “A Prayer by a Weary Sufferer who pours out his Complaints to the Lord.” I want to suggest that sounds more like what is really going on here in Psalm 102 ...someone pouring out complaints to God.

The psalmist is troubled and very tired. He’s had enough! He says that his life is disappearing like smoke; his body is burning like fire; he is beaten down like dry grass; he

has lost his desire for food; he groans aloud; he is nothing more than skin and bones. Here is someone who is really suffering and really mad about it. What does this troubled psalmist do with that pain and anger? He takes it to God in prayer; and when he does so, he is brutally honest. Please remember that part: that this psalmist was honest with God about his pain and anger because *honesty is one of the two anchors that must be at the heart of prayer*. When we are troubled and express anger in prayer, we must anchor that expression in honesty.

Look at what the psalmist says to the Lord in verse 2: “When I am in trouble, don’t turn away from me.” Do you hear the accusatory undertone in that question? It’s as if he is saying, “You’ve turned away from me before.” And that is an honest expression of what he is feeling. However, it is an assumption and a misconception on the psalmist’s part. It is certainly not the truth about God. Nevertheless, it is how he honestly feels at the time and he is not afraid to tell God so.

“Listen to me,” the psalmist cries to God. I can sense the frustration in this man because what he really means is this: “God, you don’t listen to me. You are not there for me when I need you! You don’t answer me quickly when I call! I know you are going to tell me to be patient, but I want a quick answer to my prayer.” In this prayer that the psalmist offers to God when he is troubled, he is absolutely honest about his feelings of anger and pain and frustration.

Look at verse 9: “Because of *your* anger and fury, ashes are my food; and my tears are mixed with my drink. *You* picked me up and threw me away.” He is telling God exactly how he feels. Now jump down to verse 23: “The *Lord* has made me weak while I am still young. The *Lord* has shortened my life.” Do you think that sounds like good theology? No. And we could make many other judgments about this psalmist: some of us might say he is arrogant before God; some might think he is being rude; some might say it is wrong to speak to God in that tone of voice.

During my ministry I have counseled many people who had just been through deep waters. They came to share their pain and anger with many for many different reasons: they had lost a loved one; a child had suddenly become gravely ill or had been disabled in a tragic accident; they had been laid off; they were facing financial ruin and hardship ...and that is

just to name a few reasons why people seek out pastors for counsel. They have sat in my office, or I have sat in their home, and they have said, “Ivan, why has God done this to me?” That is how they were feeling.

The first thing I ask a person who feels angry with God is this: “Have you said that to God?” Their response is immediate and goes like this: “Excuse me, what did you say?” or simply “Huh?” I repeat my question: “Have you said that to God? Have you told the Lord how angry you feel?” Most people respond, “Oh no, I can’t tell God that.” “Why not,” I ask, “he knows already? You can’t keep secrets from God. The Lord knows everything that is going on inside you. Tell that to God.”

I am suggesting that the first anchor of prayer when we are troubled and angry is this: ***We need to tell God honestly what we feel.*** God cannot help us ...God cannot deal with our pain or fear ...God cannot deal with what is going on in our lives ...unless we go to God and say, “Lord, this is exactly how I feel. I am mad at you today!” At which time I believe God would say, “Great, now we can talk! Now we can work it out.” ***Honesty*** ...telling God precisely how we feel – even when we feel angry with him – is at the very heart, is one of the anchors, of prayer.

God wants us to know that it is okay to share our anger about God with God. What is more, God is okay about our not even being sure about him ...about doubting God or God’s control or power ...even doubting that God is listening, or that God is there at all. Let’s tell God all that stuff that we usually store up on the inside where it does us no good. Let us tell God exactly and honestly what is going on inside of us when we are troubled and angry. If we will speak to God this way, then we can begin to work together with God from the honest base of how we really feel.

Before I give you one more point – and it is the final point - I hope we all understand that God is okay with our anger. Let’s be assured of that truth. When a child is disciplined or disappointed with the parents’ responses to a particular situation, most parents understand a child’s anger. They hold them through that anger. How much *more* God knows from where our anger comes. How much *more* God understands our circumstances. How much *more* God knows our pain. How much *more* God knows we don’t have answers to our

questions ...that it is a struggle for us ...that we are taking it out on God because God is the only one who does not fight back. Let us give our anger to God. Let us tell God honestly how we feel. Then let us hear God say, “It is good that you have got that off your chest! Now we can start working together. Now I can start dealing with you and working with you to meet your need.” Honestly expressing to God the anger that we feel is one of the anchors of prayer.

Now look again at Psalm 102 with me. Notice not only the honesty that is shown by this psalmist as he expresses his anger to God; notice also this person’s deep *humility*. Do you see that intermingled with the expression of his anger and pain and frustration there is a strong affirmation of the love of God, of the presence and power of God, and of the certainty that we are safe in the hands of God? The psalmist is never presumptuous towards God. He never tells God what to do with his universe. He expresses himself with total honesty but then *in all humility accepts that God is still in control*.

No matter how troubled we are ...how bad the circumstances ...there is always an appropriate and an inappropriate way to express ourselves to God in prayer. Let’s be honest about our feelings, yes. But let’s be *humble*, too. That is *always* the proper way to pray. There is no room for arrogance or haughtiness in prayer. We must refrain from trying to assert ourselves arrogantly before God in prayer. There is no room for that at all.

Do you remember that insightful story that Jesus told about the two men who went up to the temple to pray? Peggy preached a most challenging sermon on it recently. Do you remember the story? The Pharisee prayed: “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer.” What a self-opinionated person! So confident in himself! So arrogant towards others! So blind to what was really going on inside of him. Then comes the tax-collector, the despised one, who would have been looked at scornfully because he had the nerve to come into the temple. He feels so ashamed that he won’t even look up, but hides his face and beats upon his chest, and says: “God, have pity on me, a sinner!” *That’s the honest, humble cry of one who knows that he is in need*.

So let me draw this to a close. I have tried to present the two anchors for praying when we are troubled and angry: the *honesty* to tell God exactly how we are feeling and to know

that we are accepted in the expression of our anger; and the *humility* not to dictate to God, but rather just to be there in God's presence and to allow God to speak.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is to know God's heart through prayer. But hear this: we will never know God's heart if we don't allow God to see into ours; if we do not open ourselves and speak to God about what is really going on inside of us – honestly and humbly.

How long will it take before we have a heart-to-heart conversation with the Lord? We need that ...we need the Lord ...every hour we need the Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.