

Speak of Dark Things
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Psalm 78: 1-8

I'm no scientist so when I tell you that for a while now, I've wanted to conduct a scientific experiment, I am using the words "scientific" and "experiment" loosely. But here it is: What would happen if, instead of the nightly news, instead of political campaigns, instead of repeating "I can" statements or chanting out the days' objectives, we had story time?

What would happen if someone told a story before a Senate meeting? What would it do if before every Presidential debate each candidate had to be read to - by someone on the opposite side of the political spectrum? And the reader would have to read a story that went against their own political leanings? How would we change if, that eternal stream of headlines at the bottom of CNN were replaced with poetry: JackyInn Woodson's "Even the silence/has a story to tell you./Just listen. Listen." Or Macbeth's, "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak/Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break." Or King Lear's, "[Let's] take upon 's the mystery of things,/As if we were God's spies."

Like I said, I'm no scientist, but I do think I have a pretty solid argument for why the experiment ought to proceed after reading the first few verses of Psalm 78. "I will open my mouth in a parable," "I will utter dark sayings from of old." We need stories, but not the kind that we read before naptime. We need stories to bring us back to life. These are not the kind of stories that will be easy to bear.

Note the choice of words in this Psalm. Every time I read that Jesus is about to give us a parable, I roll my eyes a little bit. Parables are hard! What do you mean 77 times 7 times? Why are you making me do math?

And "incline" does not evoke images of cozy blankets and scented candles burning in a living room of friends holding mugs of spiced cider close to them. "Incline" is active. "Incline" is work. Have any of you ran or walked or even crawled up the Arb hill? There's t-shirts about it! It's legendary! This is the kind of listening we must do.

Last, and perhaps the icing on this haunted cake we're about to be served - the stories we are called to listen to are going to be scary.

The first 8 verses of this Psalm are an introduction and a call to sit up straight, buckle up, and hold on tight and to listen to a plethora of destruction and pain we have caused:

- We've turned our backs when it was time to fight.
- We forget the good and wonderful things God has done for us.
- We deliberately and undeliberately test God, and who's to say which is worse?
- We rebel. We lie. We crave. We cheat...the list goes on for like 60 verses. We are totally awful.

Here's the really crazy part, though. God keeps coming back. Actually, I don't think God ever left. Through all our awfulness, God is there. God is angry, no doubt - furious, really - but God is with us. Holding us. We are sinners in the hands of an angry, angry God.

I lied. That's not the craziest part. The most insane part of this are the last two verses when David shows up. Here's how it reads:

He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheep pens;
he brought him from tending ewes
to be shepherd over his people Jacob -
over Israel, his inheritance.
He shepherded them with a pure heart
and guided them with his skillful hands.

God *chose* David. If we believe God is omniscient - that God knows all we've done and all we will do - what we know about David and some of his extracurricular activities and that he is in the line of Jesus can be a bit of a hard pill to swallow. Talk about inclining to listen. I'm not trying to hear that there is good in people - men of power especially - who take whatever they have a hankering for, who brag about what they grab and what they take. I'm not trying to believe there is good in a man like that.

"Jesus, fix him," I want to say, and I have said, and it is at the end of this Psalm where the poet blends David and God that I find a response to my prayer. We know God chose David. We know God took him from tending sheep to tending people. In the last three lines though, there are no names associated with the "he," and "his" pronouns. Which one is David, and which one is God?

Maybe it's lazy writing, or maybe it's a deliberate choice to illuminate the disruptive grace that happens because God loves us so much that we are always a part of who God is, and God is always a part of us. If we believe that we have been wonderfully and fearfully created in God's image, then we bear the marks of God, and God bears the marks of us.

I believe God has chosen all of us. All of us are invited to the story, and all of us are in the story. We are a part of the dark things, and we are a part of God's mighty and wondrous and mysterious works.

The call then, is to incline ourselves to listen and to continue to tell these stories. To speak to each other in the language of parables and poetry so that we understand that forgiveness is harder than even the most difficult math problem, and we must practice it every day, as God does with us.

A poem, by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Today we gather around the listening table
and I notice how when one woman speaks
of grief, her notes ring in me as if
I were a cave made for echoing with the song
she sings and another's words strike me
as if I'm a bell made to be rung by her voice.
And when one woman says, "I'm a digger,"
I want to shout, "I'm a digger, too,"
but I don't. I listen. I listen and notice how
the act of listening is its own kind of digging
in which we are hollowed out and filled
at the same. Around the listening table,
I let the spade of joy and the shovel of ache
the spoon of awe do their good digging work,
though sometimes it hurts as they
excavate in me what is real, and sometimes
It thrills me to hear another speak,
filling me with what I, too, know is true."

A cave is a dark, old thing, and I don't know any times I've wished to be turned into one. I'm not sure I know any times I've wanted to be in a cave for that matter. Caves are dark. I think they're probably cold. There's no food except for what has been caught and most likely dragged in. At least, that's what my fear tells me. I don't know any stories that went, "and then she

found a cave that was well stocked with food, was warm and well lit and all was well and she lived happily ever after.”

But the poet suggests that stories turn us into caves. Caves that echo. Caves made for singing. The poet suggests that, if we listen, they will transform us. If we listen, we can be changed by what we've heard and in turn, we can join in and sing along to the melody and harmony of a story that was not meant to be sung by just one voice.

It's a lot of work to be turned into a cave.

It's a lot of work to listen, too.

Spades of joy, shovels of ache, spoons of awe are involved. To be a cave then, means to allow ourselves to be hollowed out by these tools of vulnerability. It is the only way to be filled. Here is how we gather. Here is how we incline ourselves to listen.

Once upon a time she stepped into the dark. She was the dark. But she was not empty. She'd heard a song. And she knew a song. She sang the song she was given and the songs she made up and sometimes she knew which were which and sometimes she didn't. She didn't care. Once upon a time she sang because she heard someone else sing, and that song excavated something real in her. Once upon a time she listened. Once upon a time she sang along. Once upon a time she told a story.

And she lived.