

Sermon (7/30/17, Psalm 105: 1-11):

In the opening scene of the movie ‘Tap’, Max, played by Gregory Hines, is lying on a cot in a dark and dingy prison cell. His breathing is quick and there is a tear leaking from the corner of his eye and rolling down his cheek. Clearly, he is frightened.

As he stares at the ceiling, he remembers the voice of his father speaking words of encouragement to him when he was just a young boy about to go on stage to do a tap dancing routine. ‘Remember,’ his father said to his then stage frightened son. ‘Remember to listen for the rhythm and it will be okay...listen for the rhythm.’

While the circumstances were far different for Max at this point in his adult life, the fear was not and the advice of his father was just as pertinent. ‘Listen for the rhythm and it will be okay.’ Echoes his father’s voice from long past.

Max listens. Eventually his ears latch onto the sound of a dripping faucet from a sink in his cell. He begins to mimic the rhythm of the drip with his voice. ‘Badum, badum, badum...’ His breathing then moves from panicked panting to rhythmic repetition of this lesson his new teacher, the faucet, is trying to teach. Soon Max is sitting up. He reaches for his tap shoes. Laces one of them on and, with a short burst of tapping, mimics the water’s drip. He laces the second shoe on and, before long, he has a new step he’s dancing right there in his cell.

At first, the other inmates protest, complaining about all the racket this new kid on the block was making but soon the protesting diminishes as the inmates realize that the tapping is not noise but music. Music being tapped from a dancer remembering how to dance even in or especially in a place as foreboding, as ugly, and as frightening as a prison cell.

Max’s remembrance of his father’s affirming and comforting words had become salvific. ‘Remember the rhythm,’ his father said. ‘Remember the rhythm and it will be okay...’ Max remembered and listened and heard and learned from an otherwise nearly imperceptible teacher, a dripping faucet, calling him from his panic packed fear to creation’s declaration that God is Creator still – the rhythm of God’s new song plays on.

Many years ago, I read a book written by Eugene Peterson entitled, “Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer”. It left an indelible mark on me.

I’ve always appreciated the Psalms, particularly the usual favorites like Psalm 23, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd...’ and Psalm 121, ‘I lift up my eyes to the hills...’, but Peterson’s book helped me to see the Psalms in a new way. He broadened my appreciation for far more than just the favorite few including even the ugly, sharp-edged, angry psalms.

The psalms are teachers of prayer. They cover the entire breath of our human emotions from praise to the burning desire for retribution, from guilt to the surprise of holy mercy, from relief to rage, from suffering to healing. There is not a human emotion that is overlooked in this book of prayer and the Psalms give us a voice to speak them and a means to use them in a healthy and redeeming manner.

It is thought by some that Psalm 105, the Psalm we just partially recited, was written during or just following the Babylonian exile. As such, it is a prayer intended for folks whose homes had been reduced to rubble, whose community had been decimated, whose leaders and young had been carted off as prisoners of war, whose families had been torn apart leaving many to wonder if they would ever see each other again, and whose Temple, the house in which the very presence of God was believed to reside, was left in ruins.

For those left behind, there was little that remained. For those taken away as prisoners, they wondered how they would survive in a foreign land.

There are numerous Psalms that reflect the lament and horror felt by the Hebrew people during this time including Psalm 137, ‘By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept. How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?’

In stark contrast to Psalm 137, however, Psalm 105 opens with an odd sense of thankful exuberance. ‘O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name...sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of his wonderful works.’

On the surface, at least, it seems like a very strange prayer to pray amid such dire circumstances. Yet, unmistakably, the author of this Psalm

seems happy. Why? How? Is it even appropriate? Where does this Psalmist find such exuberance and how are those who pray this Psalm supposed to share in that exuberance?

As we read on, we begin to sense that this exuberance finds its roots in the discipline of remembering and it is in this remembering, like Max's remembrance of his father's words, where new life is birthed.

'Remember the wonderful works God has done,' the Psalmist implores. 'God's miracles and the judgments that God has uttered. God is mindful of his covenant forever...'

What follows is the Psalmist's rehearsal of how God has historically kept his covenant forever.

First there was Abraham to whom God promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, then Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's son, and then Jacob, Isaac and Rebekah's son. Each one these benefiting from the stalwart promises of God even though none of them were perfect by any stretch of the imagination.

The Psalmist continues, rehearsing the story of how the Hebrew people were few in number yet, by the grace of God, they survived the rebukes of mighty Kings, the danger of famines, and even the evil intents of their own leaders such as when Joseph's jealous brothers sold Joseph off as a slave, telling their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been killed in a terrible accident.

Even then, God's commitment did not waver, miraculously transforming that evil deed into an avenue of salvation as Joseph eventually ends up being key to saving Jacob and his family from certain death because of a famine.

The Psalmist then calls to mind the Pharaohs of Egypt who turned the Hebrew people into slaves and the rescue that God instituted through the work of his servant Moses.

The Psalm ends with these words, 'For God remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant. God brought his people out of slavery with joy, his chosen ones with singing.'

Some have suggested that this Psalm might have been used as part of a worship liturgy. Perhaps a call and response litany like we sometimes

do in our worship services. Through it, the Hebrew people rehearsed again and again the story of their past, inviting the worshiper to call to mind the fact that God keeps covenant. Even in the midst of tragic and repeated human failure, God never ceases to hold up God's end of the bargain. Wait for it, look for it, and never stop believing in it.

What's essential in this remembering is God's determination to keep covenant even as that covenant keeping takes on new and differing forms. For example, at one time that covenant keeping included God's promise to build the Temple in Jerusalem where God would reside among his people. Under King Solomon's reign, King David's son, God accomplished that. Around 70 A.D. that Temple was destroyed, however, once and for all by the Romans. There's a reason why what little remains of that Temple today is called the wailing wall. Yet, as Jesus promised God would, God has kept his promise to be with his people only now, instead of residing in a single building, God resides in the midst of the Beloved community by way of Spirit, Word, worship, the sacraments, and 'wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name'.

The common, unbreakable thread that connects these historic events is that God keeps covenant with his people and that is the important lesson this Psalm implores us to remember. God's promises never fail. Repeatedly God has demonstrated this even in the worst of times and repeatedly God will do the same no matter what the future holds. It is our sure and certain hope.

The church has always taken this call to remember seriously. It's what keeps our faith intact, even in the most strenuous of times.

The way we worship on Sunday mornings repeats again and again the story of how God's response of grace to our failures continually transforms our dead-ends into new beginnings.

The seasons of the church year rehearse again and again the salvific story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, reminding us that not even something as horrific as the cross, not even death, can thwart God's promise to rescue us, preserve us, and guarantee us a future as God's people.

It is in and through this faithful remembering where our panic

induced quick breathing and fret induced tears find hope. It is in and through this faithful remembering where we hear the small but steady sound of dripping water calling us back to a font that declares, in no uncertain terms, we are God's beloved still. It is in and through this faithful remembering where we begin to hear anew the good news that God is creating still-opening doors, redeeming the irredeemable, and forgiving the very things that have us locked in our own personal prisons. It is in and through this faithful remembering where soon our panicked breathing is replaced with song and our cold and tired feet find themselves wanting to dance again, live again, and get back in the fight again to stubbornly proclaim that, come what may, above all, beyond all, in all, we are and always will be God's people.

'O give thanks to the Lord...make known his deeds among the peoples. ...Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of his wonderful works.'

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, your unwavering commitment to love us into your Kingdom will never fail us. Though there have been times when we have tested your patience, when we have taken matters into our own hands because we deemed your response not quick enough, when we have tried your love with our stubborn waywardness, you have not wavered in your commitment to us. Like a loving parent whose love for a child overrides all things, you have cared for us, you have lifted us from the deepest pit, you have opened doors we thought forever closed.

We praise and thank you, O God, on this day of worship and in this place where you have gathered us to be your people. We praise and thank you as we rejoice in the promise that you are here – among us, with us, forever our companion along life's complicated roads. We praise and thank you that you are our God and we are your people.

Loving God, we know that it is easy to remember your goodness when times are good. It is easy to remember your grace in this place where we are in the company of your church. Yet, we also know the challenges of remembering when times are tough, when the dark of night settles in and we can barely see the hand in front of our face, when hardship convinces us that tomorrow is a dream that will never come. When remembering is difficult, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and memories to cling to so that we might find our footing in knowing that you are mindful of your covenant forever.

This day, O God, we pray for those who find themselves in places and circumstances where remembering is difficult. We pray for the ill, the grieving, the suffering, the distraught, the broken, the isolated, the lonely, the fearful, the homeless, the poor, the rejected, the bullied, the abused, and the defeated. We

especially ask you to hear these prayers we now boldly pray in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.