Seven Psalms #3: "Psalms for the Indignant"
July 27, 2025

Jeremiah 20:7-13
Psalm 55
Luke 9:37-43a

I'm doing something a little different on these summer Sundays—maybe, really, *a lot* different.

I'm preaching from the Psalms—and as a starting point, I'm using the Paul Simon album from a couple of years ago, *Seven Psalms*.

This morning we heard the third track in that work, a song called, "My Professional Opinion." It is more lighthearted and playful than much of the album, even though it sings of indignation, of grievance, and of blame. So in one verse Simon sings:

> I heard two cows in a conversation
> One called the other one a name
> In my professional opinion
> All cows in the country must
> bear the blame

And he concludes:

> So all rise to the occasion
> Or all sink into despair

Which seem like cautionary words for our days, maybe for all days.

I thought that I'd take my own lighthearted approach to indignation this morning, looking at the ways in which all people—including you and me—can sink into the anger that arises out of perceived unfair treatment. You know what I mean.

And I could have reminded you of those great words of G. K. Chesterton, that "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly." I've often counselled lightening up, much like Paul Simon, who sings:

> Gonna carry my grievances
> down to the shore
> Wash them away in the tumbling tide.

But then I spent some time with the Psalms, which, after all, provide the text for this sermon. And the Psalms counsel something different.

The Psalms open us up to our indignation. They take us deep into our grievances. They validate our hurt feelings and our anger. And in doing so, the Psalms transform both our indignation and our lives.

There are many Psalms of praise, Psalms of gratitude, Psalms that tell of the goodness of God.

There are Psalms that speak of strength in adversity.

We find these psalms, we read them over and over, we use them in worship, we memorize them and are grateful for the comfort and encouragement they give to us.

But in a book with 150 Psalms, we also find a shadow side.

There are Psalms of lament, Psalms of anger, and yes, Psalms of indignation.

We read one such psalm together this morning. And there are many others in which lament, anger, and indignation blend together. Often a psalmist will ask, incredulously: "Why do the wicked prosper?" Or plead with God: "Let not the oppressed be shamed and turned away…Rise up, God, defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long."

The words of despair at the beginning of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" were given to Jesus on the cross in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

And the plaintive lament of Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion/On the willows there, we hung up our lyres…" ends with one of the most chilling cries for vengeance in all of literature. I won't even read it here.

Maybe our grievances do need to be washed away with the tide.

The Psalms are no strangers to our human condition.

We joined with the Psalmist this morning, crying out:

> In the evening, in the morning, and at noonday,
> I will complain and lament,
> and the Lord will hear my voice.

The Psalmist is troubled by "the noise of the enemy" and "the pressure of the wicked." Such opponents might trouble us as well.
We didn't read the entire Psalm—you can do this at home—but it becomes surprisingly clear that this wicked enemy is not distant foe. Instead, we hear:

> it was you, my companion,
> my own familiar friend, dear to my own heart.

Those closest to us have great potential to hurt and to disappoint. Even Jesus was not beyond such feelings. We heard this morning a story that, as much as anything else, reveals the deep humanity of Jesus. Told of his own disciples' inability to heal, he responds: "What an unbelieving and perverse generation! How long shall I be with you and endure you?"

That might not be what we would want or expect from Jesus, but we can certainly understand his exasperated indignation. The response of Jesus when his closest followers can do nothing to

bring the healing that is so needed echoes through the millennia and challenges our own inaction in the face the wanton cruelty that is apparent in so many places in these days.

Of course, it is not the betrayal of a friend alone that grieves the Psalmist. There is "violence and strife in the city." "The public square is never free from oppression and deceit." The Psalms do not simply take us out of life as we know it so that we might walk in green pastures and by still waters. Reading them we are immersed in the troubled waters of personal relationships, we face the brick walls of injustice in the nation, and we walk through the dark alleys of corruption in the marketplace.

All of this becomes so unbearable that the aggrieved Psalmist asks of God:

> Let death come upon them suddenly;
> let them go down alive into the grave.

Such an extreme reaction here and in many other Psalms might shock and disturb us. The Old Testament scholar, Kathleen Farmer, points out: "Those who read or pray the psalms are not asked to admire or respect the speakers' desire for revenge. The words of the psalmists are descriptive rather than prescriptive: they describe human reality—the psalmists actually did have such thoughts and desires—but they do not suggest that others should imitate or encourage the attitudes described.[i]

And yet, many will recognize their own thoughts in the indignant words of Psalm 55. If this is the case, remember Desmond Tutu, the Anglican archbishop who knew firsthand the abuse and oppression of apartheid in South Africa, who told us: "You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger."

As much as anyone else—perhaps *more* than anyone else—in scripture, the prophet Jeremiah is known for his indignation. In fact, his name and his indignation gave rise to a word—"jeremiad"—a complaint, a lament. The book that bears his name is filled with, well, *jeremiads* and the one we heard is a classic in this genre.

Jeremiah had been beaten and thrown into the stocks by a priest and chief officer whose name was Pashhur, a name that means freedom or liberation. When he is released the next day, the prophet wastes no time. He immediately renames his opponent, saying: "The Lord has called you not Pashhur but Magor-missabib," that is "Terror let loose."

But Jeremiah's complaint is not with human beings alone. He turns his voice and his anger toward God. "You have enticed me, Lord."

Other translations get at the harshness of the jeremiad: "You have *deceived* me, Lord, and I have been deceived." Or the *Revised English Bible's*: "You have *duped* me, Lord, and I have been your dupe; you have outwitted me and prevailed."

Those are intensely personal words. The are filled with anger and outrage. They are the cry of someone struggling to confront the evil that is so apparent in the world. They are the cry of someone who knows how hard confrontation can be. Jeremiah, worn down, despised by others, has reached the point of asking: "Why bother?" In a statement that some regard as bordering on

blasphemy, Jeremiah stands as one individual, honest before the God he seeks to serve, honest before the God who seems strong and persistent and the same time, unbending to Jeremiah's complaint.

His indignation is great, and yet, even Jeremiah knows that God is greater. He could keep his mouth shut and no longer speak the word that comes to him from God; no longer cry "Violence!" and "Assault!" But holding back would feel like a fire burning in his heart. Like many, he finds himself living in the tension between certainty and doubt that is faith.

As he works through all of this, Jeremiah concludes with what is for him an unusual affirmation of "confident trust and praise": "Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord; for God rescues the poor from those who would do them wrong."

I have been your dupe, O God—and even so, I am confident in my faith that you rescue those with little from those who would take away even that.

Listening to the Psalmist, the prophet, Jeremiah, and Jesus, we are invited to consider again our own indignation. This is not about our anger over the small slights that we have all personally experienced. Sometimes we do need to let those be washed away in the tumbling tide.

But we are invited to consider again our sense that things are not right, that there is a great unfairness, a great injustice in our world. Yes, it would be easier to remain silent, but to do so will feel like a fire that burns in our own heart.

The German theologian, Dorothee Sölle, recalled experiencing a bully as a child:

"One time when I was a child, I saw three big kids jump a small boy, throw him to the ground, and beat him up. The little kid yelled and screamed. I had a helpless feeling inside, a feeling of rage in the pit of my stomach. What could I do? They paid no attention to me since I was even littler than my classmate. So I screamed. I screamed out of anger, out of revulsion, out of rage."[ii]

In this example from childhood, we are getting at what it means to speak out of a righteous indignation, remembering that "righteous" is a word that speaks of right, restored relationship. Righteous indignation is our desire for relationships between people, between nations, even between human beings and the rest of creation to be renewed and restored.

What other than indignation should we feel when we behold the immense cruelty at work in our nation's current approach to immigration and deportation, ripping families apart, pulling people from the street, holding them in barbarous condition?

What other than indignation should we feel when we see the children needlessly starving in Gaza as our own nation and other countries look away?

What other than indignation should we feel over the continued assault on Ukraine by Russia?

I could go on. You could go on.

The great twentieth-century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who studied in Berlin before the

War and fled Poland shortly before it was invaded by Germany and who lost many family members in the Holocaust, said: "There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people."

He concluded: "God is not indifferent to evil."

We, too, should never be indifferent to evil—especially now as it seems to loom over all the earth.

Give voice to your indignation.

Let your indignation show in your actions.

In doing so, you are working toward the restoration of all creation.

So it is that after complaining all day long, the Psalmist can conclude:

> Cast your burden on the Lord,
> and God will sustain you;
> God will never permit
> the righteous to be moved.

This is our faith. This is our hope.

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[i] Kathleen Farmer, "Psalms," in *The Women's Bible Commentary, pg. 141.*
[ii] Dorothee Solle, *Not Just Yes and Amen*