

PSALMS OF LAMENT: TWISTER

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Psalm 143

Very early on Tuesday morning of this week, a family of tornados ravaged a swath of Middle Tennessee bringing death and destruction in their wake. These tornados claimed at least 24 lives. The age of the victims range from 2 to 84. 18 of the dead lived in Putnam County. The full extent of the damage is still being assessed.

The tornado that hid Putnam County—an EF-4—was the strongest rated tornado to hit the US in three years.

These tornados all originated from the same supercell thunderstorm that tracked more than 275 miles across our state. Storm reports first emerged at 11:07 p.m. on Monday in Benton County, which is 75 miles west of Nashville. The storm first produced an EF-2 tornado that killed one person in Camden.

An hour and a half later at 12:30 a.m. on Tuesday, another tornado, this one an EF-3, hit the John C. Tune airport in Nashville causing an estimated \$90 million dollars in damage, which doesn't include damage to the many aircraft that were there. The estimated winds of that tornado are estimated to have hit 165 mph, which, it is worth noting, just 1 mph short of the threshold for EF-4.

For the next hour, this tornado weaved its way through Davidson, Wilson, and Smith counties sometimes moving as fast as 50 mph. It moved from North Nashville, to Germantown, to East Nashville, to Donelson, to Hermitage, to Mt. Juliet, to the area around 109 and I-40, and then through Lebanon before disappearing just short of Gordonsville around 1:30 a.m. It's path has been measured at 60.13 miles.

Then, at about 1:52 a.m., 22 minutes later, the storm produced an EF-4 tornado with maximum wind speeds of 175 mph. This is the tornado that hit the Baxter and Cookeville communities killing 18.¹

Everyone of you here has been affected in some way by the events of this week's tornados. It might be as little as losing your power for a short while or simply dealing with the change in traffic patterns and the inevitable delays. Some of you experienced significant damage to your home or business. Fortunately, as far as I

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/03/05/nashville-tornado-cookeville-ef4/?itid=lk_inline_manual_52

know, no one associated with this church was injured or killed. Nonetheless, we offer our prayers for those who were.

The inescapable question at a time like this is, “Why?” Why did this storm happen? Was there a reason? Why did it hurt some people and not others?

We know in our heads that a storm is just a storm. It is ethically neutral. As we read in the gospel of Matthew, God *sends rain on the just and on the unjust* (Matthew 5:45). There is no why to the storm. It just is. And yet we want to fabricate an explanation, a reason, a cause for the pain and destruction.

So, it was with a great deal of anger that I read about this particular preacher in Omaha, Nebraska, who announced on a television broadcast this week that the storms that hit Tennessee were an act of God sent as punishment for an abortion-related bill working its way through the Tennessee legislature. Putting all politics aside, this is a cruel and hateful thing to say.

Jesus addressed this very issue when he referenced the tragedy of the Tower of Siloam (Luke 13:2-5). This tower in Jerusalem fell and killed 18 people. Jesus asks if those killed were worse sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem. The answer is, no, they were not.

Last Sunday, when we looked at Psalm 102, we read the words of a person who was near death suffering from a terrible illness. On top of their illness, that person added, *All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse*. We read this and wonder who would be so devoid of empathy that they would besmirch a person for being ill. Talk about kicking someone when they are down. And yet, this preacher in Omaha takes to the airwaves and curses those who are already suffering.²

Did God send those tornados as punishment against our communities? Absolutely not. It was a storm. In fact, as we have experienced, storms like that hit this area with some regularity—especially in the Springtime. This one happened to be larger and more destructive than most.

For this Season of Lent, I am preaching a sermon series on the Psalms of Lament that we find in our scripture. After this week’s tornado, I considered changing our reading for today—a reading which I selected several weeks ago. However, after spending time with Psalm 143, I concluded that it is as appropriate as any passage from our Scripture. After all, it is a cry to God; it is a psalm of lament. And this is a week in which all of us have cried to God.

² <https://deadstate.org/christian-pastor-tennessee-tornado-was-an-attack-from-satan-for-the-states-anti-abortion-bill/>

There are over fifty psalms in the psalter which are categorized as psalms of lament. These psalms are written from the point of view of individuals as well as entire nations. These laments cover illness, war, aging, isolation, and more. These laments are heartfelt cries that God will hear them in their despair. They are not so much focused that God will fix their problem, but that, at the least, that God will not ignore them or abandon them.

We don't know exactly how these psalms were used. It is most likely that they were part of the temple's liturgy in Jerusalem. They provide those worshipers who are overwhelmed by emotion with the words to speak to God. These psalms offer a model for grieving. We can use these words when we feel that our own stuttering speech is unreliable.

Psalm 143 is categorized as a prayer from personal enemies. Of course, what those enemies are is not specified. And they don't need to be. Everyone's enemies are different.

The first section of this psalm is a prayer that God, in God's goodness, will listen. It is also a confession of all people's sin. *Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.* This is the prayer, that this person, in their distress, will have God's attention.

The second portion of the psalm is the actual lament. The writer talks about an enemy. We assume it to be a person, but it sounds like the experience many of us had with the tornado. Engage your imagination and think of the enemy as being a tornado.

For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead.

How many of you felt pursued by the tornado and its ability to "crush your life to the ground?" How many of you went to a closet or bathroom or basement and sat in the darkness like it was a tomb?

And as you sat there, not knowing what would happen did you feel your *spirit fainting within you; that your heart was appalled?*

It is in times like this that we pray. As the psalmist writes, *I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands.* As we hunker in our 'safe space' we recall God's works in our lives; we ponder God's deeds; we pray that God will be with us.

And in response, in our prayer, we reach out to God. We realize how much we need the Lord. *I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.*

And then we come to the third and final section of this psalm. In this section we read the psalmist's petition to God for action. The psalmist implores God to answer quickly because their *spirit is failing*.

Like someone hiding in the dark at night, they pray, *Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust.*

The petitions continue: *Save me, O Lord, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge.*

Then the psalmist reminds God of the great covenant saying, *Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.* As God covenanted with Abraham, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." The psalmist's prayer is that God will honor that covenant in their time of need.

The next petition is a plea that God will save them: *O Lord, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.* Remember earlier when the writer said that *no one living is righteous before [God]*. Now he recognizes that God alone is righteous. And God alone has the power to save.

The psalm ends with a pledge from the psalmist to hold up his end of the covenant. As we might have prayed this week, "God, divert that tornado away from me," so the psalmist cries out, *In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant.*

As I said earlier, a tornado is ethically neutral. You cannot convince me that God used this one to punish anybody. We may ask "Why?" but more important than the "why" is the "how," as in 'How do we respond?' How do we react in the face of this natural disaster? And the answer is found in Psalm 143. We must become God.

The third section of Psalm 143 contains all those petitions the psalmist, who is pursued by enemies, is sending to God—answer me, show your steadfast love, save me. As people of faith, these petitions can be the framework of our response to victims of the tornado. What are we supposed to do? Well, respond to their petitions as if the psalmist is asking them to you directly. There are tornado victims out there crying to God and God sends us as emissaries. We should answer and do so quickly because the spirit of the victims is failing. We should not hide our faces from the victims, but be present. Ignoring them is to treat them as if they are dead and gone. We must exhibit steadfast love, love that lasts. We must become the people that can be trusted; we must develop a covenant relationship with them. May our good spirit inspire them. I encourage you to study this part of Psalm 143 and let it guide us in our response.

The compassion already shown by the communities of Middle Tennessee has been extraordinary. Members of this congregation gathered yesterday and

assembled 140 sandwiches and bag lunches to take to work crews in the county. So many people want to help that on Thursday, leaders in Davidson, Wilson, and Puckett counties were asking people not to volunteer. There were just too many. They needed to give the linemen the chance to first get the power restored. They needed to get the roads cleared and the neighborhoods secured. But systems are being put into place to allow folk to help out.

As is the case in every disaster like this, there is the immediate response and the need to plan for the long-term—three to four years out—to help people recover.

It has been a week that we won't forget. And we should not forget. We should not forget the tornados and we should not forget the victims. We are not God and we can't be God. But as God's emissaries, may our ears be open to their prayers; may we go to them as God would go. Amen.