

PSALMS OF LAMENT: THE ARSENAL OF FAITH

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Psalm 80

In 1941, on Sunday, December 7, at 7:55 a.m., the Japanese empire launched a surprise attack on the United States Pacific Fleet which was anchored at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Hundreds of Japanese warplanes launched from aircraft carriers far out at sea and reigned devastation on the US forces. Eight battleships, including the *Arizona*, plus 3 light cruisers, 3 destroyers, and 4 other naval vessels were either sunk or damaged. 164 aircraft, mostly on the ground, were destroyed. 2,403 Americans lost their lives. On the same day, the Japanese also hit Guam, Wake Island, the Philippines, Malaya, and Hong Kong. President Roosevelt would call this “a date which will live in infamy.”

The next day, in response to this attack, the United States declared war with Japan. Three days after that, Germany and Italy declared war on the US.

These dates do not mark the start of World War II. The war had been raging in Europe and Asia for several years. In 1939, Germany had annexed Czechoslovakia and invaded Poland. Honoring their treaty with Poland, France and Great Britain entered into the war against Germany. As war broke out in Europe, American sentiment heavily favored isolationism. The US declared itself neutral. Pearl Harbor changed that.

When we envision the US efforts in World War II, we think of the massive US military—thousands of ships, tanks, and planes, millions of armed soldiers. We think of the Normandy Invasion with military hardware blanketing the horizon across the English Channel. But the reality was that in December 1941, when we entered the war, the US lacked the manpower or the firepower to engage Germany, Italy, and Japan on two separate fronts. Economically, the US was still recovering from its involvement in World War I as well as the Great Depression.

However, once the US declared war, it desperately needed to ramp up production on ships, planes, tanks, bombs, guns, boots, and everything else. We needed to develop what President Franklin Roosevelt famously termed “**the arsenal of democracy**.” And we did. Under Roosevelt’s leadership, the nation turned its resources to producing the arsenal needed to fight and win that war—a war we didn’t start but were determined to finish, a war that threatened democracy on our own shores and around the globe.

In 1939, the US military consisted of just 334,000 personnel. By 1945, that number had climbed to 12 million. At the start of the war, the US navy consisted of 380 vessels. By 1945, that number had increased to 6084. In 1939, the US manufactured 921 warplanes. By 1944, the annual output was a staggering 96,318

aircraft. Total US wartime production of military aircraft surpassed 300,000. Across the country, factories were retooled for the war effort. In Detroit, the Ford automotive plant famously turned out one B-24 bomber every 63 minutes.

To fight a war—to win a war—you must possess an arsenal.

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching a series of sermons from the Book of Psalms—specifically the psalms of lament. Among the 150 psalms in our Bible, about fifty of these can be categorized as psalms of lament. These laments come from individuals facing illness, isolation, pain, sorrow, and threats from enemies. Laments can also come from nations or communities who have suffered natural disasters, plagues, or incursion from foreign adversaries. Our reading for today falls into this second group. Psalm 80 is a psalm of national lament.

One aspect of Psalm 80 that makes it unique is its refrain. Three times within this psalm we encounter this repeated plea, *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved*. However, each time these words are spoken, the refrain escalates. The first time, the psalm prays *Restore us, O God*. The second time we find, *Restore us, O God of hosts*. The third time, *Restore us, O Lord God of hosts*. The effect is that each iteration cranks up the volume on this plea. The first cry is simply to *God*; the second is to *God of hosts*—commander of the armies of heaven; the third adds God's personal name Yahweh into the mix and shouts, *God Yahweh commander of the armies of heaven, restore us*.

This psalm was used in worship. The priest would sing the verses and the congregation would respond with that refrain, *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved*.

Today, each of us may feel that we do need saving. Over the past week, so much about our own lives has changed. Our attention is now consumed with the coronavirus, and the new rules of self-isolation, social distancing, and even the inability to gather for worship. But so much of the situation that we find ourselves in is unknown. We simply don't know what the immediate future looks like. And that can be as unsettling as the disease itself. We have little doubt that very soon we will be calling to God, "save us."

We will get through this pandemic, but as people of faith we need to build up our arsenal. Not an arsenal of democracy, not an arsenal of tanks and guns, but an arsenal of faith. Such an arsenal of faith provides us the tools we need to fight through times of crisis, of suffering and of loss.

For our well-equipped arsenal of faith, we need to gather together such qualities as prayer, compassion, cooperation, community, faith, and hope.

When the US exited World War II, as a nation, we were far stronger than when we entered the war. We had expanded production capacity, increased personal wealth, made tremendous strides in science and technology.

So, it is my hope that after this current pandemic subsides, we, as individuals, and as a community of faith, will be stronger as well. I hope that maybe we can become a church—a community—that is more compassionate, more giving, more connected, more loving, and more faithful.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in the Season of Lent. This year, Lent feels as if it has been pushed aside first by the tornados and now by the Coronavirus. Churches have been forced to cancel many Lenten activities. For Christians, Lent is a reflection of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness praying and fasting and being tempted by the devil.

Because Jesus had been fasting for 40 days, he would have been famished. But when the tempter comes along and offers food, and power, and security, Jesus turns him down. Jesus keeps God first in his life ahead of his own personal needs and desires—something we must always strive to do.

In our reading from Psalm 80, one of the laments we hear is this: *How long, O Lord, will you be angry with your people's prayers?* This is a strange question. Are we to believe that God is really angry with their prayers? I believe the answer is “yes” and “no.” When times are good and our bellies are full and our beds are warm and comfortable, our prayers to God can be rather insipid, superficial, selfish. We tend to pray about ourselves and our wants. We put ourselves ahead of God. It is these prayers that make God angry. These are the prayers of our selfishness.

In the wilderness, through fasting and prayer, Jesus was able to align himself fully with God. It is in our own moments of wilderness when we are stripped of our pride and braggadocio that we finally bring our true prayers before God. Perhaps the most necessary tool in our arsenal of faith should be humility—to stand before God and confess our sins. This is the time to pray for renewal and change, to recognize that we are not what God desires us to be, that we need restoration—something only God can provide. It is in this moment that we are able to cry with authenticity, *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

As in all psalms of lament, in Psalm 80 we uncover the bare, naked need for God's intervention. We cry out that ragged plea, *Restore us. May your face shine on us. Save us.* The person praying this doesn't ask to be fixed, but to be saved. This should be our prayer this day and every day.

The late Eugene Peterson was a Presbyterian pastor and author. In one of his books he explores the subject of Christian hope and he differentiates between hoping and wishing. Peterson points out that what a lot of people call hope is in

reality something very different. They are actually wishing, not hoping—two different things. “Wishing,” he writes, “is something all of us do... Just because we wish for something good or holy we think it qualifies as hope. It does not. Wishing extends our egos into the future; hope grows out of our faith. Hope is oriented toward what God is doing; wishing is oriented toward what we are doing.” It is those prayers—the wishes—that make God angry. The prayers that cause God to turn back to us are the prayers for hope. Hope must be part of our arsenal of faith.

This impending epidemic rattling our world scares me. I am anxious. Darker days are ahead of us and I wish the scientists would quickly develop a vaccine and a cure. I wish no more people will die. I wish I could stand before my congregation and not a camera. But, I hope God will be with me.

We will get through this. But, in the meantime, I expect each of us to pray to God the words we find in our psalm psalm, *Do not hide from us. May your face shine on us. Restore us. Save us.*

Amen.