

Leader's Guide - Psalm 80 "Struggling for Hope"

1. What sorts of things instigate a crisis of faith? How do we usually respond to them?

In the sermon Tim gave a few examples of things that instigate such crisis.

Perhaps you were formed in your life of faith with a very clear "us" vs. "them" mentality. We are the wise, the good, the saved and they are the ignorant, the sinful, the lost. Then you began to have relationship with whomever the "them" was and they weren't who you were led to believe. A crisis of faith.

Perhaps you were motivated to live the Christian life with a solid dose of fear. Don't do that, or this, that, or this other thing will happen to you. You did "that" thing and nothing like you were warned about ever occurred. A crisis of faith.

Circumstance however is the most fertile ground for a crisis of faith. A sharp disconnect between what you believe about God and the circumstances you find yourself in.

Believing that God is God of healing, a God who hears our prayers you prayed for healing and wholeness, for the restoration of a broken relationship. You were earnest, faithful, diligent in your prayers and nothing happened. A crisis of faith.

Trusting that God is good and loving has given you certain expectations about what your life should look like - the fulfilment of your dreams, hopes, yearnings or at the very least the absence of death, disease, conflict, and tragedy. Yet your good yearnings go unfulfilled and your life is marred with suffering. A crisis of faith.

How do we respond to them?

Some of us just walk away. It must not be true so not worth the time and effort to re-examine my convictions.

Others of us bury it down. We don't want to let the doubt and questions in for we can't imagine a life without that faith. The Christian community seems to encourage this by not giving space for doubt and questions so we just bury them down.

Still others of us double down on our convictions. All the while knowing they aren't as solid as before, brittle within our grasp.

I would encourage you as leader to set the tone with this question and make it personal if you are able. Some of the reasons we don't find healing in the midst of such a crisis is we bottle it up because we find no safe place to express it – not in Christian community – not in prayer.

The psalmist writes in the midst of a crisis. The Assyrians have conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and now threaten Judah. Such a reality would trigger a crisis of faith – how could this happen to us? We are God's chosen, the sheep of his pasture? The Psalm is written out of that context and invites a particular response.

Read Psalm 80

2. (vs. 1-3) The psalmist invites us in the midst of such a crisis of faith to bring ourselves face to face with God in prayer. What keeps us from prayer in the midst of such a crisis?

There is the pressure to come before God with our "best selves", and so we hide our true self, our true emotions, clean up our language feeling like we can't talk to God about what is really going on in our hearts and lives.

Perhaps part of this stems from a belief in a transactional relationship with God. If I put on my best self with God he will be favorably disposed to my prayers. If we can't put on our best selves better to stay away.

Another part of this probably stems from the belief that God owes us a good life and so when things go wrong either it is God's fault or our fault (we are being punished for something). In this mindset we are either angry or ashamed – neither of which we readily want to take to God in prayer.

3. (vs. 4-7) The Psalmist lays the blame for what is happening to them at the feet of God. Is God indeed to blame? How would having such a perspective impact how the psalmist navigates the crisis?

*The scriptures seem to affirm two truths. God is sovereign **and** we are responsible. The Assyrian greed and thirst for power and conquest has led them to expand their kingdom – they are responsible. But it is also true that God is sovereign over the situation and biblical texts like Isaiah 5:1-7 (our first reading this Sunday) express that truth. Not only is God sovereign but he has purpose in allowing the Assyrians to conquer Israel.*

How can both of these things be true at the same time? It's a mystery. However we are invited over and over again to live in the midst of that mystery and not sacrifice one truth in favor of the other.

Affirming God's sovereignty in the midst of a crisis does give expression to the Psalmist's anger but also is a affirmation of hope filled trust – because you did this – because you are sovereign - you are the only one who can do anything about this. When everything is far beyond our control knowing that there is one who is in control is indeed comforting. However, the question remains can I trust the one who is in control – is He good and loving?

4. (vs. 8-16) The Psalmist is reminding God of His purposes for Israel. God's purpose was that Israel would live in such a way that they would reflect the character of their God and point to His renewing purposes for the world. This was so that the nations around them would come as well to see and know the God they worship that his renewing purposes would cover the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 4:6-8). The image of the vine and its fruit was used to point to this purpose for Israel. What is the Psalmists grievance with God in light of this imagery?

The psalmist is questioning the wisdom and purposes of God. How will your purposes for us be fulfilled if you have torn down the wall and allowed the Assyrians to trample all over your vineyard. How will your vine – your restoring purposes – cover the earth if the other nations (wild boars of the field) steal the fruit?

5. It was St. Athanasius who said 'you can go to the Psalms with whatever need or trouble you are facing to find words to give expression to the deep movements and currents of your heart. Why is this profitable for us as people of faith to find words to express these movements?

This is where it might be helpful to reflect as a leader on question 7 ahead of time so that you can answer this question from your experience.

I think one of the first things that is profitable here is that when we encounter some of the movements of our hearts articulated in the psalms that we would not want to bring before God out of shame or fear the Psalms tell us – it's ok to feel this way – it's ok to pray this way – it's ok to work out those emotions in the presence of God. It's permission giving and pushes judgement and shame away.

Our knowledge of ourselves is limited and being able to express what we truly feel before a God who knows us right the way to the bottom gives us a safe place by God's light, love and grace to understand ourselves.

6. St. Athanasius also affirmed that when we bring those movements of our hearts before God we allow the character of the God that we pray to to shape those movements, to bring healing and wholeness and restoration. Where do you see evidence of a trajectory toward this healing in the Psalm itself?

It is important to note that in the midst of a political, economic, humanitarian crisis the Psalmist's yearning, articulated in the refrain (vs. 3, 7, 19) is to see the face of God. He wants a real encounter with the presence of God. For to see / know God will change how we respond to the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis of our day, the crisis of our lives. For to encounter the face of God is to be conformed to his will and way not by duty or compulsion but by an inner desire born of an encounter with his love, grace, and beauty.

This is his yearning and each refrain shifts slightly as the Psalmist encounters more fully the presence of God.

Vs. 3 – Restore us O God - Elohim – the name given to God in creation – a cry for help but distant and remote.

Vs. 7 – Restore us O God of hosts – Elohim Tzavoat – the name given to God in the Exodus – the God who sees the suffering of the slaves in Egypt and mobilizes the hosts – the resources of heaven – to do something about it

Vs. 19 – Restore us O LORD God of hosts – the covenant name – Yahweh – is added. The Psalmist is resting in relationship with the covenant God who is in a loving committed relationship with his people – who out of that loving faithfulness will do something about it.

Even the angry questioning of the purposes of God for Israel there is a subtle shift. The vine that bears fruit to point to the character of God and his renewing purposes for the earth is no longer a nation, but a person, a man at God's right hand, a son of man (vs. 17). There is in the midst of the prayer a realization along with the beginnings of a repentant heart (vs 18) that Israel will not fulfil this purpose of God but there will be one who will – foreshadowing the one who would come and say – I am the true vine – abide in me in my word in my love and you will bear fruit – apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:1-5).

This healing comes about through that simple combination of coming before God with as much emotional honesty as we can muster and allowing him to shape the movements of our hearts.

7. Do you have an experience where you bared your heart in prayer where God indeed met you where you were to heal, shape and transform? Consider sharing this for the mutual benefit of your group.

I would encourage you as leader to chart the course in this question with an experience of your own if you have one.