

“The Cry of Lament”

Polo First United Methodist Church
Polo, IL

Psalm 89:46-52

Isaiah 64:1-9

November 27, 2011 (1st Sunday of Advent)

Prayer: Savior Christ, calm us now into a quietness that heals and listens. Open wounded hearts to the balm of your Word. Speak to us in clear tones so that we might feel our spirits leap for joy and skip with hope as we watch and wait for you. Amen.

It was late November and I was working at Duke University Hospital. On this particular night I was the on-call chaplain, the only on-site chaplain for the entire hospital from five in the afternoon until eight in the morning.

The one thing I always hoped and prayed for when I was the on-call chaplain was that it would be a quiet night. All the routine visiting was done by 8 PM, so it was only going to be a death or a serious situation that would warrant my attention.

I awkwardly got in the tiny twin size bed in the on-call room at the hospital with my dress shirt and tie still on just in case there was a call in the middle of the night. I placed my two pagers on the desk next to the head of the bed so that if they started beeping I would hear them. Not that I really had to worry, I never slept well when I was on-call.

The hours went by, as I remember there were only two calls that evening. One came in at about midnight. Someone had died. I dutifully went to the ICU wing of the sixth floor and asked the nurse if there was any family around that I could go talk to and pray with. She told me there was no one around, so I went back to my room, said a prayer for the patient’s family, and went back to bed.

The second page that came was at 6:30 in the morning, a mere hour and a half before I would be relieved of my duty. I called the number listed on the pager and was connected with a nurse down in the Emergency Department. I introduced myself as the chaplain on-call and waited for information and instructions. I held my breath hoping that it would be something routine. But it wasn’t.

The nurse began to describe the last thing that I wanted to hear in that moment. A four week old child had stopped breathing in the middle of the night and had been brought to the hospital. The mother was distraught. I told the nurse I would be down immediately.

As I walked down the hall to the elevator I was calm on the outside but I was filled with fear and dread on the inside. This was only my third on-call at the hospital and up until that point I hadn’t

been called to anything like this. Tending to a family whose grandparent is in the hospital is one thing, but when it's a child it's something else entirely.

I arrived down at the ED a few minutes later. I was immediately overwhelmed as I watched about twenty doctors, nurses and hospital staff rushing around the hallway and the room that held the tiny child. All of them were working feverishly to restore the baby's breathing, and to determine what had caused the problem in the first place.

Meanwhile, I stood there not exactly knowing what to do. One of the nurses came up to me upon seeing my "Pastoral Services" stitching on my lab coat and pointed to the weeping mother flanked by two nurses who were holding and consoling her. The nurse told me to wait a little while before I introduced myself. Which is exactly what I wanted to do. What could I possibly say? So I just waited. I took everything in, muttering a few prayers in my head for the child, the mother, the doctors.

After about ten minutes the same nurse called me over and said it was probably time to introduce myself to the mother. I asked for her name so that I could speak directly to her instead of just in generalities. Then I stepped in front of the mother, who was still surrounded by two nurses, and I offered her my hand saying, "Mrs. Brown, my name is Derek and I'm the chaplain on-call at the hospital tonight. I wanted you to know that I am here to pray for you and your son."

With this the mother fell back into weeping. I can only guess that she thought I was there to bring bad news (even though we were all right next to the room and she would have already known if something bad had happened). The nurses, sensing the same thing, quickly began explaining to her that nothing had happened to her son. When she had finally calmed back down a little bit, I said a few more words to her and then stepped back in silence not knowing what to say next. I resorted to saying more prayers in my head.

Another ten minutes or so elapsed, and finally the mother was able to go in and see her son. I attempted to go in with her, but with all the doctors and nurses and police surrounding the room I was unable to make it in so I just stood by the door watching.

Another minute or two passed and the same nurse from earlier came up to me and said, "Have you done this before?" And I said, "Not for a baby, no." Then she said, "But you have been at the hospital before haven't you?" A little startled I said, "Oh, yeah, of course." Then she said, and I will forever remember these words, "And they train you, right?"

I looked back at her a little dumbfounded. I can't even begin to describe the thoughts that went through my head. What did she expect me to do? What did she expect me to say? Nothing I do can make this any better! Nothing I do can make this any easier for the mother!

That nurse was kind of like the Israelites who cries out to God, "Rip open the heavens and get down here! Make the mountains tremble!" That nurse wanted something big to happen. It was

like she expected my words or my prayers to be so faithful, so eloquent, so perfect and powerful that the mother would stop her crying and the baby would somehow regain his breath.

But it didn't work. The hospital didn't shake. The ceiling wasn't peeled back. Divine light or voice didn't come. The baby wasn't miraculously healed.

It didn't work for me, and it didn't work for those Israelites either. God didn't come down. The Israelites weren't saved from their enemies. The world wasn't redeemed.

I can imagine an Israelite coming up to Isaiah, "You are a prophet, right? You were chosen by God? And you've done this before?"

But as loud as Isaiah cried out, as much as he hoped and prayed and pleaded that God would intervene, that God would come down, that God would do something miraculous, something big. It didn't come. He was met with divine silence.

So he stepped back awkwardly not knowing exactly what to do or say next. Where's God? When are things going to change around here?

The Israelites wanted deliverance from the exile. They wanted salvation from their enemies. They wanted to be brought home to the Promised Land and to the Temple. For us it's not really like that, but it's not really that different either.

If there is anything that shows that this world needs God to intercede in a dramatic way it is that scene from the hospital. A four week old child mysteriously stopped breathing in the middle of the night. "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?"

We've heard these marvelous stories of God's powerful presence and miraculous movements in history. Why doesn't that happen now? Where is God this time? Will you hide yourself forever, God?

People are starving, children are being abused, husbands are dying, wives are grieving . . . How long, O Lord? How long?

Nothing we say seems to work. Nothing we do changes things. No amount of money can fix this. So we step back awkwardly in silence. We wait . . . We watch . . . We weep . . . How Long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?

This is the season of Advent. It's not a season of passive waiting and watching, but it's a season of weeping. It's a season of lament. We lament because all is not right with this world. Something is seriously wrong. And we've got this God who is baffling because no matter how loud we cry out, no matter how much we plead, he seems to be hiding.

God, you promised! God, you said you would act! God, you said salvation would come! You said redemption would be revealed!

So we weep because we have caught a glimpse of God's new day and we ache for it's coming. So we watch with eager anticipation. So we wait with renewed hope. How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?

Amen