

A Particular Person
Psalm 31: 1-5; 15-16

Rev. Tom VandeStadt
May 10, 2020
Congregational Church of Austin, UCC

Today's lectionary reading, Psalm 31: 1-5; 15-16, selects the verses from Psalm 31 that many would consider to be the most inspiring ones, those that are the most hopeful and faith-filled. There are actually twenty four verses in Psalm 31. We read seven of them, less than a third, so we're missing over two-thirds of the Psalm.

Most significantly, we're missing the person who's saying these hopeful and faith-filled words. Who's saying this stuff? Who's hoping? Who's putting their faith in God? Just reading the lectionary verses, we don't know.

Let's find out.

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.
For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.
I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*

Psalm 31: 9-13

Today's lectionary reading edits this person out. If we stick to the lectionary, we don't know who's speaking.

Now, that's not necessarily bad, because editing this particular person out conveys the message that anybody could speak these hopeful and faith-filled words. Not just a particular person, but anybody. The words of inspiration have a universal quality. Any number of people, in any number of situations, predicaments and crisis could speak them.

However, there's a down-side to editing out the actual speaker. By rendering the actual speaker invisible, the lectionary renders the actual person unimportant. It could be anybody, so it doesn't really matter who it is.

But it's not anybody. And it does matter who it really is. It's a particular person.

A particular person—suffering their own unique existential crisis.

A particular person—facing threats from all directions.

A particular person—cut off, isolated, alone.

A particular person—suffering relentless stress and anxiety, misery and despair.

A particular person—begging God, save me! You're my only hope, God. I have no other. I trust you. Save me!

Today's lectionary renders that particular person invisible and unimportant.

And that's one way that some people with lots of power dominate others with far less power—they render them invisible and unimportant. They don't think of them as particular people, living particular lives. They think of them as just anybody, and therefore, as nobody in particular.

I wonder how many particular people are begging God to save them now, especially people particularly at risk of infection—people living in places with a high risk of infection, people working in places with a high risk of infection.

I have to confess, I'm angry at Donald Trump.

For a number of reasons, but let me share one.

I think Donald Trump, along with others in positions of economic and political power, are trying to convince our nation that a certain corona-virus death toll is necessary and acceptable, and that certain people are expendable.

We're fighting a war, they're telling us, and people get killed in wars. It's unavoidable. We have to learn to accept a certain number of casualties. And yes, the casualties will be high.

"Some people will be affected badly," Donald Trump said this week.

"Some people?"

Who in particular?

We know who.

People of color.

People who work for low-wages.

Elderly people.

Health-care personnel.

And other vulnerable people.

They will disproportionately suffer and die.

They're the foot soldiers, the cannon fodder, in this war in which victory is achieved not by minimizing the number of people who suffer and die, but by resuscitating, as quickly as possible, an economy that's inherently unjust. To achieve that victory, "some people" must suffer and die. It's the *Live and Let Die* policy.

I wonder how many particular people, especially those with no choice but to live and work in high risk places, are begging God now, save me!

I'm exposing myself to a killer. Save me!

I have no protective gear. Protect me, God. I'm vulnerable.

There's no food, the rent's overdue, and the safety net's quickly unraveling.

You're my only hope, God. You're all I have. I trust you. Save me!

I'd like us to remember today that every person praying like this is a particular person.

A particular person with their particular life.

A particular person facing their particular existential crisis.

A particular person feeling their particular stress, anxiety, and pain.

Particular groups of people may be disproportionately praying like this now, because they're particularly at risk. But every person in every group is a particular person.

And each person who suffers and dies, is a particular loss. "Some people" won't suffer and die, particular people will suffer and die. Lots of them. For no good or just or righteous reason.

We can't sit back and allow powerful people to render particular people invisible and unimportant, and sacrifice them. As Christ's disciples, we have to resist this policy, and promote more just and humane alternatives.

That's why groups like Central Texas Interfaith, Equal Justice Center, Texas Impact, Micah 6, Labyrinth Student Ministry, and Texas Freedom Network are so important right now. Groups like these are resisting the cavalier sacrifice of particular people in the groups most at risk. Let's continue to support these groups as best as we're able, as we continue to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every particular person, and defend the life of every particular person.