

Seeking God

Psalm 70

Center Church, Hartford

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COVID, political differences, economic pressures, so many things seem to be working against people being able to form meaningful community. We have always been a divided country, but now we are divided in new and dangerous ways, and, literally, divided from one another by the pandemic. The election of Joe Biden will not magically change that tomorrow!

All of this makes it extraordinarily hard to have empathy for others. We are all in our own bubbles, focused on whatever our own particular struggles are, great or small, and we have a much harder time connecting with other people empathetically. It's so much harder to do that through a screen. I don't mean having sympathy for others, which means feeling sorry for them. Rather that seemingly ever more elusive quality of empathy, being able to imagine walking in another's shoes and the struggles they experience. Not dismissing someone else's problems as irrelevant. That's been occurring on all sides of the political spectrum. Not mansplaining or white-splaining or privilege-splaining away how someone else feels, thus making their experiences and emotions illegitimate. Empathy: "the ability to understand and

share the feelings of others,” not to merely comment on them or criticize them, or worse, belittle them.

In order to get through this pandemic, to face the continuing embedded racism in our culture, to move into post–election governing and do what everyone claims to want, heal the nation, we are all going to have to re–invigorate our capacity for empathy. It’s what gets us to wear masks, to acknowledge privilege when it exists, to truly listen to one another.

The book of Psalms, which gives us so much in so many ways, also offers us an opportunity to practice empathy which just might help move us through this very long winter of our discontent. Here’s how:

Often when we pray the Psalms, we may find a Psalm that seems to represent how we feel in any given moment: joyful or sad or frightened or in need of help, and then we make those words our own. Today I invite us into a different kind of praying the Psalms. We can pray the Psalms vicariously for other people. In other words, as we pray a Psalm, consider who in our family, our church, our community, our nation, our world, might pray exactly these words, feeling exactly these feelings, experiencing exactly these kinds of events in their lives or communities.

Today I am going to lead us into praying Psalm 70 in just this way. I will use the Contemporary English Version so that the words feel like those someone alive today might use. I am going to pray it segment by segment, then give a few moments of pause between each. In that pause, I invite you to consider who might pray this kind of prayer right now, feel into their feelings, pray in one voice with them as they seek God. Either on Facebook or Zoom, as you do this, I encourage you to write in the chat/comments who might pray this prayer. If you have a name, keep it to a first name in order to preserve privacy. It might be a group of people. I will suggest one for each segment to prime our thinking.

Get into a comfortable position for prayer for you, whatever that may be. I encourage you to close your eyes, so that you might see in your mind's eye those for and with whom you pray each segment.

Let us pray.

“Save me, Lord God! Hurry and help!” (repeat) Someone in the midst of a natural disaster or war.

“Disappoint and confuse all who want to kill me.” (repeat)
Someone experiencing physical assault.

“Turn away and disgrace all who want to hurt me. Embarrass and shame those who say ‘We told you so!’” (repeat) Someone who has experienced betrayal by friends or family.

“Let your worshippers celebrate and be glad because of you. They love your saving power, so let them always say, ‘God is wonderful!’” (repeat) Someone who has experienced healing from a bad case of COVID.

“I am poor and needy, but you the Lord God, care about me.” (repeat) Someone living on the street who will attend our Sunday dinner this afternoon.

“You are the one who saves me. Please hurry and help!” (repeat) Someone who has been cast out of their family because of their sexual orientation or identity.

You see how it works? You can do it with almost any Psalm, and it is such an act of love; I hope you could feel that.

Some of the Psalms end like this one, with a fervent plea. Others begin or end with a song of trust, remembering times when God has been faithful, and often it is good to end our empathetic prayer time with words like that. The words we just prayed from Psalm 70 actually occur twice in the book of Psalms. These very words make up the

second half of Psalm 40. Psalm 40 begins, however, with these words of hope and trust: “I patiently waited, Lord, for you to hear my prayer. You listened and pulled me from a lonely pit full of mud and mire. You let me stand on a rock with my feet firm, and you gave me a new song, a song of praise to you.” Perhaps this morning you or someone for whom you prayed is still in the mud and mire of life. Perhaps you are celebrating deliverance. If so, listen and pray with me these words to close out our time, and remember to whom we pray, (repeat above) May that be so for all for whom and with whom we pray. Amen.