

## Psalm 39: 1-6, 12-13

<sup>1</sup> I said, 'I will guard my ways  
that I may not sin with my tongue;  
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth  
as long as the wicked are in my presence.'

<sup>2</sup> I was silent and still;  
I held my peace to no avail;  
my distress grew worse,

<sup>3</sup> my heart became hot within me.  
While I mused, the fire burned;  
then I spoke with my tongue:

<sup>4</sup> 'LORD, let me know my end,  
and what is the measure of my days;  
let me know how fleeting my life is.

<sup>5</sup> You have made my days a few handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.  
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.

<sup>6</sup> Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.  
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;  
they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

<sup>12</sup> 'Hear my prayer, O LORD,  
and give ear to my cry;  
do not hold your peace at my tears.

For I am your passing guest,  
an alien, like all my forebears.

<sup>13</sup> Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,  
before I depart and am no more.'

Why is this psalm in the psalter? Not only does it begin and end with gloom and doom hopelessness. But it puts the blame square on God... Actually, though, it is a little more subtle than that.

The psalm begins with the psalmist describing how hard they tried to maintain self-control in the face of taunts and temptations to lose it and do to others what was being done to them. The hope was that it would all stop somehow. The psalmist had faith that God would act somehow to stop what was being done, to protect the psalmist and, perhaps, even vindicate them against their enemies. However, the opposite seems to have happened. The trouble has continued and the psalmist is struggling to hold on to faith.

Finally, the psalmist can't hold back their tongue. They speak. They speak their pain and hurt and feelings of hopelessness. They speak of the futility of life, the fragility of life, the fleetingness of life (we're here today and gone tomorrow and someone else will claim all we've worked for). But even worse, the psalmist puts all this squarely on God. God has created humans so that they are here today and gone tomorrow and God doesn't much care either it seems: <sup>5</sup> You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your

sight." And, "6 Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather."

The psalm ends in hopelessness and frustration: "13 Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more." And yet, I don't know if you caught it... Just before the end is this verse: 12 'Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears." This is a psalm of supplication, a plea, a crying up... Even though there is a gloom and doom hopelessness, a frustration at the apparent silence and disregard from God in the face of the injustices the psalmist is suffering, there is also a hope, a sliver of hope in what can yet be if God is awakened to hear and feel the psalmists pain.

But is it that God is not listening? Or is God's movement to be activated in a whole other way? All too many people in the psalmists day and our day today give up on prayer and faith in God because God seems to be absent or distant, or maybe God has been a wishful figment of our imagination... But for those who persist in seeking for God (the biblical Job is a great example), God does show up... but God looks different and works different than imagined before...

The great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in a Nazi prison camp, had a journal he wrote in while in prison. And one of the last things he wrote was that Christians are being called to grow up in their faith, from a childish faith that expects God to intervene and change circumstances on the outside (be it praying for good weather, getting the winning bid on a house purchase or defeating my competitor or enemy), to God as a power and force that works from within us to empower us to be and to become in the face of so much in our world that is wrong or not in our control... Bonhoeffer couldn't change his fate in the end. But he believed resurrection was more real than ever, in this life and the next...

What kind of faith do you need in your life right now? What kind of faith do we need in our world right now? How do we pray in this time? What kind of God do we need to pray to? May the struggle of the psalmists open up fresh arteries in us so that the blood of new spiritual life flows in and through us.

PRAYER: We are here, O God, present and alive before you... We cannot lie, O God. Some days and some seasons in our lives we are overwhelmed, helpless and hopeless... Other times it is frustration and anger that afflict us... Injustice in our world, injustice in our lives, tragedies and atrocities... How can we experience your power of resurrection when crucifixion is so vivid a reality around us and in us too? How can we taste the sweetness of your beauty and grace when there is such a bitter taste of sadness and pain in our mouths... We open our hearts anew before you, O God, this day, this hour... Like the psalmist we pray: 12 'Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears...

Amen.