

WISDOM FROM *EQUUS*

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-21

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached at an 8:30am service to a limited congregation under COVID-19 restrictions.

- ¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.
- ² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
- ³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
- ¹⁷ Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
- ¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
- ¹⁹ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
- ²⁰ he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
- ²¹ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
- ²² And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

I.

When I attended seminary in New York in the 1970s, I had never seen a Broadway play; but as student tickets were only \$5, I took advantage of the opportunity. As it happened the first play I saw was *Equus*, and it has stayed with me ever since.

The play features a seventeen-year-old British boy who commits a violent crime against horses he loves at the stable where he works. In a last-minute reprieve from jail, he is committed to a state psychiatric hospital by a magistrate who asks a psychiatrist friend to do a special favor and admit the boy as a patient. The psychiatrist himself is at the end of his rope in his own work, has begun to question *its* and *his* value, but accepts the boy, more as a favor to the magistrate than out of any real hope of help or healing for the boy.

As the play develops, the relationship between the psychiatrist and the boy becomes redemptive, not only for the boy, but ironically for the psychiatrist as well. Toward the end of the play, the psychiatrist says:

[This boy is] full of memory and fear...But [he] has known a passion *more ferocious* than I have felt in any second of my life. And...I *envy* it.¹

¹ Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Avon, 1974), Act II, 25, page 94.

“A passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life.”

While *Equus* is about redemption and hope, it is equally profound in the ways it presents the pain and suffering out of which redemption comes: the pain of the psychiatrist, the boy, his father, his mother, and therefore humanity in general. There is wisdom from *Equus* concerning human suffering, wisdom for us during Lent.

II.

The psalm for this Fourth Sunday of Lent provides an eloquent recitation of different kinds of pain the people of Israel have suffered up to that point in their long history.

The psalmist speaks of their *exile* in Babylon:

Some wandered in *desert wastes*,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and *thirsty*,
their *soul fainted* within them.

The psalmist depicts the despair of *depression* and *imprisonment*:

Some sat in *darkness* and in *gloom*,
prisoners in *misery* and in *irons*...
Their hearts were bowed down with *hard labor*;
they fell down, with no one to help.

The psalmist speaks of the twin curses of *sin* and *illness*:

Some were *sick* through their sinful ways,
and because of their *iniquities* endured affliction;
they *loathed* any kind of food,
and they drew near to the *gates of death*.

And the psalmist speaks of suffering that comes at the hand of *nature*, perhaps even “nature’s god”²:

Some went down to the *sea* in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the *stormy wind*,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to *heaven*, they went down to the *depths*;
their courage melted away in their *calamity*;
they *reeled and staggered like drunkards*,
and were at their *wits’ end*.

² *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

Tolstoy wrote: “All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”³ There are multiple ways we mortals suffer and experience pain, multiple ways we are unhappy. Many of these are given eloquent voice in our psalm this Lenten Sunday.

III.

But the psalm is not simply an eloquent *catalogue* of human pain. It begins on a more *positive* note, with worship, gratitude, affirmation:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his steadfast love endures for ever.

This refrain is repeated *nine* times in the 43 verses of the psalm. In this psalm, as in Lent, the joy of worship grows out of the recognition of pain, the resolution of suffering, the realization that we yearn for what has not yet come to be and that our efforts at bringing it about have only just begun and need not cease.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his steadfast love endures for ever.

IV.

How can we give thanks to the Lord? How can we move from suffering to joy, from pain to worship? How can we as people of faith – in whatever suffering we have *experienced* or *seen* – “give thanks to the Lord for his *steadfast love* that endures *forever*”?

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I must say that on this 53rd Sunday of worshipping in this place with faces I see in their regular pews more in *memory* than in *person*, I draw some hope from *recent* developments:

- Vaccines moving to what seems near proliferation levels
- The now common greeting or conversation: “Have you gotten your vaccine yet?”
- The simple advent of sunshine and warmer weather.

It is as if we have been afloat on “the watery part of the world”⁴ for over a year and have awakened one morning to the sight of a small land mass in the distance, tiny, to be sure, but slightly larger with each passing day, even each passing hour.

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Friday afternoon my wife and I both felt our eyes bloodshot from staring at our computer screens since early in the morning, so about 4:30 we began unpacking the two very large boxes a delivery truck had left on our front step the day before:

- An outdoor rug
- A patio table

³ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 1878.

⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851.

- Six chairs, two of them rotating.

Between us we passed the one pair of scissors we could find among the ten I know we have somewhere in the house, as we unwrapped newsprint and cut through tape and soft packing material wrapped tightly around each leg of the table and the pieces of the chairs. Even though the day was bright and sunny and birds were singing, we felt like it was more like Christmas than a few weeks before Easter.

- The hope of cooking out
- Of eating outside
- Maybe even with someone other than the two of us.

We still have to assemble the table and chairs, but unwrapping was fun. In the sequestration of coronavirus, we draw hope from little things.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his steadfast love endures for ever.

V.

But when we are aware of pain, most of us need something more than the pleasure of a patio set to move us to praise. In order to worship, in order to recover joy, we have to come to terms with our pain, accept it, incorporate its presence or its memory into our lives, let it become an appropriate part of us, neither oversized nor buried and hidden.

In *Equus*, as the psychiatrist begins to see the *boy* get better, he says:

Look ...To go through life and call it yours – *your life* – you first have to get *your own pain*. Pain that's *unique* to you.⁵

Your own pain. Pain that's unique to you.

- Perhaps this is “the tailor-made cross” I mentioned in a recent sermon.
- Perhaps it is the “solitary furnace experience” Faulkner mentions.⁶
- Perhaps it is what one rabbi meant when, in an ancient rabbinical tale, he asked another rabbi: “Do you *yet* love your pain?”⁷
- Perhaps it is the Lenten spiritual:

Jesus walked this lonesome valley;
He had to walk it by himself.

⁵ Shaffer 94.

⁶ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Avon, 1976), 29. Originally published 1936.

⁷ Doug King, Paper on Psalm 107, Moveable Feast Preaching Group, 2021. The rabbinical story is found in Alan Lew's *Be Still and Get Going* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

Oh, nobody else could walk it for him;
He had to walk it by himself.⁸

Is this what the psychiatrist means?

*You have to get your own pain.
Pain that's unique to You.*

I don't think it is so much the case that we have to *acquire* our own pain...like we buy patio furniture and have it delivered. Pain will come to us in time, but we are better off in the long run when we acknowledge our pain, face it, incorporate it into our lives...in that sense "love" it. Most of the time, when we acknowledge our pain and make it part of who we are, it releases its dark grip on how we view ourselves, on how and who we trust, on how we treat people close to us as well as people barely of our acquaintance.

**

One way we acquire our own pain is to pay attention to the pain of others:

Whether we are talking about

- The Royal Family or Black Lives Matter
- The Opioid Crisis or the Me-Too Movement

We need to be aware that

- We cannot fully *enter* someone else's pain as neither can they fully *enter* ours.
- But we are unwise to *dismiss* the pain of another, or to *assume* that their pain *exhausts* all we can know about who they are.
- If I may use a double negative: A cry of pain *never* contains *no* truth; and it rarely contains the *whole* of truth.

VI.

The final wisdom from both *Equus* and the psalm is this: The incorporation of pain into our lives is often *necessary* for us to worship, for as we make progress in coming to terms with our own pain, we begin to remove its power to block our relationship with God and therefore hinder our worship.

Even though the psychiatrist is an atheist, he is fascinated by the boy's worship of his god, the mighty horse *Equus*.

That boy stands in the dark for an hour [the doctor marvels], sucking the sweat off his god's hairy cheek.⁹

⁸ https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_walked_this_lonesome_valley.

⁹ Shafer 95.

He concludes:

*Without worship you shrink. It's as brutal as that.*¹⁰

Through his patient, the doctor discovers the centrality of worship.

VII.

It is great to see you all here today, at your normal *time* if not your normal *space*.

- From this time we have spent away from our church
- From the suffering and deaths our nation has experienced and the disparities this pandemic has once again revealed
- And from the “solitary furnace experience[s]” we have been through

I hope we will *recover* – perhaps even *deepen* – or *sense of worship*:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his steadfast love endures for ever.

Let us worship God.

Amen.

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¹⁰ Shafer 95.