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Sermon Preached in Class (November 6) and at Church of the Resurrection (CXM Site – November 9)

Proper 27, Track 2: Job 19:23-27a; **Psalm 17:1-9**; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17;
Luke 20:27-38

“I call upon you, O God, for you will answer me; *

incline your ear to me and hear my words.”¹ Amen.

This sermon comes to you in three parts. First, I’m going to talk about how people don’t get what they deserve. Next, we’ll spend some time meditating on our enemies. And finally, I’ll discuss how we may respond to these challenging realities.

Psalm 17 is a petition psalm, more specifically a psalm of innocence.

“Hear my plea of innocence, O Lord;

give heed to my cry;”²

The psalmist is asserting his innocence before God, even though God surely knows all about the psalmist. The psalmist is so invested in declaring his innocence to God, that we only get the reason why the psalmist is asking for vindication at the

¹ Psalm 17:6.

² Psalm 17:1.

end of the lectionary reading for today, which is more than halfway through the entire 15 verse prayer. Why would he do this? To understand, we have to look at the relationship between the Israelite people and God in the Hebrew Bible.

God and Israel are covenant partners. Throughout multiple passages of the Hebrew Bible, God makes promises to Israel to bless them, protect them, and provide for them. And now, when the psalmist is surrounded by enemies and feels that God isn't holding up God's end of the agreement, the psalmist cries out to God for vindication. He asks God to examine him and test every part of him to see if there's something he's said or done to deserve the ill-treatment. By asserting his own innocence, the psalmist is saying, "I've held up my end of our agreement. Where are *you*, God?"

You may be able to imagine an alternative scenario where the psalmist is calling out to God saying, "Forgive me! Bad things are happening to me, and I know it's my fault."

And in some ways that situation is preferable to the situation of the psalmist.

I've had two serious foot injuries in my life, one for each foot. One of them happened when I was walking barefoot in silty stream... where I couldn't see the bottom – I think you can guess where this is going so, I'll spare you the gory details. The other happened when I was at dance class, doing things I'd done thousands of times before, wearing the appropriate footwear. I didn't fall, I didn't

kick something, but then out of nowhere, I got a hairline fracture in a bone in my foot and had to wear a boot for six weeks.

Both of these injuries ended up with me on crutches. But with the first, I felt a certain amount of responsibility for my own poor decision making. And in the other, it's actually a bit more complicated. There's nothing I would do differently. It wasn't my fault.

Now, my foot problems are pretty innocuous, but the fact that sometimes things happen to us through no fault of our own has devastating consequences.

People don't get what they deserve.

I'm thinking about all the federal workers, who had no part in the government shut down, yet are now missing paychecks and struggling to pay their bills and feed their families. I'm thinking about children everywhere who are born into situations that they had no part in creating yet suffer the consequences of others' actions all the same. I could go on, and I'm sure each of us can think of a situation that is close to our hearts.

People don't get what they deserve. Despite the psalmist's claim that his footsteps hold fast to the way of God's law, still there are the wicked who assault him and the deadly enemies who surround him.

This leads me into my next section. Who or what are our enemies? And what are we supposed to do about them?

The psalmist actually has more to say about his enemies than the lectionary allows him. He goes on to say that his enemies are like a

“lion eager to tear,

like a young lion lurking in ambush.”³

The psalmist continues saying:

¹³ “⁴Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them!

By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,

¹⁴ from mortals—by your hand, O LORD—

from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.”

That was a bit uncomfortable for me to read. And maybe that has something to do with the lectionary omitting these verses. There is unavoidable friction between passages like these and our understanding of a loving God. Aren’t we supposed to love our enemies like Jesus said in the Luke reading this past week? This is a hard scriptural moment, but maybe the psalmist is being honest here. Maybe what felt comforting or vindicating at the time was the image of a powerful God who takes down his enemies by force.

³ Psalm 17: 12.

⁴ Psalm 17: 13-14.

Nevertheless, I find myself tempted to spiritualize verses like these. I'm metaphorically surrounded by enemies. Maybe my enemy is my own propensity to sin. Maybe my enemies are the temptations around me. But I wonder what it could be like to take seriously that for many people having an enemy isn't a metaphor. The psalmist describes his enemies as mortals, not spirits or forces.

It's a very literal, tangible, enfleshed reality that there are people who seek to and commit harm against others. There are people that are literally out to get me and others like me. For many of us who were born and raised in the United States in-between the attacks on Pearl Harbor and 9/11, enemies probably have felt far away in time and space. Yet, for those of us who are survivors of abuse, violence, hate crimes, police brutality, war, abduction, and all forms of inhumane treatment having an enemy isn't hypothetical. Sometimes our enemies are in our own towns, neighborhoods, and homes.

It may be a sign of privilege to say I have no enemies when oppressed peoples have always known who their enemies are. I'm not digging into the fact that we have enemies to cause further division and polarization. And I'm not trying to make anyone feel paranoid. I'm digging into this because we cannot protect the vulnerable if we don't take seriously the threats against them. We cannot stand in solidarity with our immigrant neighbors, our black and brown neighbors, our protesting neighbors, our transgender neighbors, our poor neighbors, our food

insecure neighbors, if we don't face the fact that there are people in this country committing spiritual and bodily violence against them.

So, what do we do when we're surrounded by enemies? We bring our petitions to God, the God of justice, in prayer.

God doesn't fix His eyes on justice because we ask him to. We cry out to God for justice to remind ourselves of who God is and who we are. This psalm teaches us that God is open to argument. We can call God into account. And in confronting God, we confront ourselves. Are our footsteps following God's path? Where is God leading us and how are we called to care for the most vulnerable among us as our enemies encroach closer and closer?

The psalmist teaches us how to respond to our enemies. Not necessarily by picking up our own swords and going to battle, but by calling on God and asking God to show us His marvelous loving-kindness. God's loving-kindness is the force, the spirit, that inspires us to love. God's marvelous loving-kindness tells us that every human being is loved and deserves to be safe.

God's spirit is here at Resurrection. It's what inspires this community to react to a world full of enemies by extending kindness and generosity. Our enemies say that not everyone deserves food, but we say, "We will feed you." Our enemies say that not everyone deserves a safe place to stay, yet we work to build homes.

We call upon God not only because He is our savior and we know he will answer us. We call upon God and ask him to show us the path to justice and to sustain us as we, day after day, take step after step.