

A place of hopelessness: Psalm 77

by [Roger Lovette](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

According to my homiletics professor, there are only two ways to preach a good sermon: either we begin where we are and end in Jerusalem, or we begin in Jerusalem and end on the street where we live.

The words of Psalm 77 come out of the depths of where God's chosen people are: in exile. Far from home, they find themselves in a hard place where it's nearly impossible to sing the Lord's song. This is a place called hopelessness—a region of enormous pain.

We've all been there. We struggle with unanswered prayer. We identify with the old spiritual, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." The old landmarks seem to have slipped away. We worry about the shifting morals of our young, or about job security, terrorism or health care. We wonder if we'll have enough to pay the mortgage. Sometimes things are so hard that our prayers stick in our throats and the psalmist's lament becomes our own: "Has his steadfast love ceased forever?" "Are his promises at an end?" This is the street where most of us live.

Sometimes I wonder what possible connection a particular Sunday's lectionary readings have with one another. Not today's texts. Elijah could identify with Psalm 77. This faithful prophet found himself running for his life after having offended the petulant Queen Jezebel—she was determined to kill him. Elijah hid in the wilderness and railed, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10).

This same sentiment is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where the personal pull of slavery was very real. The old gratification of self-destruction was ever present: fornication, impurity, licentiousness—the list was seemingly endless. In his own life the apostle had prayed: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). "I do not understand my own actions," he said, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15).

It sounds familiar—the psalmist is in exile, Elijah afraid and desperate, Paul agonizing over the strictures of his own humanity. These are descriptions of the street where we live.

Psalm 77 is a psalm of lament. There are more of these psalms than of any other type. Maybe this is because, as Walter Brueggemann writes, life is often savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence and hard-lived asymmetry. He finds it strange that the church today often opts for upbeat songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented.

But we cannot stay on the street called lament, for in the middle of the darkness of all these readings there shines a beam of light. From verses 11–20 the psalmist moves from a time of stress much like ours to the strange hopeful world of the Bible. We find ourselves in Jerusalem, of all places. Brueggemann says these latter verses give us a psalm of orientation.

In the desert Elijah discovered a highway that led to his God. Not all the valleys were exalted and not all the hills were made low, but God spoke in his darkest hour. Elijah was fed by the hands of angels, and a still small voice sent him back into the fight.

Out of his own life Paul discovered a word to offer the troubled Galatians. Slavery was not the last word, neither was idolatry, enmity or strife. But all these words gave way to the fruits of the spirit: love and joy and peace and patience.

Psalm 77:11 moves from the harsh, hard days of the exile to a vision of a far better world. In remembering the God who had acted in their history, God's chosen people discovered that this same God would act on the mean streets where they lived. What we have here is a change of perspective. One scholar says that in all these readings we see the movement from I to Thou. The hymn captures it well: "Thou in the darkness drear our one true light." Even in the hard circumstances of these exiles' lives, the world was filled with hope and mystery.

In *Psalms of Lament*, Ann Weems tells how the stars fell out of her sky when her son Todd was killed less than an hour after his 21st birthday. Her friend, Walter Brueggemann, suggested that she write out the laments of her heart. Out of her pain she lifted up her anger and lamentations and wrote page after page. Slowly she discovered that God can wipe the tears from the eyes when no consolation seems to

come and that God really does put the stars back in our skies.

The street where we live may be a place that is hard and difficult, but the testimonies of the faithful remind us that somewhere beyond the pain of our lives there is a Jerusalem where we will find hope and joy once more.