

Impasse
Psalm 80
Sermon by Dan Schrock
November 30, 2008
Advent 1

¹*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!*

³*Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*
⁴*O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
⁷Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

⁸*You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
⁹You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
¹¹it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.
¹²Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
¹³The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.*

¹⁴*Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
¹⁵the stock that your right hand planted.
¹⁶They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. (NRSV)*

Americans are fond of thinking that they can do anything. With enough sweat, persistence, money, and technological know-how, people in this country believe they can solve nearly any challenge, fix nearly any problem, improve nearly any situation. Send a man to the moon? America can figure it out! Invent the world's fastest computer? American ingenuity can handle it! Build the world's biggest and most powerful aircraft carrier! That's easy!

But in recent years, particularly in the last few months, the United States has come to an impasse in a number of important areas. "Impasse" is not a word we use very often; but there aren't many other words in the English language that mean the same thing as this word, so I want to go ahead and use it. An impasse is "a road or a passage having no exit." More broadly it refers to a deadlocked or stalemated situation.¹ If you are at an impasse, it means that you have no idea how to move forward. You have no idea what to do next. You can't see any way to make progress on solving the situation. You don't know how to fix the problem. You're at a complete loss about how to proceed. You are stuck in the mud, your wheels spinning.

The word impasse fits a number of situations in the United States. Millions of people are without healthcare. Many are without homes. Others are without jobs. The environment is degrading. The economy is fragile. Infrastructure is crumbling, and the solutions to these and other huge problems seem far off.

At several points in its history, Israel was also stuck in an impasse. One of them comes at the shores of the Red Sea. The Hebrews are in the process of fleeing from Egypt, the taste of freedom on their tongues. But then they come to the Red Sea, and suddenly they realize they are trapped. They can't go forward because ahead of them lies this impassable body of water, and they have no boats to cross it. They can't go back either, because behind them are the swift chariots of Egypt carrying archers ready to shoot them. Since the Hebrews are on foot, the Egyptian cavalry will have an easy time massacring them. So retreating or running is not an option either. Therefore the people of Israel have come to an impasse. That night on the shore of the Red Sea, the Israelites realize they have no solution to this impasse. So they do the only thing they can think of doing: they cry out to Moses, and to God who is guiding Moses (Ex. 14:10-12).

That is also what happens in Psalm 80. In this psalm the people of Israel have once again come to an impasse. Although we don't know when this psalm was written, or exactly what events it refers to, the general situation seems clear enough: the land of Israel has been destroyed by war. In the central part of the psalm, verses 8-13, the poet uses the image of a vine for Israel, and the image of a gardener for God. Like an accomplished master gardener, God "brought out a vine" from Egypt; and in the fertile land of Canaan, God transplanted this vine (vv. 8-9). Under God's care and protection, the vine of Israel grew into a huge, wide plant with deep roots. The vine became taller than a mountain (v. 10), and stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the River Euphrates in the east (v. 11). It was a wonderful, healthy, vibrant plant.

But then for reasons the psalm does not name, God the gardener deliberately dismantles the protective wall around the vine of Israel. We are to imagine, perhaps, a thick stone wall around Israel, high enough to keep out animals such as wild boars (v. 13). The poet doesn't say why God removes the wall and lets the pigs come right on in to destroy the vine; maybe the poet doesn't know why. Nevertheless we can guess that the wild boar, which was considered by Israel to be an unclean animal, probably symbolizes some foreign, gentile nation. Unclean gentiles have invaded Israel and ravaged the land. And according to verse 16, the invaders have cut the vine of Israel down and burned it.

In other words, Israel is now at an impasse. Its soldiers have slunk home in defeat. Its barley fields, olive trees, and grape vines are torched. Its economy is wrecked. People in Israel are probably looking at hunger. They see no way to undo this situation. The king, who is alluded to in verse 17, is powerless. From top to bottom and side to side, the nation of Israel has come to the end of its abilities. It can no longer fix its own problems. It can't solve its own difficulties. It is at the end of the road, bleak, gloomy, and forlorn. Impasse.

Every year Advent begins with despair. Of all the Sundays of the church year, the first Sunday of Advent may be the gloomiest of all. Each year at this time, the texts for Advent direct our thoughts to some of the most impassible, intractable, and insuperable situations of our lives. Psalm 80, and some of the other passages that appear each year on the first Sunday of Advent, help us to reflect on our own places of impasse. In what part of your life are you completely and hopelessly stuck, where none of your solutions seem to work? Or if everything is going well in your personal life, then consider the business or organization where you work. Where is the

organization up against a wall? What looks to you like a dead end? Where is your impasse, and how is it affecting you?

In response to impasse, Psalm 80 does two things. First, it accuses God of causing this impasse. Verse 12 is blunt: “Why then have you broken down its walls?” You planted us, God. It was your job to protect us. You were supposed to take care of us. Your task as God is to create a place of shalom in which we may live and prosper and raise our children in peace. And you didn’t do your job! You busted up those protective walls and left us vulnerable, weak, defenseless. You, God, are the problem here!

Most of us are highly reluctant to speak that boldly to God. We especially recoil at the thought of accusing God with such strong language. When something goes wrong, we usually assume that it’s our fault, that we are the ones to blame. That assumption causes us, I think, to use nice words in our prayers. In prayer we are generally humble, respectful, and courteous. This is, of course, generally a good thing. Humility before God is indeed a virtue. Speaking respectfully to God is one way of conveying our sense of God’s majesty, holiness, and righteousness.

There are lots of passages in scripture where the poets and theologians of ancient Israel speak humbly to God. They are the majority of passages. But sometimes those same poets and theologians speak to God harshly, accusingly, bluntly. Sometimes they lay the blame at God’s feet. This is not simply a tactic to let off steam and make themselves feel better. No, this is a tactic to hold God accountable to the commitments that God freely chose to make. God, said the theologians of Israel, made a covenant with us to bless us, prosper us, and keep us safe. To be sure, sometimes we mess up by breaking our side of the covenant. We sin. In those situations we deserve the consequences that happen to us. Yet not always do we deserve what happens to us. Sometimes we’ve done nothing to deserve the impasses and destructions we encounter. Sometimes it’s not our fault; and if it’s not our fault, then we may conclude it’s God’s fault. Therefore we may be justified in accusing God of covenantal unfaithfulness. That’s what this psalm does.

But if God is the problem, then God is also the solution.² This is Psalm 80’s second response to God—it cries out to God in hope that God will do something. Think about it: if you are in an impasse, where are you going to find hope? If you are genuinely out of all options, what is the one option that you always have left as a person of faith? When your schemes to fix, improve,

and manage have all failed, where can you turn? The answer, of course, is that you and I always have the option of calling upon God for help—which is the second way this psalm responds to impasse. Three times, in verses 3, 17, and 19, this psalm implores God to “restore us,” to “let your face shine that we may be saved.” The root prayer here can be summed up in one word, the word “Help!” “Help” is the root behind all petitionary and intercessory prayer. You can pray for hours on end, down on your knees if you want, using the fanciest and most eloquent language you can think of; but as far as I can tell, all petitionary and intercessory prayers boil down to this same single word: “Help!”

When you read this psalm carefully, you will discover that nowhere does it promise that God will answer this prayer for help. There is no guarantee God will respond. Indeed, there is no guarantee that God will do anything at all.

But there is hope that God will do something. After all, in the language of verse 1, God is still “enthroned on the cherubim.” That means God still rules. God is still a mighty, glorious, and incomparable God. And the very fact that the psalmist prays to God at all is itself proof that the person praying trusts in the continuing ability of God. If you have no hope in God, you stop praying, right? If you think God is a bumbling idiot, or if you think God is powerless, or if you think God doesn’t care, or if you think God does not exist, then I’ll wager you’re not going to waste your time praying to God. So by praying, this psalmist proves his or her continuing hope in God’s ability to do something, to turn and save us from this impasse.

The theologians of ancient Israel were convinced that we can engage God in every circumstance of our lives. There is no situation—not even anger, despair, or frustration—where we cannot engage God vigorously. You and I can always go to God and wrestle, if that’s what we feel like doing. Spiritually speaking, wrestling with God though the impasses of life is by no means the worst thing we can do. Maybe the worst thing we can do in relation to God is to give up, because the day we no longer engage God may be the day of our spiritual death. But Psalm 80 is far from spiritual death. It shows us the possibilities for engaging God vigorously in our experiences of impasse. It realizes that if anything is going to change, if anything is going to get better, if any way will open up through our impasse, then God will have to act. God is the only possibility for a way forward. God is the only hope for a solution. That is what we yearn for this Advent. That is what we look for: the decisive, incomparable action of God.

Notes

1. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition, 2006.
2. Clinton J. McCann, Jr., "Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 999.