

Text: Psalm 51
Title: Empty Pockets
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Roger Allen Nelson

Warren Zevon was a sardonic, complex, and colorful singer-songwriter. He wrote eclectic-eccentric-electric rock-n-roll full of literary references, unforgettable characters, and dark humor. Warren Zevon died from mesothelioma when he was only 56.

During his last days Zevon gathered together some great musician friends and recorded a meditation on death and dying entitled "The Wind." Much of it was done in his home when he wasn't strong enough to go anywhere else.

One raucous song in that collection is entitled "Disorder in the House." With a blistering bluesy guitar, and just enough dirty slop to remind you that this is from his soul, he sings:

*Disorder in the house, the tubs running over
Plaster's falling down in pieces by the couch of pain*

*Disorder in the house, time to duck and cover
Helicopters hover over rough terrain*

*Disorder in the house, there's a flaw in the system
And the fly in the ointment's gonna bring the whole thing down*

*The floodgates are open, we've let the demons loose
The big guns have spoken and we've fallen for the ruse*

*Disorder in the house, the doors are coming off the hinges
The earth will open and swallow up the real estate*

*Disorder in the house, all bets are off
I'm sprawled across the davenport of despair*

*Disorder in the house, I'll live with the losses
And watch the sundown through the portiere*

From the death bed of dying rocker it is an apt diagnosis of the human condition....

When 32 Chicago Public School kids were killed last year and 29 students have been killed this year ~ there is disorder in the house.

When an economy heaves, shudders, and staggers from years of greed, fraud, excess and crippling debt ~ there is disorder in the house

When depression grips the heart of a kid and she can't see who she really is and the lies and self loathing bear down ~ there is disorder in the house.

When....

You get the picture.

Psalm 51 is a song of disorder in the house. It is what Walter Brueggemann refers to as a "psalm of disorientation." It is written in the clear recognition that things are out of whack, assymetetical, incoherent, sick, and broken. And, the word that the psalmist uses as the root for all of this is ~ sin.

Psalm 51 is a plea to God for relief, rescue, or redemption from sin. There is no response from God here; there is no clear voice of compassion or comfort. The text stands as a one-sided cry that there is disorder in the house and the reason is sin. God have mercy.

Now, maybe this is such familiar territory for pew-sitters and the sermon savvy that we sigh and drift into a comfortable stupor; or maybe the culture is so thick with sin-talk and layer upon layer of guilt that it feels like one more familiar heavy blanket of shame; or maybe it is just one more Lenten reminder that we're all dust and to dust we shall return...

But, maybe, just maybe, there is a fresh breeze here and we can find some open window to a biblical spirituality that helps us live and breathe in a house of disorder.

By inscription and tradition Psalm 51 is credited to David after his "indiscretion" with Bathsheba. You remember the story:

David peers out from his roof garden to catch a glimpse of his naked nubile neighbor enjoying a bath in the slanted light of the setting sun.

I recently read a description of the architecture and cultural mores in David's Jerusalem suggesting that Bathsheba may not have been a naïve schoolgirl who didn't know that her tub was in the sight line of the king...

But, be that as it may, David surrenders to his baser instincts, has Bathsheba brought to him, beds her, and sends her home.

When David received word of Bathsheba's subsequent pregnancy he hatched schemes for damage control. He arranged for Uriah (her husband) to sleep with her, but Uriah's sense of military duty got in the way. He got Uriah all liquored-up, hoping that would grease the skids ~ so to speak. Again, no luck. So, David sent Uriah to the front lines where the fighting was the fiercest, insuring his death. And, after the suitable time for mourning was over David took Bathsheba as his wife and she bore him a son.

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David with an analogous story about a rich man stealing sheep from a poor neighbor. And, when David realized that he was being confronted with his sin he said, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Now...

Uriah is buried in a heap,
the widowed Bathsheba is finding her way as one of David's wives,
their innocent child will be struck sick and die,
the brutality of the sword is promised never to leave David's family,
but David's confession is that he sinned against God.

Old Testament scholar James Mays sees it this way:

...apart from God's relation to human acts, there would be no sin. Sin is essentially a theological category. It is God and God alone whose way and will as criteria for human acts reveal them as sin... Where there is no reckoning with the oversight of God, the vocabulary of sin becomes meaningless and atrophies.

Sin is a profoundly personal affront to God and Psalm 51 rises out of that recognition. For, while all sin has a horizontal dimension, and while all sin wrecks havoc on creature and creation, it is essentially a disruption of relationship with God. Sin dismantles the foundational relationship of "I- Thou" and the whole house falls down around it.

So, Karl Barth defines sin as:

...the preoccupation, the orientation, the determination of humanity as it has left its place as a creature and broken its covenant with God.

Or, said another way, sin is ruptured covenant and its subsequent disorder.

The shalom that God intends, the will and the way of God, the Torah of God, and the heart of God is broken by sin.

I lose track of that....Sin is so common, so every day, so five minutes ago, that I lose track that it breaks the heart of God.

Therefore, God summarizes this sinful situation by saying to David through Nathan "you despised me." As that is true, and mind you David didn't offer this confession until he was cornered, David recites in Psalm 51 a plea for God's action:

Have mercy,
blot out,
wash away,
cleanse,
hide,
create,
renew,
restore,
deliver....

David offers nothing but a cry for mercy. All he has is a broken and contrite spirit. He is not holding anything else. There is no scheme, no bargain, no self defense, no protection,

no piety, and no excuse. There is no reference to achievement, or belief, or good behavior, or faith, or... All he has are empty pockets.

George Orwell wrote from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War that he saw a man from the opposing fascist forces jump out of the trench and run along the parapet in full view, presumably carrying a message to an officer. But, he had nothing on but a pair of ill-fitting trousers, which he held up with one hand as he ran. Orwell wrote:

I refrained from shooting him . . . I had come here to shoot at "fascists," but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a "fascist," he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself and you don't feel like shooting him.

It is remarkable, comical, and poignant image, but maybe it is also an image of the way of salvation.

Dear friends, what if all that God's requires is that we're vulnerable, with empty pockets ~ in effect running half naked in ill fitting trousers. But, from that position, repentance can breathe, hearts can be made new, order can be restored, and mercy can be meted.

Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

...the God of this psalm wants no religious conventions but only a dismantled self.... True worship and new living requires a yielding of self to begin again on God's terms. But the brokenness may not be a psychological dismantling. It may as well be an economic unburdening, a political risking, a stepping away from whatever form of power we have used by which to secure our selves.

Complete forfeiture of self, on one hand; and desperate trust in God, on the other.

Now.....there is a powerful pull to cover ourselves with good intentions, and there is a powerful pull to even construct an apparatus of religious repentance that makes sure that we get it right. But, as Psalm 51 is a model for confession it amounts to us emptying our pockets, and stripping away all pride and pretense, and offering our true selves.....

And that takes time.

It takes time in silence,
it takes time talking with trusted friends,
it takes time with those who will confront like Nathan,
it takes time sitting with analogous stories,
it takes time reciting psalms of disorientation,
it takes time assessing the disorder in our house,
it takes time loosening our grip on power...

For the great mystery of the gospel is that God's way of salvation is powerlessness.
God so loved sinners

that he gave up power,
that he relinquished divine prerogative,
that he emptied his pockets unto death ~ even death on the cross...

The great mystery of the gospel is that even as we despised God and broke covenant, God saw us trying to hold up our pants with one hand and saw us not as enemies but as his very children....

And, from out of the very line of David and Bathsheba, God raised up a Savior.
And, in Christ you are forgiven, given a clean heart, and able to breath again
And, disorder is made right by way of the cross.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.