

Text: Psalm 51  
Title: Singing with the Empty Handed  
Date: 03.21.21  
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Warren Zevon wrote eclectic-eccentric-electric rock-n-roll full of literary references, unforgettable characters, and dark humor. In his early-fifties, Zevon was diagnosed with terminal mesothelioma, in response he gathered some 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 on that album is entitled “Disorder in the House.” With a blistering-bluesy guitar and a raspy-sloppy voice Zevon sings:

*Disorder in the house, the tub runneth 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, reptile wisdom  
Zombies on the lawn staggering around  
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, 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*

There’s more. You get the idea. From the death bed of a dying rocker a diagnosis of the human condition.

What song shall we sing?  
There’s disorder in the house....

Psalm 51 is what Walter Brueggemann refers to as a “psalm of disorientation.” It’s written in the clear recognition that things are out of whack, asymmetric, incoherent, sick, and disordered. And, the word that the psalmist uses as the root for all of this is “sin.”

Psalm 51 is a plea to God for rescue or redemption from sin.

And, there’s no response from God here; there’s no clear voice of comfort or forgiveness. The text stands as a one-sided cry: There’s disorder in the house.  
God have mercy.

Most translations include a superscription that this is a psalm “of David.” Our translation includes a line linking it to David’s indiscretion with Bathsheba. But, while those lines were inserted by scribes or editors, both the psalm and the story point to the nature of sin. So, a quick review of the story....

From the palace-roof David caught a glimpse of his naked nubile neighbor enjoying a bath in the slanted light of the setting sun.

By the way, current tours of Jerusalem will take you to where you can easily see into homes across a narrow ravine and the tour guides suggest that these were David’s sightlines....

Given what he saw, David surrendered to his baser instincts, bedded Bathsheba, and sent her home. When Bathsheba turned up pregnant David arranged for Uriah (her husband) to come home from his military post in the hopes that he’d sleep with her, but Uriah’s sense of duty got in the way.

Therefore, David got Uriah all liquored-up, hoping that would help.

Again, no luck...

Finally, David sent Uriah to the front lines where the fighting was the fiercest, insuring his death. And, after a suitable time for mourning was over, David took Bathsheba as his wife and she bore him a son.

However, the Lord then sent Nathan 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 cried out, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Now. Clearly there’s disorder in the house....

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,  
and yet, David’s confession is that he sinned against God.

Psalm 51 has it as:

*Against, you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...*

Uriah and Bathsheba might take exception with that summary.

But an Old Testament scholar puts it this way:

*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.*

Dear friends, that is to say that 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 wreaks havoc on creature and creation, it is essentially a disruption of relationship with God. Sin dismantles the foundational “I- Thou” relationship and the whole house falls down around it. Or, said another way, sin is ruptured covenant with God and its subsequent disorder.

God summarizes David’s actions by saying to David through Nathan “you despised me.” As that is true, and mind you David didn’t offer his confession until he was cornered, David cries out in Psalm 51 for God to act: have mercy, blot out, wash away, cleanse, hide, create, renew, restore, deliver....

All the action is God’s. All David offers is a broken and contrite spirit. He’s not holding anything else. There’s no scheme, no exchange, no self-defense, no excuse. There’s no reference to belief, good behavior, or faith. His hands are empty.

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, save 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.*

That’s a remarkable, comical, and poignant image, but it’s also helpful as we think about this psalm. We are, in effect, running half-naked with ill-fitting trousers. 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 only 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 ourselves.... Complete forfeiture of self, on one hand; and desperate trust in God, on the other.*

Dear friends, you won’t easily find the language of sin in contemporary conversations about the human condition where the dynamics are political, psychological, economic, or related to racial or sexual identity. Reflection on the nature of sin is archaic and decidedly religious, but I think there are a couple helpful themes in this psalm – even for contemporary conversations.

One is the notion that sin is an affront to God. While creation’s disorder has all sorts of implications, sin is essentially – theologically – broken relationship with God. The

*shalom* that God intends, the will of God, and the heart of God are broken by sin. And therefore, it seems like the beginning place to address disorder in the house is with God.

So, two: Despite the powerful pull to cover ourselves with good intentions or construct a religious apparatus, Psalm 51 is a model for confession that amounts to us emptying our pockets, scuttling all pride, and offering our true selves - naked, empty handed, in need of mercy.

And that process comes in many forms: prayer, therapy, recovery communities, meditation, Bible study, worship, being broken by life, etc, etc. The crucial thing is a humble heart and empty hands.

And therefore, maybe three: The posture of a broken and contrite spirit strips away defensiveness and pretense and in doing so enables us to see others with a corresponding mercy – with a measure of humility or empathy. We’re less likely to shoot when we see our enemy running naked in ill-fitting trousers.

Look. Part of the struggle when talking about sin is that we pass it off as purely private peccadillos. Sin is adultery and murder. I haven’t committed adultery and I’ve only murdered in my mind – so I’m not so bad. A little religion will cover that blemish.

But! If sin is at the root of the disorder in the house then it is more than just the little things that we do or don’t do. Rather, sin can take on structural, institutional, corporate, historical qualities....

And, if that’s the case then is it possible that a broken and contrite spirit would be less defensive and maybe more willing to listen to the experience of others and consider our culpability? Is it possible that we’re complicit in patterns and powers that benefit some at the expense of others?

What song shall we sing?

Let us sing with the choir – all nations and peoples, those passed away and those yet unborn. Let us sing with the symphony – all creation, from the highest heaven to the smallest microbe. Let us sing with those who testify – whether lament or a song of God’s faithfulness. And let us sing with the empty handed – for “a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”

Dear friends, the good news is that even as we despised God and broke covenant, even as we’re trying to hold up our pants with one hand, God raised up a Savior from out of the very line of David and Bathsheba. In Christ you are forgiven, given a clean heart, and ultimately creation’s disorder is made right by way of the cross and the empty tomb. Thanks be to God!

Amen.