

No Plan B

Psalm 56

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Good morning, church. It's great to see you. Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "You know riding a bicycle? You know, once you've done it once, a few times, you will always remember how to do it." Well, preaching I hope is like riding a bicycle, that I remember how to do it. Although, I wrecked my bicycle this summer. So I'm not sure how this morning is going to go. So in the event that this doesn't go well this morning, I'll be back next week for one more time at bat here as team leader pastor at Columbia Presbyterian Church. It is truly an honor and a pleasure to be with you. Thank you for your prayers. Thank you for your welcome this morning.

And I want to open God's word with you in the Psalms as you've spent the summer in the Psalms. And this morning, we're going to spend time in the psalm which I returned to over and over again this summer. It's Psalm 56. So as you open your Bibles this morning, if you're joining us on the livestream or if you're here and you have them, please open up to Psalm 56.

And as you do so, I want to ask you the following question. What happens when the life that you want does not align with the life that God has given you? What happens when the life that you want or expect does not align with the life that God has given you? What happens in that space to you internally, emotionally, relationally, theologically? For surely in that intersection where we come to see life as it is, different than how we want or expect but as it is, there we begin to find a space, a space where I believe that God invites each of us to find His presence and to find a deeper truth of what it means to depend on Him.

And so as we read this psalm this morning, I want you to think about just that question. And if you leave here this morning, please remember that. How am I doing at this intersection? Whether it's the intersection of the lives your children have, or that you have, or your grandchildren have, whatever I might be, how are you doing in the intersection between the life you want and the life that God has given you? Because there is no plan B. It is what God is doing even in the midst of the rubble and the brokenness. There is no plan B.

So let's hear from God's word. Psalm 56, beginning at verse 1.

Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil. They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life. For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?

I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would be present with us by the power of your Holy Spirit. We thank you, Father, that even when we do not realize that we're in your presence, your word reminds us that we live and move and have our being in your presence. Father, even for those who come this morning whose faith feels like dry bones, they are still in your presence. For those whose cups are being experienced as overflowing, you are present. So Lord, we come to you dry and full alike and in need of your renewing power through the work of your Holy Spirit to fill us with your word, to give us the reminder that you are the sovereign God. Will you meet us, teach us, confront us, reshape us, renew us, and give us hope? We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Help the teacher. Amen.

David French, journalist and lawyer, this week wrote of a BBC series about what has largely been phrased as the France that was forgotten. It was during World War II and how many really remember France as largely coming to blows with the Germans, so easily giving up the fight. However, during this series, French writes about a particular man who's in his 80's, Felipe de Lobair (sic). Now in his 80's, he has only vague memories of his father, an Airforce commander. The story of his death in May 1940 still inspires his son. He says of his father,

"My father was flying these ancient bombers called amiot. They were hopelessly old-fashioned. When the Germans put their pontoon over the river, it was vital to throw everything at them. My father had just flown a mission, and he was not supposed to go out again. But the thought of his squadron flying into such danger without him was unacceptable. So he stopped one of the amiot that was about to taxi onto the runway and ordered one of the airmen to off the plane, and he got into his place."

Felipe's father died in one of the most notorious defeats in world history, flying an obsolete plane against a superior force. Yet no one would argue that he threw his life away. This French commander understood that even in the face of certain defeat, there was no plan B. He was willing to give of himself for the sake of his country against evil enemy forces that were pouring into the heart of France. Ordering that airman off the plane, you wonder what was going on inside his chest, his mind, and his heart. Was he afraid? Oh, I'm most certain he was. But he was absolutely convinced that he would do everything he could to defend life and liberty and the cause of his country.

We come this morning to a psalm that happens in the midst of the early part of David's life. It's important for us to see because we will see two sides of one man. It is, though, a special life. Yes, King David. In many ways it is also the picture of just an ordinary life, not that it's given to us so we might be like David but so that we might be able to see the God that he cries out to at the intersection between the life that he wanted and the life that God had given him. What would happen at that intersection? So let's look together as you see the outline in your bulletin at a crazy night in Gath, infinite and imminent certain victory.

A crazy night in Gath. Yes. If you're not familiar with this story, it's important to hold Psalm 56 as well with its broader context, the story from 1 Samuel 21. David has just asked for the best sword he could find because he now has to flee the King Saul, who was seeking him out, jealous and enraged at David's victories. Although victorious, though the hand of God was on him, and though clearly chosen by God, he was now having to flee the people because the king was after him. So he was given the sword. And so he flees, and he ends up fleeing to the Philistines. Now, small problem. They're not friends. So David arrives in 1 Samuel 21:10, we hear these words.

And David rose and fled that day from Saul and went to Achish the king of

Gath, and the servants of Achish said to him, "Is not this David the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances? Saul had struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands?" And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of the king of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be an insane man in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" [ESV]

And so David would end up having to flee from this king. So here you have David having to start his acting career.

Now, you can see in that moment what's happening at the intersection between the life that he wanted, the life that he was expecting, that he would have greater victory, that he would perhaps become king of Israel, that the Lord's hand would be on him, that he would not have to suffer. Who knows all the thoughts and things that he was dreaming about at night? But it certainly was not this. And at this intersection, now he's in front of this king. What does the text tell us? The text tells us of something profoundly human. David was afraid. And so he put on an act to be someone who was insane.

Now let's just camp out on that image for a minute. He's dancing around the king, marking up the doorway, allowing spit to drool down his beard, a very lengthy beard, a very royal beard. And then to have people say and mock him, "Hey, wait a second. Isn't this David the great one?" And that did not cause him comfort. That now caused him greater fear. Because if they saw him as the great one, wouldn't they surely want to take him out?

So we see David in the midst of his intersection being very afraid, but yet we also see another part of David in the psalm. We see a David who's not necessarily in fear, but we see a man who's in deep anguish. Hear again how the psalm opens. "Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly." He's talking to God about the mocking that he's receiving. And he's crying out to God. And then he says these words. "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" So in the midst of his anguish, even in the midst of his fear, David is telling us something about a normal, ordinary human heart at the intersection of this space of what he wanted and what God had given him. He is in fear, but he's also in anguish. And what he does with both of those is he goes to God with them. He brings it all in front of him. And he repeats this phrase, "What can man do to me? I will put my trust in you." In some sense, David is allowing us to see how he's speaking God's truth back to himself even in the midst of prayer.

And what that's showing us is this crazy night in Gath actually allows us into what our crazy nights look like. When things do not add up, when they do not turn out the way you want, and we begin to wonder, "What have I done to deserve this? This is not fair. Is God punishing me for something? What do I need to do to clean myself up? What do I need to do to pray more, to be better, to go to church more? What do I need to do, God? Do I need to memorize more scripture?" And we try to clean our lives up, either feeling guilty or shame. "Because surely, there has to be an explanation because, God, this intersection, I don't like it. What do I need to do to get rid of it?"

But what David allows us to see is that we can't get rid of that intersection. There is no plan B. There's going to eventually be a car crash at this intersection between the life we're driving and the life we want, and then suddenly at this intersection, we realize God has a very different plan for us. And what

David is teaching us is that what we're invited to do by the heavenly Father, which is to come into His presence. And it's completely okay, it's completely all right to say the following. You ready? CPC, you ready? What's up, God? What are you doing? Hey, I don't like this. This is uncomfortable. Why have you allowed this? What are you doing? Who am I in the midst of this? I don't even recognize myself. Lord, I need to say out loud to you that I don't trust you, which means I need to repeat back to myself that oh, wait, I can trust you. Lord, what can man do to me?

Because at that intersection, David realizes what Paul realized at the end of 2 Corinthians. A similar situation, if you think of it. Think of David here before this king and Paul, who's just had this great vision, which the Lord had given to him, of what the heavenly glory is like. Paul says to "Keep me from being puffed up and prideful." God allowed a messenger of Satan to torment him." Paul says, "Take it from me. What are you doing, God? Take it from me. Take it from me. David, now being mocked by his enemies, "Hey, weren't you the victorious general? What's up with you, bro? You're dancing around here like a crazy man."

But maybe in the midst of this intersection between the life that we want and the life that God has for us is the place where we can finally find a place of rest, where all of our doing cannot change anything. When our education, our zip code, our income, our backgrounds, our families, our relationships, all of our knowledge, all of our church history, all of it can do nothing to rid us from this suffering. And in that place, we can finally come to a place of peaceful anguish on our knees and say simultaneously, "Lord, what are you doing? But in God I trust."

Two simultaneous truths came home to me very early on in my sabbatical. And I've held onto this vision. And I've cried more about it. I have laughed more about it. And I've rejoiced more over it than anything I have probably in my adult life. As I hugged the man who led me to Jesus, as I hugged the man who married Kate and me 25 years ago this summer, as I hugged the man who was instrumental in my actually being a pastor, I said two simultaneous truths I've come to see this summer. I am absolutely one single small speck of dust in God's vast cosmos, and yet simultaneously I know that I am particularly loved. And from dust I come. To dust I will return. And no one will write books. No one will remember. But this I know. In God I can trust. And that had to be a wrestling in the midst of the intersection. Lord, what are you doing? This is crazy.

And that leads us to the second part of the psalm, the infinite and the imminent. For what David is crying out as he's pleading to God about the particularities of how the people are coming after him in the midst of what he thought was not going to happen but is very much happening. He calls out, and he says, "In God whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" He's recognizing at that moment God is infinite, and He's imminent. He's both over all things, and He's also particularly close. What do I mean? When he's saying God is above all flesh, "What can man do to me," he's saying, "You're the God of all the cosmos. You've created everything."

Yes, we've marveled at the first contempt at consumer-bought trips to space this summer. But it pales in comparison, does it not? Even though I looked at it and was like, "Wow, that's really cool. But how small." You know. Because our God, we read, created all things from nothing by the word of His power in the space of six days, our confession says. Our confession also says these words in chapter 3.

"God, from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His will freely and interchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. Yet so thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of His creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken but rather established. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He

foresaw it as future or that which would come to pass under such conditions. By the decree of God for the manifestation of His glory, He has predestined everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."

God does not know the future because He sees it happening. No. He knows all that is to come and by all conditions of which they will come. He is neither the author of sin nor the cause of violence. And yet He by His own decree has called all things into being and has in His hands all human life, for He has created it by the word of His power and called it very good. And He draws to Himself all that He calls. And those that He has not called will not know Him. But that is not up to us. That's way above our pay grade. We clearly announce the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is God who is infinite, who rules all things. But at the same time, He is imminent.

Hear what David says. "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" David is in some ways saying what he would repeat in Psalm 139. "Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord. You are familiar with all my ways. Your eyes saw my unformed substance, all the days ordained for me before one of them came to be." He says here, "You count my tossings and my fear, and you hold my tears from my anguish." And that is the beauty of this psalm. While at the same time David finds himself in an intersection he never wanted to be in, what he meets is a heavenly Father who so loves him that He's counted his tossings, and He's stored up his tears.

Do you know that is true for you and for me? What are you tossing about? What are you anguished about? In this place, our God is infinite and imminent, which allows us to finally be at rest and allow our brokenness, our doubt, our fear, our anger to be brought before Him because He cares. Isn't it beautiful that the same Bible says God does not remember our sin? He separates our sin as far as the east is from the west from us. And yet here he says though He removes our sin from us and does not remember it, He counts our tears. What an amazing loving Father.

You as a parent, if you are a parent, who of us who are parents would not want to be with our child coming to us in tears or in fear? Who of us would not want to be present with them? What has been your response? What is your response to your children in that moment? Is it not engulfing them in care in love? Though we know we can't protect them, we know that we can be with them in the midst of it. Do you know that is exactly what is in store and given to us in this psalm? A God who loves so imminently that He remembers your tossing and turning even though you and I are dead to the world in the midst of our sin. Thanks be to God that we worship a God who is infinite in all that He has done but so imminent that He knows our tears.

Are you letting God know your tears? Are you pouring out to God your anguish? Are you bringing to Him your anger and your questions? Because embedded in the phrase, "What can man do to me," is also this question. Who else can we turn to? Who else? Kate is with me, but she cannot be the one who counts my tears. My best friends can be present with me. They can pray for me. They can call. And we need that in the body of Christ. But they are not the savior. They are not the one that holds us in His hand. Only the Lord can.

But not only do we see a crazy night in Gath, and infinite and imminent, but it is also certain victory. He says in verse 10, "In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?" He says, "I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life." David is singing of certain victory.

He comes from saying, "What can man do to me? I put my trust in you." He then turns and says, because of that, "I now will render my vows to you." Now please understand it's not David saying, "Hey, I

need to be obedient back to you so that you're good back to me." It's not meaning this in a transactional performative way. He's saying, "Because you are my God, because I can trust in you, I'm now going to pull forth my worship and all that I have towards you." And then he uses this phrase, "thanks offerings," meaning you offer thanksgiving offerings for what God has done.

So David turns the intersection between the life he wanted and the life that God has given into a temple of worship. And he now says, "What can man do to me? Nothing. I will render my thanksgiving offerings to a God who gives me certain victory." Because that is what he's saying. He's saying, "For you have delivered me." The verb tense teaches us that though he's still in the midst of uncertainty, he's saying that God has delivered him. How can that be? Because man cannot take salvation from us. They cannot remove God's promises from us. And so David leads us in worship and says, "For you have delivered me. You have kept my foot from slipping. You have sustained me." This is certain victory.

Let me ask you, in this intersection, if you are afraid that you have done something wrong, that God is punishing you because the intersection you're experiencing is not pleasant, I want to call you away from that false guilt and that false shame. For in Jesus Christ, our sin has been paid in full. Our God allows us to experience the consequences of our sin. He allowed David to experience that. But that is not God simply lashing out in punishment and anger saying, "How dare you." That's not the case. Let me call you away from false guilt and shame that you have to clean yourself up to get back to God, because that is not what we have to do. Because what's been announced over you and over me is certain victory, which means that we can come to Him with ourselves in our sin, in our brokenness, in our doubt, in our anger and anguish, and say, "Lord, remind me of the victory that is mine in Christ Jesus."

Because do you know, friends—as one writer says in these words,

"A person living in the first century could easily believe that Christ died in vain. His death utterly frustrated the political and military expectations of a messiah, of the savior that so many people long for. Even his resurrection was but a rumor for many, completely unknown by most. By every singular measure, the execution of Jesus by a Roman authority had a simple meaning. Rome has won."

No one could foresee the arch of history. Yet we now know holding these Bibles in our hands that the arch of God's sovereign infinite providence fueled by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and fueled by the following sacrifices of the saints gives you and me enduring hope, because there have been saints who have gone before us who did not have these Bibles in their hands in their own language, who did not have the testimony that you and I can turn to on a Monday morning and read about and remind ourselves. They remembered what they had been told, and they believed the testimony. And the Holy Spirit worked in them and brought them conviction, and they gave themselves to the testimony to be witnesses for Jesus all over the world. And they gave themselves to such horrific sacrifice throughout church history. They've been mocked. They've been flogged. They've been tortured, and they've been stoned even today as we've prayed for Afghanistan. There will be Christians today around the world who will give their lives for the sake of Christ because of this eternal truth upon which our faith is founded. Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again. We have certain victory.

And as I finish this morning, I want to land this plane on two fronts. First, cosmic. Dear friends, as I descended into my sabbatical away from the noise and the surface of life, and I disengaged from all the normal stuff I would normally be about in my regular ministerial life, it allowed me to go to a deeper place to be reminded of the truths of this psalm. And I needed David's fear and his anguish and this intersection to remind me God is with us. What can man do to us? There is not a single one of us who can hear my voice who knows and believes in Jesus Christ who needs to fear one single other human being.

We don't need to fear a government. We don't need to fear an agenda. We can know that the certain victory is ours in Christ Jesus because our infinite God is also imminent in the death of Jesus and His resurrection. And He will take us to be with Himself at a time of His choosing and of no one else's. Our victory is certain.

But on a personal level, I share with you these words from my favorite author of this year and of this summer. She's Tish Harrison Warren. And she writes these words in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. She says these words.

"Sometimes my days run smoothly, like ticker tape. They hum along pleasant enough, productive at times, my plans for the most part uninterrupted. And then something happens. The slightest tear in the tape, the whole thing halts, becomes an unbidden morality tale. The neediness and sinfulness and moroseness and weakness that I try to pretty up and manage through control, ease, and privilege are suddenly on display."

In my own life, there have been seasons of deep sorrow, but that is not what I'm talking about. This is not the valley of the shadow of death. This is the roadside ditch of broken things, lost objects, the potholes of gloom, and unwanted interruptions. And she talks about the fact that though she finds herself in an ordinary day, she finds herself in petty anger, irritation. And in that place, at that intersection, she finally is able to hear that her savior bids her to rest.

On June 8th, just a few days after my sabbatical started, I had a grand plan. I had a lot of reading, and I've done most of that reading. I had lots of time in prayer, which I very much wanted and took, and it's been a blessing. But I also had another plan. That plan was to ride Skyline Drive in Virginia from north to south and south to north over two days. 200 miles, roughly about 20,000 feet of climbing with my favorite training partner. Couldn't wait.

So that week was my second day of training to get ready for what I was going to do hopefully in August. A mile away from the finish of the ride, just three of us going along right there near APL, and I slow down because of a stoplight. And one of the cyclists with us on the ride does not pay attention to the fact that I've now slowed down and runs right into the back of me, knocking me to the ground immediately next to a car. And I'm skidding along the road, and I had some not so nice words to say because I didn't know what just happened to me. I wasn't angry at him. I was just responding to what was happening. And I got up. I was bleeding, but there was nothing broken. I knew to check. I was like, okay, I'm fine. Let's get out of the road. And I reach over and pick up the bikes. I disentangle his from mine and realized his is fine. Mine is broken in three places. And I knew what had just happened was not just a bike accident. And I will tell you, I was angry.

Now, I know it's just a broken bike. But it was more than that for me. That bike was a gift last year as COVID started. This was to be my plan for the summer. I had planned for this. This was going to be great. But I knew that He had a very different plan for me.

You see, what Warren says in her book and what I will say in my own words, I have a theology for tornados and hurricanes and challenges. What I don't have oftentimes is a theology big enough for broken bikes and stir-crazy Tuesday mornings. I trust God in the big stuff. But it's in the small stuff where I get easily irritated, I get angry, and I want to get controlling. And I want God to get with the plan that I have for my life. And it's all great when those things seem to align. But when they don't, I've realized what's in my heart. Doubt, lack of trust, a sin to turn towards self-dependence and control.

So this sermon really is about me speaking to my own soul. I want a god who gets with my plan. But I've now realized that there's a far better place for me to be, and that better place for me was an

intersection with a broken bike that I cannot replace because of supply chain issues. Yeah. But I've come to see something far deeper. I used to be a teenage skater, hater, smoker, hater of Christians who desperately needed Jesus. But now I'm a grey-haired 51-year-old Presbyterian minister who needs Jesus far more than I ever imagined. There is no plan B. There is only what He is doing.

I say this to you as a testimony, friends. And I invite you into this place of my life. Perhaps it's the place where you've been. Lord, what are you doing? What I can tell you is that place of rest is not where all my questions have been answered. But I am experiencing Him in far deeper ways and far more peaceful than all the control I could try to muster.

May the Lord give you grace, CPC. May He give you love. And may He remind you that He counts your tossings, and He stores up your tears that we might rest in Him alone. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word. I thank you for your people. I thank you for your church. I thank you for your grace. I thank you, Father, for allowing me to wreck my bike. I thank you for teaching me the deep places of control that I like to pretend are not there. Father, thank you for showing me as a loved but yet pathetic 51-year-old man who is in desperate need of your love. Thank you, Lord, that you show us in the midst of broken things that you are the Lord and that those broken things are a part of your plan and that you invite us to rest. Lord, teach us these things. What can man do to us? We can trust in you and your word. And we render you praise, for our victory is sure in Christ. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.