

Text: Psalm 17  
Title: Splayed Open  
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The Boundary Waters is a seemingly endless collection of glacial lakes, bogs, and rocky islands on the border of Minnesota and Canada. There are miles and miles and miles of woods and waters as the protected lands and national parks of two countries bump up against one another. It is an international treasure.

For better than thirty years a collection of friends has been doing an annual Boundary Waters canoe trip. I went again this year. We drove to the end of the road, took a motorboat as far as they are allowed, and then pushed off to paddle and portage in the pristine wilderness.

My friends are fishermen. Whenever fish was on the menu they caught whatever we needed. We had bass and pike and lake trout. I don't get the lure of fishing, but with each catch I helped a dear friend clean, gut, and fillet the fish.

I particularly remember a twenty-inch pike. He first ran the sharp blade the length of the long soft underbelly to pull out the guts, then he pushed the blade in further from head to tail and the fish folded open like a book. There was nothing hidden. There were no protecting skin or scales. The pike was splayed open.

Psalm 17 is David splayed open.

This is not an intricate poem of praise.  
This is not a list of reasons to love the Lord.  
This is not a celebration of the Law.  
There is nothing hidden.  
There are no protecting skins or scales.  
The life and heart of David is splayed open.

And, there is nothing here that is particularly winsome.

David trumpets his own innocence and calls for his enemies to be trashed. There is something about it that feels sort of pompous, self-promoting, and vindictive. David opens up his heart and calls out to God that he's not such a bad guy but his adversaries need to be brought down.

Scholarly speculation is that this psalm was written while Saul pursues David as a treasonous threat with plans to seize the crown. Here's the back story...

When Saul learns that David is in the desert of En Gedi he sets out in hot pursuit with three thousand men. As he comes near the Crags of the Wild Goats Saul needs to relieve himself, so he slips into a cave. The Hebrew has it that his robe covered his feet ~ his robe fell to the floor.

What Saul didn't know was that David and his men were hiding in the back of the same cave. And seemingly unnoticed, David snuck up on Saul and cut off a corner of his robe (a symbol of his kingship). Rather than take off Saul's head David took the corner of Saul's robe ~ while he was relieving himself.

David felt guilty for this brazen act, so when Saul rejoined his men David came out of the cave, fell on his knees, and cried out:

*My lord, the king! Why do you listen when man say "David is bent on harming you." .... I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me....May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me and deliver me from your hand.*

It seems plausible that David wrote Psalm 17 with that exchange in mind. He is being cast as the bad guy, but the charges are fake news. So, he voices his relative innocence to God and asks that the real bad guys get what they deserve.

Dear friends, how should we read this psalm?

As part of the songbook of faith how can we learn to sing Psalm 17?

What is helpful here about the nature of God?

What is helpful here about shaping a meaningful life?

What are we to make of Psalm 17?

Anne Lamott, in a pithy little book, makes the case that there are essentially three prayers: help, thanks, and wow. She writes about the first prayer:

*....when we are truly at the end of our rope and just done, we say the same prayer. We say, "Help." We say, Help this is really all too much, or I am going slowly crazy, or I can't do this, or I can't stop doing this, or I can't feel anything. Or, Help, he is going to leave me, or I have no life, or I hate the one I've created, or I forgot to have a life, or I forgot to pay attention as it scrolled by. Or even, Help, I hate her so much, and one of my parents is dying – or will never die. Unfortunately, we haven't even gotten to the big ticket items yet: cancer, financial ruin, lost children, incontinence.*

When David is splayed open he pleads to God for help.

Without mincing words or spiritualizing his situation, he tells the truth from his perspective.

He names his good character.

He denounces the slander of others.

He voices anger.

He asks for help.

It seems to me, therefore, that an authentic spirituality would engage the full range of human emotion, and that our prayer life would be stripped bare of skin and scales and at times be hard, salty, angry, defensive, prickly, the end of our proverbial ropes....

And, rather than prayers that are laundry lists of familiar phrases and hopes for the health of others we would offer even the demons and darkness that we try to hide. Rather than a spiritual life that is a passive acceptance of whatever God would give there would be some bite.

Can we join David in voicing anger and calling for the destruction of our enemies?

For as long as I can remember Lavelle has been a cross-dressing-street-walking-gay-drug-addict in Roseland. That he is still alive is some manner of miracle. Lavelle has also long been part of the community at Roseland Christian Ministries. During a recent season of liberation from addiction he was a daily volunteer in the food pantry, a faithful church member, and part of the choir. On Pentecost, a few years ago, Lavelle stood in middle of our choir, as flamboyant as could be, raised his hands, and lifted his voice in praise to God. It was enough to make you believe in the power of the resurrection and the coming of the Kingdom. Thanks be to God!

Lavelle relapsed recently and was back out on the streets. He looked old, ragged, lost. Last week a gang of young thugs beat Lavelle senseless and drug him behind a car until they tore the skin off his backside. They left him for dead. He was in a coma at Roseland Hospital. He is now recovering. Pastor Joe Huizenga and folks from Roseland Christian Ministries are still standing beside him, encouraging him, and praying for him.

And! And, it is right that those prayers include anger at the thugs and anger at the addiction. It is right that we would spit back against all that would brutalize, dehumanize, and destroy a child of God. Sometimes, to quote singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn, we need to kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.

It is right that we would rage against cancer.

It is right that we would be angry at a stroke.

It is right that we would cry out for anxiety or depression to be toppled.

It is right that we would voice the bile we know toward those who bully the weak.

It is right that we would plead for the destruction of terrorism.

The heart splayed open is rightfully angry.

Psalm 17 makes space for that truth to be told.

I tell the truth to my wife, to my therapist, to my friends.

I wonder if I tell the truth to my God?

What is remarkable about Psalm 17 is the way in which David brings his concerns to God. David doesn't cry out into the void; David doesn't hem and haw and apologize. Rather, David addresses God with a sense of intimacy and the confidence that God in fact desires to listen. And therefore, David addresses God with a string of bold imperatives. "Hear!" "Show me..." "Rise up..." "Save me..."

Our particular translation is notorious for taking the edge off of the language of scripture and for some reason even in with this psalm they drop some of the demands of David and

make it read less aggressive (?). But, be that as it may, it is still clear that David pulls God into his open heart in the confidence that God hears, cares, responds....

Christian Wiman is a contemporary poet living with a typically terminal cancer. In *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* he offers these few lines:

*What is the difference between a cry of pain that is also a cry of praise and a cry of pain that is pure despair? Faith? The cry of faith, even if it is a cry against God, moves toward God, has its meaning in God, as in the cries of Job. The cry of faithlessness is the cry of the damned, like Dante's souls locked in trees that must bleed to speak, their release from pain only further pain... a cry that seems to at once contain and release some energy that is not merely the self, that does not end at despair but ramifies, however darkly, beyond it, is a metaphysical cry. And to make such a cry, even in the absence of definitions, a definition, for it establishes us in relation to something that is beyond ourselves.*

There is a lot there. But, dear friends, can we learn to sing a song of pleading, even a song of anger? With hearts splayed open can we cry out to God? For, even our cries of despair reach toward the God who would shelter us or take a shine to us. And, even our demands are directed toward the God who is beyond ourselves.

An authentic biblical spirituality is rooted in the faith that we bring our full unvarnished selves to God. Therefore, David ends with this beautiful hope:

*As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face;  
when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.*

With your heart splayed open what would you cry out to God?

Amen.