

Our Parent's Sour Grapes

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Psalm 95

“Do not harden your hearts... as when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof...”

Do you ever feel like you are stuck in a rut? Do you ever feel like you are in a grind that goes on and on and on, and there is no getting out. We wake up, go through our daily routine, go to bed and repeat in a monotonous way each and every day. The existentialists Camus and Sartre told us this would happen with their bleak, nihilistic philosophy, and sometimes, as you pull off the expressway, as you wake up bleary eyed on any weekday morning, as you begin to do the dishes yet again another night, you may find yourself wondering if they were right. Here we are again: the beginning of another week of the same thing, the same predictable life. In the movie, *Groundhog Day*, the main character, Bill Murry, somehow becomes stuck in the routine of one particular day, and is forced to repeat that day again and again and again. Each morning he wakes up to the same radio announcement, he walks in the same puddle, has the same daily conversations, and continues through the grind because he is cursed to repeat his one day *ad nauseam*.

Maybe you have had that experience as well. Maybe you feel as if your life is that "one day" of the movie *Groundhog Day*. In D.L. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*, one of the characters, Ursula, is reflecting on her life, the grind and the monotony, and thinks; "better die than live mechanically a life that is a repetition of repetitions." We agree with the sentiment, yet we find ourselves like mindless robots working the line (Eli Whitney would be proud) in our daily life and routines. We often find ourselves going through the same motions again and again and again where we can predict the next day, and we feel forced, we feel trapped. From dinner table conversation to evening routines to the lunch break, we are in many ways repetitious creatures falling into the simplicity and the predictability of the routine. Maybe you find comfort in the schedule, but have you ever felt that the routine has become a rut - a monotony that offers no movement, and no freedom? Have you ever felt like you are stuck in a rut?

Psalm 95 addresses a people who are stuck in a rut, and for them that rut isn't pretty. We are creatures of habit, but the habit that the Psalmist is condemning is no water cooler conversation, no *L.A. Story* brunch chatter, but one of grave importance; it is none to ignore. Oh that they were only sharing the same conversation day in and day out, but they weren't. The Psalm is pointing to the faith, or lack of, the witness, or lack of, and the people's relationship with God, or lack of. "Come and praise" the Psalm begins. Come and praise the great creator God, who knows no depths, or heights, in whose hands can be found all things bright and beautiful, and who has gathered us, and vowed to be with us, protecting and shepherding us. This is our pastor, our caretaker, our shepherd, and our creator whom we come to praise. Like Psalm 149 and 150, this Psalm could end with the call to praise a great creating God, but it doesn't. No, this Psalm then points out the habits of the people, the practices that cause the Lord dismay, and calls the people to turn. "Do not be a stubborn people today... like you have been in the past!" "Do not turn from the Lord today as you have been again and again." Do not be the people who demanded a king, when you were given judges, just because the other nations had kings. Do not be the people who demand military power and might comparable to the military might of other nations when I give you sufficient grace. Do not be the son who, in Jesus' parable, says "yes, yes," but then goes the other way and does his own thing. Do not be the people who in Exodus 17, in the desert, in the wild, at Massah and Meribah lost faith in God, doubted God's presence, and then demanded that God act in a way to their pleasing. Oh water poured from the rock to quench your thirst, to quell your murmuring, and to remind you that God will see to your needs, but you were a stubborn people showing little appreciation, and little thanks that God delivered you from Egypt.

This is what the Psalm is pointing to, this endless repetition of a people falling from God's favor through their own actions. If we read through the history of Israel, in Judges, Chronicles, Kings, and even in the prophets, we find a people who again and again fall from God's grace, choose to abandon their relationship with the Lord that is celebrated in the beginning of this Psalm, and go their own way. The scholar, James Mays, suggests that the Psalm is speaking of a bold and audacious people testing God and demanding God's presence in Exodus, and this pattern has continued through the

story of Israel as we read it in the Bible. Psalm 95 is not just a psalm of praise and glory but one that speaks to a people stuck in a rut, and that rut isn't pretty.

But the rut continues through the history of the church and in the western world today. We are still the same people as in Exodus 17, who choose to do things our own way, to be our own people. We have been given a narrative, a story that tells us that power and violence are the best ways in which to prosper and live well. We have been given the economic story that demand is high and supply is low, so we must protect our claim, fight for our domain, and be wary of anyone else who may take our stuff from us. When you are driving on the expressway at a blazing 25 mph, do you make room so others can get in front of you if they need to, or do you protect your space in line dearly, as if you have won it and claimed it? In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, when many American neighborhoods were becoming segregated, many white homeowners, who claimed to be open minded and inclusive fought the change, because the land which they had worked so hard to obtain would be tainted, and tarnished. When settlers came over to the Americas from Europe, they saw much land and resources, and violently oppressed the American Indians so it would be ripe for the taking. The slave trades, the oppression of women's rights, the mistreatment of workers are the sour grapes that our ancestors ate, and upon which we all still chew. These are grapes that grow from a vine of power, deception, oppression, and possession. This is the story we live, the rut we have been placed in, and the grind of which we are all a part. Our history is as torrid and shameful as the Israelite's, and perhaps even more so. But we can't seem to get out, we can't seem to change, we can't seem to become a new people, God's people, and living God's story.

And where is the church in this cycle of oppression, power, and ownership? The church has bowed her head, sour grapes in her mouth, with her eyes focused piously on the floor, hoping that nobody would notice her presence. In his analysis of secularism and atheism, the historian, Alistair McGrath, describes 19th and early 20th century Europe and America as a time when the church was largely seen as irrelevant for society and the church, by in large, acted that way. It had been thought out, worked out, and understood as an oppressive institution and regime that was interested in its own power and money. When God was invoked, it was merely for poetic show, and nostalgic patronizing. In reality, the church was just an old family heirloom that had moved from the coffee table to the mantle, and was on its way up to the attic. More currently, Jim Wallis, the founder of the "Sojourners" movement, and the "Call to Renewal" claimed that when he went to Trinity Seminary he still found a church that did not want to be a proactive and prophetic voice in society; he found Christians who did not want to rock the boat of the world. The church was to be a place where people could feel good, but not where people would be challenged to change. We are to love Jesus, and live our lives. Wallis echoed the words of Matthew 25 to no avail; Christianity was not about to push society out of its neat rut into which it had grooved. The grind had started, and the church was not about to get in the way.

With society so well integrated into a rut of power, we can be the Christians that Wallis criticized; we can be duped into this grind as well. We come to church, we feel good, and maybe, maybe we connect with God for a moment, but how long does it take us to fall back into the grind of the world when we leave the doors of the church? How long does it take us to return to our narrative of power and violence when we stop telling the narrative of God's people? Especially when the prevailing ethos of American Christianity is to support the narrative of power and control it is difficult to keep our focus on God. It is so easy for all of us to become "yes men" to God, paying our lip service, repeating the first half of the Psalm, and then going our own separate ways, as we hear the rest of the Psalm calling out to us from the distance. No, the world's song is stronger, and the pull is tangible. The rut, the grind is as real and as pervasive as it was for the Israelites, and continues through society today.

Even when we try to break out, when we decide to acknowledge God's presence, we often do it on our terms, we are still falling into the rut; we are still a part of the grind. Even when we decide to reach out our hand and invite God into our lives, we are still in the narrative of control. This is tricky because there is a difference between asking God for help, and demanding that God act in a specific way. But if we are living in the world of power, of demands, and of control, it is so hard to ask in a humble way that admits our fallen-ness, our nakedness, and our shame. Our rut leaves us in the desert, and we find ourselves doubting God's presence, and then demanding that God give us water. We demand that God fix our lives in the way we think would be best. Make me smarter, God. Give me money, God. Give me power and control so I will at last feel safe and secure. Our ancestor's sour grapes have overpowered the language of being in relationship with God and have soured our faces to a demanding and doubting stance. So we tell God what we want, and then force God into a "yes" or a "no."

There is a story of a man who fell off a boat into the ocean. As he was struggling to stay afloat, another boat came by. When they offered him a hand, he shook his head and said, "No, God will provide." Then a helicopter came by, and dropped a ladder to take him out of the seas. But the man shook his head again, "no, the Lord will save me." Well, the man drowned and went to heaven. There he saw God, and said, "Lord, why didn't you save me?" And God answered, "I sent you a boat and a helicopter, what more do you want?"

What do we want when we want God's intervention? Do we want a thunderbolt? Do we want a heavenly army?

Like a spoiled child, like a little princess, we often find ourselves demanding our way, listing our wishes, and telling God what it is we think we want God to do. When we are ready to turn to God, it is on our terms, and our story our rut continues, the grind is maintained, and as a people demanding God's action we are still turning from God.

But today, in worship, we can take the bold step and decide to break out of our cycle and be a redeemed people. In our liturgy, as a community, we can spit the sour grapes out of our mouth, and cling to the life-giving vine of our Lord. Listen! That is what the Psalmist urges us to do. Listen and wait. The missionary, activist, and theologian, Robert Schreiter claims that the first three things we need to do to break out of our rut, our cycle and our grind, is to listen, to be attentive with compassion, and then to walk with God. So we start with listening, not demanding, not telling, not pledging, but listening to God. Oh that we could even do that in worship. Oh that we could take the time to not say anything, to sit and be still. This means that we cannot force God, we cannot tell God what we want, when we are to speak, and when God is to answer; we can only walk with God. We cannot demand that things will be easy and go our way that God will attend to us in our space and time and that life will be as we desire. No, we are only to listen. Listen, be attentive, and then walk with God.

Think about one of the amazing parts of our human history – the Truth and Reconciliation summits in South Africa. A country that was torn by violence, based on a system and structure of racism decided that instead of demanding revenge, they would listen. So they listened to those who were wronged, and to those who were the causes of the wrongs. They listen to the aches, the pains, and the wounds of the people. And true healing, true room for reconciliation was being formed.

Did you know that one of the best things you can do for someone who is suffering is to just listen? When someone has lost something, has suffered in some way we want to step in, control the situation, make things better – and we mean well, but we are still clinging to our ancestors grapes of control and power. Instead we are to listen and to be attentive, and then walk with God. We are to sit there and hear the pain, give space for tears, and feel helpless with our brother or sister. These are new grapes we are given from the vine of Christ, this is a new grind in which we join our saints, our Christian witnesses before us, and we try to be God's people. It is the way set before us by Christ – the one who listened to what people desired, who was attentive to people's presence, and who walked with God – today we can take that bold step, we can break out of our cycle, and we can walk with God.

And we will be guided out of our rut, our monotony, guided by the grace of God. We will be given the grapes that will lead us to praise God as the Psalm calls us to praise. We will be part of a new story, attached to a new vine of peace, hope, love, and forgiveness. We will live the story of Christ, who loves us, died for us, and calls us to follow. Now, let me tell you right now, this will not be easy for we are deeply embedded in our story of power, the taste of the sour grapes is strong in our mouths, and the lure to control is powerful. So let's start here in worship, lets allow the Psalm to be our gathering call, our herald bringing us together, leading us into God's presence, and then reminding us what to do: listen.

Have you seen the scene in the Monty Python movie *The Holy Grail* when God appears to King Arthur and his band of knights? They first grovel, then they avert their gaze, and then they listen. While it is comical, it is the direction we need.

So today, listen with humble ears, with a contrite heart, with an open spirit to the words of the Lord. This is where Lent leads us, to listen to the wonderful and difficult story of Christ. And if we are listening, if we are full of compassion, and if we are walking with Christ all the way to the Cross, then something new will happen. Schreiter calls it the story of a new creation, where we no longer need a strategy to be a people, to be a church, but a spirituality that guides us and connects us. Where we are not making the plans, but all is initiated by God, and where a new reality, on many levels emerges from these sweet grapes of God's grace. This is the hard work of being a church, it is work that may seem to many to be folly and foolishness, but it is the church that I want to belong. So we leave this worship, listening to God, and we go back into the week listening to God. Help each other out, remind each other to listen to God, to open yourself up to God, and allow God to be a part of your life, without control or power.

And we will walk out of this service like the final scene in *Casablanca*. Walking with God, having gone through much, and expecting to go through more, but able to say those final words spoken and immortalized by Humphrey Bogart, "... I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

AMEN