

“Whistling in the Dark”

A sermon engaging domestic violence by Jay Kieve

I remember being afraid of the night as a child. Imagined monsters lived in the shadows of my room. At home, we had nightlights and hall lights that drove away the dark. But when I visited my grandparents the unfamiliar space and dim light of their home elevated my fear. To help me get to sleep my grandparents would sing to me: a lilting “Silent Night” by my soprano grandmother and an off-key “On the Jericho Road” by my tone-deaf grandfather. I think it helped.

When I parented young children, they, too, became afraid of the night. Imaginary monsters lurked waiting for the cover of darkness frightfully to emerge. As their dad, I sought new and better ways to keep the bogeymen at bay. We would faithfully check the closets, shine a flashlight under the bed, and draw the blinds tight against things outside. Sometimes we even slept with the lights on because everyone knows monsters don’t like light. And sometimes our best defense was a song together. A quick verse of “Jesus Loves” or “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head” would calm our spirits and allow sleep free of monsters. Maybe having a song, something to whistle in the dark is the way to go against monsters and evil things waiting to pounce.

Imaginary monsters are powerful things that prey on our insecurities and lie in wait in the mysterious realms where we can’t see. As children, we instinctively know to fear what might be hidden and we battle against it with our songs. As adults, it seems we grow more accustomed to life with the lights out. Our imaginations don’t run as wild, and we can ignore the corners and the shadows without fear of imaginary monsters. The problem is, sometimes we stop looking in the hidden places and miss real dangers that threaten us.

It is in the hidden places that domestic violence, and abuse of all kinds, lurks. With the lights out and behind closed doors, powerful people exert control and act only in their own interest and for their personal gratification. When others can’t see, physical violence rains to intimidate, isolate, and bend behavior toward the abuser. Beyond the limits of light, abusers use coercive reproduction to entangle their victims, economic abuse to bind their victims, and emotional abuse to destroy the self-image of their victims. In hidden places left uninvestigated, the terrors aren’t imagined and people experiencing domestic violence need to be seen and sung a powerful song that they can whistle against the dark.

Whistling in the dark is what Psalm 84 is. This is the tune that the people of Israel sang as they journeyed through mysterious and hostile territory. It is the tune they sang as they made their pilgrimage toward the temple in Jerusalem for high holy times. During these special religious observances, scores of people filled the city to capacity and energized it with religious fervor. Being at the temple for the special occasions showed devotion to God and promised profound experiences of God’s presence...but you had to get there. Journeying toward Jerusalem meant traveling through the desert with the very real possibility of getting lost without water and, therefore, lost without hope. There were monsters in the desert, too, wild animals and robbers waiting to ambush. So, they whistled in the dark by singing Psalm 84 rather than giving in to fear or despair. They claimed its reality over against the peril they faced. Perhaps it is a song powerful enough for our peril from hidden places, too.

“How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs...for the courts of the Lord;
My body and soul shout for joy to the living God.”

The people of Israel sang this song as a people who have something to live for, a people with a destination. The thought of worship in the temple filled them with drive and hope. They anticipated a glorious day in God’s presence and that pulled them along on their journey. Yes, their road was hard and dusty. Yes, peril existed in the lion behind the rock and the robber in the bushes. Yes, the journey for this people was difficult but they are moving toward the promise of God’s presence, seeking a time characterized by joy. The tune they are whistling is a hope-filled one that reminds them to keep taking their steps. For people who experience violence--if you experience domestic violence--there is true peril but there is also hope beyond it. God desires a life of gentle love and joy, where body and soul are cared for. Sing this song and keep taking your steps in hope.

As they sing, the people of Israel are seeking the presence of the God who provides. Sparrows and swallows have nests near the altar in the temple. “Happy are those who dwell in God’s house,” their song proclaims, “they forever praise God.” Amid their journey, the song reminds the pilgrims that God provides for God’s people. There is shelter at the temple, but God’s presence isn’t confined to the temple. God’s house extends to wherever the people are so God’s provision accompanies them on their journey. As a congregation, can we be that temple-shelter? Can we become a place of provision for folks tired from their journey? Sing this song and let us be the answer to the prayers of others.

It is not the hardship of the pilgrimage or distance to Jerusalem that characterizes this people on the road. It is the resolve of the people who have put their trust in God and undertaken this journey together. Even when the path is terrible, they remind one another through song that they have not been abandoned or forsaken.

“Blessed is the one who finds refuge in You
Whose mind is on the pilgrim highways.

Even though they pass through the Valley of Baca (the “Valley of Thirst” or “Weeping”)
They make it place of springs, a place covered with blessing.
They go from strength to strength....”

This is determined whistling in the dark. It is people singing of water and plenty in a place called the “Valley of Thirst.” It is singing a song that acknowledges hardship but refutes its power over them. God is greater and promises refuge and relief from even the harshest reality. They sing to one another this song so that they don’t lose heart, grow weary, or faint. Who needs to hear this song around us? Who is growing weary as they pass through a dry valley? Let us join this song as we accompany others through their hardship.

“I would rather be with God one day than a thousand days anywhere else,” the song continues. “I would rather stand perilously on the edge of God’s presence than rest at ease in a wicked place. God is sun and shield, light and protection and God gives grace and glory; God doesn’t withhold God’s bounty....” God doesn’t withhold love, mercy, forgiveness, or any of the things that bring life. God gives freely to those who seek. Sing this song of good news. Sing it loudly enough that anyone in need of sun and shield can know where to find them.

It is so easy in this life to lose our way when the lights go out, to wander and stumble, not sure of where we are going. Compounding our own loss of vision could be the real terrors hidden from view, those who seek to control and harm us. In the fearful absence of light, sometimes we

think the best we can do to hold the monsters at bay is to refuse to peek into the hidden places. But that is not quite right. We can whistle or sing that tune of hope and life. We can join the song sung by the people of Israel that declares our hope in God. We can sing God's song that reminds us that even in difficult times God is providing for us and leading us and dwelling with us.

Whistling in the dark is what keeps the monsters from winning the battle until we are safely in God's presence. Singing to one another gives us strength and courage to face all that might be hidden in the shadowy places. If others can't see what you experience on your journey, if you suffer violence or abuse, if you don't know how to whistle, God sees and knows and hears. The tune is the promise we sing for one another.