Out of the Depths

Readings: "Forgive the Dream" by Hafiz, transl. Daniel Ladinsky; Psalm 107:1 – 22

When I read Psalm 107 from our lectionary this week, I had a lot of mixed feelings about it. Lament psalms are more my cup of tea, as they express the most authentic experiences of the human condition in a way that strikes a universal chord – after all, we've all had our moments, whether verbalized or in the secret recesses of our hearts, where we have lost the sense of safety, of what is good, what some may call the absence of God and others may call a loss of the self. There is something cathartic in crying out from the depths of your soul, to giving an actual voice to the unique pain that is a part of being human. Somehow, psalms like this one, which are called psalms of thanksgiving, stir up much more complex feelings for me, and I here's why:

Gratitude comes very easily when things go well, doesn't it? I was listening to a podcast called "Pulpit Fiction" where different progressive theologians have conversations about scriptural texts chosen for the lectionary. I found that many preachers breathe a sigh of relief when they get to a text like Psalm 107, because it is so satisfying to reflect upon the comfort and goodness of God. Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, discussing this psalm, comments, "when good things happen, we naturally tell the story of the experience, identify where it came from, and respond with gratitude." Well, yes. This psalm – and many others like it – are expressions of total gratitude, a story that tells of a happy ending following a season of strife. But what about when things are not going well, or the happy ending never comes, and gratitude feels impossible? In the context of a world in which none of us escapes pain, and so many of us suffer from various chronic pains of the soul, how do these words sound to someone who only feels the absence of anything good?

Earlier this week, I was invited with other faith leaders and seminarians to a summit at the mayor's house presenting the Unity Project, a new initiative supported by First Lady Chirlane McCray, who has decided to publicly tackle such questions. First Lady McCray has called out the lack of empathy given to issues of mental health, which are particularly stigmatized for people of color, and to create programs that will support healing and open conversation. In December, she announced her initiative "Sisters Thrive," which undertakes to destigmatize mental illness in communities of color by training at 10,000 New Yorkers this year to recognize and respond to signs of mental illness amongst family, friends and colleagues, and the Unity Project is one path that specifically aims to make New York the safest city in the nation for LGBTQ youth by creating a network of care for those who have been abandoned or rejected by their families and faith communities. Being surrounded by 125 other guests from various religious traditions who hope to make this happen and a bunch of people who had no qualms about talking openly about the challenges of mental illness was indeed a moment where I thought, give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. But I also heard stories of no happy endings, where the pain of finding one's identity in a world that continues to alienate and divide us because of our identities becomes, sometimes, too much for a person to handle, and they choose not to go on. Jane Clementi, a person of faith and a mother, spoke of her son Tyler, who you may remember in 2010 was a freshman at Rutgers when his classmate humiliated him by posting a personal encounter of his with another young man on social media. This humiliation led Tyler to take his own life. His mother Jane framed it this way: that even though Tyler was supported by the love of his family and friends, the darkness of such an

event overcame the light of safety that his immediate community tried to surround him with. We don't know what Tyler's religious life looked like, other than that his mother Jane struggled to de-stigmatize his sexual identity from the less loving theology that their church had adhered to, but it is clear that the divine love that we all deserve, that is there no matter what, had been veiled from Tyler's purview. Yet this is but one example of what is for each individual who struggles to feel connected, to feel whole, a complex and personal journey through battlefields that are sometimes clear but also very often mysterious. Tyler's case points to a particular event which likely was the culmination of multiple hurts that led him down his path, but not everyone who is hurting has this experience. Pastor David Johnson Rowe, brother of our own Merris, speaks of losing one of the brightest, vibrant, and as he described, "faithful" young women in his congregation to suicide at the age of 16. No one saw it coming, and no one could make sense of it. But obviously something was going on for Emma internally that she could not put a voice to, could not reconcile, and could no longer bear to live with. So what about all of those who are still here, somewhere on this wide spectrum and dealing with these feelings? When you wake up in the morning and feel a sense of dread, or just getting on the subway drains all your energy, or when a simple staff meeting at work makes your heart race and you feel like you can't breathe, it becomes much more difficult to talk about what is going on. Especially if you keep searching within yourself for a reason, and cannot find one. When this happens, it can lead us to deeper despair, increasing overwhelm, or more intense anxiety as we begin to weave a tale that makes some sense: we tell ourselves that we are to blame, or that the world is against us, or that there is just something innately wrong inside us, something broken, something that isn't "normal." And the resulting shame that comes with any of these stories, despite their falseness, creates a chasm between the brightness and fullness of our true selves and the oppressive reality of an illness that cannot be easily identified or named. Fortunately, we are in a time and a culture where despite its many aspects that drive us away from our authentic selves, we also have more tools at our disposal now than ever as modern relational psychology is giving us a way to make sense of these feelings. The challenge for us is to bridge the gap between how we talk about and understand mental illness and its causes, and what our faith traditions are telling us about who we are and who God is in relationship to our soul pains.

When we hear or read a text that is a part of the fabric of our faith traditions, it has a pull on us possessing multiple layers – just as we are both communal and individual, this pull is at once intergenerational and cross-cultural while also unique to each one of us, and its meaning will vary depending on where we have been, and where we are in the moment. Only recently has modern psychology explored the concept that we human beings are so complex that our journey toward wholeness may be better served by acknowledging how we are not always the same person, with one consistent perspective, or one way of responding to the world and all that it throws at us. This concept is known as the multiple self, and it can reveal a new window into discovering the divine spirit even in feelings of complete and utter alienation. Not to be confused with multiple personalities, which is known as dissociative identity disorder, the concept of the multiple self allows us to look at how we are made up of all the moments, all the experiences, all the relationships from the minute we breathed our first gasp of air out of the womb to when we breathe our last. In fact, when we consider that we are multiple rather than linear and unified, we may begin to see that our sacred texts reflect this as well. Our psalms are as diverse as our selves, some

singing words of total praise and others pleading in fear, or exploding with rage. Psalm 107 marks the beginning of a group of psalms that thank God for bringing the people out of exile, and it's a communal kind of reflection on what went wrong and how God responded by making it right. Our selected passage describes three examples of physical and spiritual distress – hunger and thirst in the wilderness, imprisonment, and sickness – each malady followed by a reason for the affliction, and then a divine deliverance as the happy ending. On a good day, in a good season, when all is going fairly well in my life, I can read this psalm through the lens of someone who may have always felt pretty safe, pretty solid – let's say, someone who generally feels loved and can love in turn. The words are triumphant, and the reasoning contains cause and effect – you hunger and thirst in the wilderness, and cry out to God in your distress, you're delivered; you are imprisoned, perhaps you acted out or did something that required terrible consequences, but hey, you asked for help and God still delivered you; you got sick because, well, again you must have done something wrong but it all turns out alright once more, because God was there and God healed you. It is not uncommon to stop there, and many theologies have read this in such a way, focusing on the joy of God's love and the promise of deliverance. This is meaningful and this can be life-saving - if your life is fairly bearable. So let's switch the lens for a moment. When I read this, I am also aware of all of those beloved children of God, including myself, for whom this was, is, or will be, terribly damaging. I am aware that on a different day, in a season of distress, when things do not feel at all that they are going well, the words can pierce like the accusations of grand inquisitors. When the psalmist tells us that those who suffered had "rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High," that "some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction," these words – sin, iniquities, rebellion – fall very differently on my ears. Like the dementors of Harry Potter's world, they steal any sense of goodness or love, instead confirming the shame that I already feel in my state of depression or anxiety or overwhelm – that it *is* my fault I feel this way, or that the world hates me for reasons I cannot understand, or worse, that there is something inherently wrong with me that cannot be explained or even fixed. In religious language, a feeling that no one can save me. This is the kind of impact that our sacred language can have for some children of God, who may hear these words as an echo of something they internalized from a young age, for a variety of reasons that range from explicit trauma to the more subtle effects of a caregiver who was dealing with their own overwhelming stress. In each unique case, we must acknowledge the multiple ways in which these words can both heal and harm, and navigate a way in which we can breathe new life into the latter.

With this in mind, I like to re-approach the psalm with a framework that includes the complexity of our multiple selves, and reaffirms the goodness of the divine spirit. Pamela Cooper-White, a clinical psychologist and Anglican priest, has described the characteristics of human beings as a part of divine creation in a way that I believe can hold both the alienating and the liberating elements of our passage. We are vulnerable, relational, and embodied creatures, she points out, and adds that because of our multiplicity we are mutable, fluid, and in process. "Creation continues to evolve, change and adapt," she says, "and new life springs up while old parts of creation decay and die. Each individual life, including each human life, is likewise in a continual state of flux and transition." Alongside all these elements, having been created as an act of a loving creator, we are ultimately loved, and are endowed with the capacity to love in turn. Within this

framework, it becomes a little bit easier to forgive the dream, as Hafiz says, of the wounds that exist because God and love have yet to become real enough – or, I would add, aren't presently real enough. It becomes slightly more bearable to consider that what happened and how we felt about it when we were 3 years old, 10 years old, last year, last month, or last week – matters, yet also doesn't define the breadth of who we are and does not change our identity as children of God whether we are at our lowest point or our highest. Through this lens, the psalm ceases to seem so punitive; rebellion, sin and sickness from iniquities can be understood as the non-forgiveness, the self-loathing and the sabotage that we feel when we cannot let ourselves off the hook for feeling so badly. We can digest the concept of sin with its literal definition, "to miss the mark," as a reminder that we actually have no business believing the lie that we are not loved, that we are not good, when we are products of such an expansive love that has created us to embody that goodness. It doesn't suddenly resolve one person's despair or another person's bipolar disorder, but it opens a door into the reality that healing is possible. It gives breath to the grasping onto old theologies that suggest that we are wildly inadequate. It creates room for us to name the difficult stuff we are told we need to suck up, or figure out, or "let go" of – and alternatively allows a space for grace that helps us cease playing the blame game, whether it is directed toward ourselves or at others. It is in this new space that we might feel safe enough to lean upon those who care for us, in our vulnerability, without the fear of judgment, as we begin to allow the possibility that God was, is, and will be around gently holding us up, quietly encouraging us, steadfastly – as the psalmist says – loving us into thriving.

And for those of us who are bearing witness to the ones for whom we desire to create such possibilities, now is a ripe and vital time to sharpen our senses. As hate crimes have risen since late 2016, and we increasingly deal with cultural fear and uncertainty, we might take our cue from First Lady McCray and do a little extra education in this year. Thrive NYC is the root initiative from which Sisters Thrive was born, and anyone can sign up for a free training in what's called mental health first aid. Thrive is striving to change the culture around mental health by helping us to better recognize signs of mental illness, strengthen interventions and close treatment gaps so that those who are suffering are treated with the care and dignity they deserve. Thrive also offers self-care stress management resources that can be easily accessed online, and has a hotline for anyone who needs to discuss anything that they are dealing with. So in this season, with our intentions fixed upon the One who liberates, with our hearts set upon the One who desires our thriving, and with the reminder that we are loved, may we move forward with a concrete commitment to include our faith in the work of increased awareness, deeper understanding, and space-making for all to journey toward wholeness.