

By the Waters of Babylon

Psalm 137 and John 3:14-21

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Joe Banks Cooper lived on Dantzler Street
in the house between my grandmother's house
and the house where they carved out an apartment
for my mother and brother and me to live
while my pappy was off fighting the big war:

My grandmother here;
My mother and brother and I here; and
Joe Banks Cooper here (between)
(we always used all three names).

Some say the house where Joe Banks Cooper lived is haunted...
haunted by the ghost of a woman
who died there many years ago under mysterious circumstances.
You can't prove it by me.
I was never so bothered by the ghost
as I was by Joe Banks Cooper.

Oh, in time,
Joe Banks Cooper and I became fast friends:
Went to the picture show together every Saturday
along with my big brother and Junior Grier
only Junior Grier was black and had to sit in the balcony.
That didn't make any more sense to me then
than it does now;
but that's the way things were then:

Some things change that need to be changed;
Other things never change.

Anyway,
when we first moved back to Saint Matthews
so my pappy could go fight the big war
Joe Banks Cooper was the bully of the neighborhood:

I was a new kid on the block.
He was probably a couple of years older.
He was definitely half a head taller,
a whole lot stronger, and
wiser by far
in the ways of Dantzler street.

Mean

is what he was:

Knock me down;

Rub my nose in the dirt;

Say bad things about my pappy...

things I knew weren't true

and there wasn't a blessed thing I could do.

That's one of the things that never changes.

Sometimes when things go wrong

there's not a blessed thing you can do.

Except I could do this:

I could stay awake at night

Plotting ways to get even...

ways I could break not only his arms and legs;

but ways I could break his back;

and ways I could train our dog, Penny,

and my grandmother's dog, Dopey,

to become killer dogs

who would lie and wait and attack

Joe Banks Cooper when he least expected it...

no matter that Penny was only this big

(about twelve inches high)

and Dopey didn't have but three legs.

My five-year-old plotting

was not one of my finer moments.

I really have become

a very nonviolent person;

and, as I said,

Joe Banks Cooper and I became fast friends.

In fact,

I would like nothing so much now

as to hear where Joe Banks Cooper is

and how he is getting on

and what he's been doing for the last forty-five years.

The last time I was in St. Matthews

I couldn't find anyone who knows.

One of the sad things about becoming an adult

is that we seldom have such friends

as Joe Banks Cooper any more

where raw bitterness

can turn quickly

to raw devotion

and it is as though

the bitterness was never there.

Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.
Too bad as adults we forget how to do that.

But, at the time,
as unthinkable as they were,
my dreams of breaking Joe Banks Cooper's arms and legs and back
were utterly honest.

Wonder what would have happened
if I had turned my honest dreams
into equally honest prayers?

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept...*

It starts off nobly enough:
a sad psalm for sad people;
a psalm for a people once held captive;
a psalm now used for any people
whose pain is by someone else's hand...
whose pain is out of control
and there is not a blessed thing you can do.

By psalm's end, however, the psalm is anything but noble:
it became a mean psalm;
a psalm for an angry people;
a psalm for a people held captive to bitterness;
a psalm so vicious it is now seldom used by any people
no matter how resentful they may be of their circumstance.

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
the psalm begins.*

*How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
the psalm continues.*

But then the psalm ends:

*I pray God
will dash their babies' heads
against a stone.*

Worse than that.
The psalm really ends:

*I pray it will make God happy
to dash their babies' heads*

against a stone.

Walter Brueggemann,
one of the leading Old Testament scholars of our day,
says this psalm
is not one of the noble moments of the Bible.
That seems to me an understatement.
Brueggemann, I think,
has been too kind.
This psalm may be the very lowest moment of the Bible.
I can think of no lower moment in all of holy writ.
It's right there somewhere below
the killing of the first-born of Egypt
so Pharaoh would let God's people go
and striking Uzzah dead
because he reached to keep the ark from falling off the cart.

But then,
crawling from somewhere beneath
the dark underside of this ignoble psalm
comes a back door invitation
to a kind of prayer
that is passionate
in its utter honesty:

Prayer that is almost like
the day dreams of little boys and girls
confronted for the first time with stark injustice.

Our God
will no more dash the heads of children against a stone
than I could break the arms, legs, and back
of Joe Banks Cooper
or have him attacked by a vicious three-legged dog;

but such an honest dream once helped
a little boy deal with evil
at a time when his daddy was not there to help.

Maybe prayer that honest can also
help God's people
at a time when there is no other help.

Oh,
to be sure,
to dwell on such dreams and prayers,
and certainly
to act on such dreams and prayers,
would be pathological;

but have you never stayed awake half the night
dreaming of all the caustic things
you could have
or even should have said to someone who caught you off guard
and left you momentarily speechless:

“I wish I had said...”

“Next time I see him I’m going to tell him...”

“Why didn’t I think to say...”

Or,

have you never spent hours writing a nasty letter...

I mean really nasty...

one that,

if taken seriously,

would end all injustice

forever:

“Madam,

In response to your asinine statement
which insulted my integrity...”

“Dear Sir:

You are a disgrace to your office
and to the cause of freedom and justice...”

“To whom it may concern:

This is to inform you that I am about to consult a lawyer...”

The only time you get in trouble with letters like that
is when you mail 'em.

As long as you don’t mail 'em,
they can help you blow off a lot of steam.

Being able to turn such raw and honest emotion
into raw and honest prayer
is even better.

God is more understanding
than the people

to whom we might be tempted to send nasty letters.

Besides that and much more important,

VENGEANCE REALLY DOES BELONG TO GOD...
AND ONLY TO GOD.

Thus said, however,

might we yet dare to pray:

“Lord, it will make me happy as a clam

if his new wife’s pretty young face turns into lizard leather.

She cost me my family.”

“Lord, it will make me just pleased as punch
if that so-and-so corporate raider’s jet crashes into the Andes.
He cost me my job.”

“Lord, it will just tickle me to death
if Saddam Hussein steps on one of his own land mines.
The carnage he caused is still going on.”

I don’t recommend those prayers.
As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
I don’t recommend them for one minute.
I think there are better things for the church to be praying;
but coming from the dark underside of this scandalous psalm,
there is the voice of God
with sadness
saying,

“If they are really honest,
I will listen even to the pain of those prayers.”

Coming, then,
welling up
from the top side of the psalm
the psalmist makes it clear God is saying,

“All of your prayers
must be utterly honest.”

I hadn’t been out of seminary long
when I had to go tell a young mother
that her husband had fallen under the track of a bulldozer
on the construction site where he was foreman.
He was dead.
I found her at the beauty parlor
and had to call her out to tell her.
News like that would travel like wild fire
around our small community.
I didn’t want her to hear it from a stranger.

Standing there in the parking lot
with her hair in curlers
she beat on me with both her fists.
She beat on me
not because she was angry with me.
She beat on me
because she was angry with God
and I was God’s representative.

It was an honest prayer.

It was a good prayer.
It was a prayer that brought healing.

It is no accident,
I am sure,
that in the Lectionary
this lowest of all passages of scripture
is paired with
what, in my opinion,
is scripture at its absolute highest.

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept...*

and before it is over,

Lord, bash the babies' heads against a stone.

It is awful...
just awful...
no matter the time...
no matter the culture...
it is an unthinkable awful prayer;
but it's standing here for us to read today.

But listen to what is standing beside it,
also calling out for us to read it today:

*God so loved the world
that he gave his only son
that whoever believes in him
should not perish
but have everlasting life.
God did not send his son into the world
to condemn the world;
but that the world might be saved through him.*

Pairing the passages like that makes it clear doesn't it?
I don't have to preach it.
It preaches itself.
The pairing of the passages makes it clear,
doesn't it?

For us
there is
no pain so deep there can be no relief;
For us
there is
no loneliness so absolute there is no friend;

For us
there is

no fear so great there can be no calm;
no death so final there can be no life;
no grief so deep there can be no consolation;
no injustice so insidious there can be no truth;
no sin so serious there can be no forgiveness;
no war so fierce there can be no peace;
no hate so deep there can be no love.

For us

there is

no prayer so honest it will not be heard.

Our honest praying will not force God's hand;
but our honest praying will bring God into focus;

and to our honest prayers God will say,

“Here,

let me take your bitterness from you
and your pain.

Now,

come
and follow me.”