

Psalm 55 and Domestic Violence

By Rev. Karen Selig

SCRIPTURES

Psalms 55:4-8; 12-14 (NRSV) My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. ⁵ Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. ⁶ And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; ⁷ truly, I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; *Selah* ⁸ I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest." ... ¹² It is not enemies who taunt me— I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me— I could hide from them. ¹³ But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, ¹⁴ with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng.

1 Samuel 7:10-12 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

"Domestic" violence is a whole pattern of behaviors inflicted by one person on another. Victims and abusers have a connection: they are part of a community of people (sometimes part of a church congregation) but the abuse is often a "secret" no one wants to know. I didn't realize quite how hard we work to keep such secrets until I went to work for a YWCA battered women's program back in the 1980s. After I'd done the work for a few years, my mother finally revealed to me that her father had abused her mother and had thrown her mother out of a second story window in one of his rages. The violence in her family was a secret she had been taught to keep and she never spoke of it until my work pushed her into it. Today I'm asking you to break the silence for a few minutes to consider the violence that exists in many homes today, and what we can do to interrupt the cycle of violence in the lives of God's much beloved children in our country and around the world.

ENCOUNTERING THE WORD IN THE WORLD:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Domestic violence is a difficult, emotional topic to face honestly. Prayer may provide the strength needed to continue the journey when the facts and stories become too painful to hear or know.
2. **Spend some time online learning some facts about domestic violence.** The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) is a very reliable place to start. If you are doing this study in a group, you can print up a handout from them with some of the basic facts about domestic violence at [http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet\(National\).pdf](http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet(National).pdf).
3. **Read "An Abused Woman's Response to Psalm 55" (attached).** If you are in a group, this can be done responsively, with the group reading the bold parts and a designated reader reading the "woman's voice."
4. **Spend some time journaling about or discussing your responses to this psalm.** Psalm 55 is a song written about the pain of being betrayed by someone you trust. It speaks of suffering violence at the hands of someone who should only have brought peace and love and joy into your life. Try not to analyze this Scripture verse by verse, but instead allow the power of the fear, the anguish, and the ultimate trust in God to speak to your heart and mind and help you think about how you can make a difference for women who may find themselves in just such circumstances.

5. Consider how you can respond as an individual and as part of your faith community. Here are just two out of many possible ideas to prime the pump as you prayerfully brainstorm how you can respond to the reality of domestic violence in the lives of those around you.

A. One step in breaking the cycle of violence is sharing knowledge: speaking honestly about the patterns and precursors of such violence. Helping each other and our children know the warning signs and the dynamics of abuse, and learning healthier ways of relating are critical. (If you are in a group, spend some time reviewing the Power and Control Wheel on the NCADV fact sheet.) Consider these realities:

- Domestic violence isn't about provocation and response. Abusive behavior is controlled. Most abusers never hit their boss, their neighbor, their friends; only their intimate partners. Abuse often begins with language that can be seen during dating: calling her stupid, questioning her worth, swearing at her. It can include intimidation: using gestures or yelling or smashing things, threats, sexual abuse. There is often economic abuse: keeping someone from getting a job or making the victim repeatedly ask for money. If there are children, they can be used to make the abused individual compliant, by threatening the children or making her feel guilty about what will happen to the children if she leaves.
- Violence in intimate relationships often follows a cyclical pattern with a building of tension within the relationship ending with an explosive incident which the abuser blames on his partner. Then there's often a period when the abuser seems sorry for what he's done, gives gifts and promises never to do it again. The victim thinks she has figured out the rules and can keep things calm, but the rules are changed, the tension once again begins to build, and eventually, another abusive incident occurs.
- During all of this, people who are being abused hear others around them justify such behavior. When they try to tell others, they may not be believed, or are told that they did something to cause the abuse. One evening while sitting in a group where the story of a woman who had been strangled to death was shared, I listened in dismay as a member of the group said "but maybe she deserved it."

B. Another step towards change is to recognize and repent of the role that our own religious tradition has played in undergirding violence against women. Many of our beliefs about what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior for men and women are based on time-honored beliefs which come to us from our religious heritage. Let me to share a few quotes and examples that highlight some of the more distressing teachings. They can make good starting places for journaling and discussion. (Visit <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org> for more resources on faith and domestic violence.)

- From a gathering of church elders at the Council of Toledo 400 C.E.: *"If wives of clergy transgress their commands, they may beat them, keep them bound in their houses and force them to fast, but not done to death."*
- An excerpt from the "Rules for Marriages" drafted by a friar and adopted by the city of Siena about 1450 C.E.: *"When you see your wife commit an offense, don't rush at her with insults and violent blows; rather first correct the wrong lovingly.... But if your wife is of a servile disposition and has a crude and shifty spirit so that pleasant words have no effect, scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if this still doesn't work, take out a stick and beat her soundly.... For it is better to punish the body and correct the soul and to damage the soul and spare the body.... You should beat her only when she commits a serious wrong, for example if she blasphemes a saint, if she mutters the devil's name, if she likes being at the window or lends a ready ear to dishonest men, or if she has taken to bad habits or bad company or commits some other wrong that is a mortal sin. Then readily beat her, not in rage, but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will redound to your merit and good."*
- From *Me? Obey Him?* by Elizabeth Rice Handford: *"Suppose a woman feels God is leading her definitely opposite from what her husband has commanded. Who should she obey? The scriptures say a woman must ignore her feelings about the will of God and do what her husband says. She is to obey her husband as if he were God himself. She can be as certain of God's will when her husband speaks as if God had spoken audibly from heaven."*

Scripture has been misused and religious tradition has helped shape a culture that tolerates violence against women. We must seek by our living to challenge these long held beliefs, because what they lead to are homes

where violence is the norm, excuses are made for the violence, and some women can't even imagine being with a partner who is not abusing them.

- C. Perhaps the most important thing you have to offer a woman in a violent relationship is hopeful companionship.** Listen to and believe her story. Remember that she cannot change her partner's behavior; she is not responsible for it. No matter how many times she leaves her abuser and returns again, resist the temptation to give up on her. Be the presence of God's love, faithfully praying for her and listening to her, assisting her to get help to make changes, always reminding her that even when you can't be there, God is there. You can make a difference; you can help a woman make the difficult but vital journey from victim to survivor.

- D. What else do you have to add to this list of ways to respond?**

CLOSING PRAYER CIRCLE (IF DONE IN A GROUP):

- 1. Give a white stone to each member of the circle.**
- 2. Read 1 Samuel 7:10-12.**
- 3. Leader's introduction/invitation:** Samuel set up an "Ebenezer," a stone of help, to celebrate the truth that God was present for the Israelites when they were under attack. It was a reminder to all who saw it of God's powerful presence in the midst of difficult times. It's a wonderful image, that stone. And there's another stone image in Scripture that is equally powerful for our remembrance today. It comes from the book of Revelation, reminding us that those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will be transformed by his love. Revelation 2:17 promises that those who trust in Christ will be given a white stone and on the white stone will be written a new name. The color white often represents holiness and healing in Scripture; a new name speaks of rebirth, new purpose. That stone is the sign of an entirely transformed existence lasting into eternity.
So we all have white stones today. They represent our thanksgiving for women who have survived domestic violence and lived productive, beautiful lives. They also represent women who continue to suffer in violent relationships and need us to stand with them. These stones remind us to lift prayers of hope for a transformed existence for the children of our planet, male and female, that they might be our promise to be light and healing and hope in this world. These stones proclaim that a new name and a new hope is a powerful thing to receive from the hands of the living God. I invite you now, as we pray together, to hold your white stones and lift the women who come to mind up to God. And when you return home, place your rock somewhere that you will see it regularly, as your own memorial Ebenezer, remembering the things we've begun to understand today and the God who is present in each and every need.
- 4. Pray together.** (If you are comfortable with this, you might ask the group to speak the first names of those they are remembering in prayer before you begin to pray.)

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AN ABUSED WOMAN'S RESPONSE TO PSALM 55

(The large group reads the words in bold; a single reader does the woman's response.)

Listen, O God, to my pleading. Do not hide yourself when I pray. Hear me and answer, for my cares give me no peace.

Where are you, God? I pray and pray. I know you're there, and if I don't keep praying God, the pain just takes over.

I am panic stricken when he shouts. And the clamor and turmoil heap trouble on me.

Sometimes I'm so scared I can't do anything. I can't run; I can't fight back. Nothing. The boiling rage is so frightening I just don't know what to do.

My heart is torn with anguish, and the terrors of death come upon me. Fear and trembling overwhelm me, and I shudder from head to foot.

My heart nearly breaks; you know that, God. People who have never been in my shoes just can't understand the amount of fear I feel. Sometimes I even wish he would just go ahead and finish the job. I'd rather be dead than feel the fear and pain again.

O, that I had the wings of the dove to fly away and be at rest. I should escape far away and find a refuge in the wilderness. Soon I should find myself a sanctuary from wind and storm, from the blast of his vengeance.

Rest! I don't know what that is anymore. I'd sure like to get away, to hide and be free - just for some peace and rest. I don't know how, though, or where. Where could I go to get away?

I have seen violence and strife day and night within these walls. It is filled with trouble and mischief, alive with rumor and scandal, and the neighborhood is never free from violence and spite.

It doesn't matter whether it's day or night. Nights are usually the worst, but it happens in the daytime, too. If the neighbors found out, I'd be so ashamed. Really, I think they must suspect, when I have to stay in four days at a time all the bruises and swelling go away. You know, they've begun to avoid us, too. We used to be friends with two couples down the block, but lately they always seem distant. I wish sometimes they knew the truth. I wonder what they'd do then. I wonder what goes on in their house.

It was no enemy that taunted me, or I should have avoided him; no adversary who treated me with scorn, or I should've kept out of his way. It was you, a man of my own heart, my love, my friend, with whom I kept pleasant company in the house of God.

How can he do this to me, God? To us? He promised to love, honor, and cherish me, but he surely has a strange way of showing it.

Commit your fortunes to the Lord, and God will sustain you. God will never let the righteous be shaken.

I'm not even sure what that means, Lord. Am I not one of the righteous? Because I really am shaken: shaken on the inside, shaken on the outside.

But I will put my trust in Thee.

There is no human I know who will listen and hear my pain. I will put my trust in you, God. You are all I have left.

(Adapted from a resource provided years ago by the Evangelical Women's Caucus of San Francisco, CA.)