

PSALM 88:

“DARKNESS IS MY CLOSEST FRIEND”: HOW SO?

We’re looking today at Psalm 88 in Book III of Psalms.

Its summary vision (indeed the whole of Book III) is that of the generation who went into exile in Babylon, during the divided Kingdom, after David and Solomon’s time; its vision is essentially this one:

...darkness is my closest friend (v.18)

What particular experience leads Israel to the belief that darkness is its *closest friend*? It seems a strange thought.

The answer is: *It’s the suffering of exile*. Being removed from your land. Watching your whole world be destroyed.

1. THE DARKNESS

I want to take you now to a contemporary voice *in exile*. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist.



Here’s what she announces this week at the U.N. global climate summit:

“My message is that we’ll be watching you.

“This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!”

Thunberg, speaking to the U.N. utters a strong denunciation of her listeners, shaming them for looking to her and other young people for hope. She’s in exile, not just from Sweden but from hope itself.

Then, somewhat like the Psalmist, she announces the character of the darkness of exile:

“You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Then Thunberg brings up the challenge of moral evil. Her theory is that we are on the brink of eco-collapse and that the adults in power are doing nothing.

She rightly sees this raises the problem of human moral evil.

“You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.”

Thunberg is speaking to people in power wondering why they don't use that power to help her, to save her from the darkness ensconcing her planetary home!

But, who is she speaking to?

The people listening – take Emmanuel Macron who, alongside Justin Trudeau and NZPM Aderne, must be amongst the most “woke” leaders on the face of the planet today.

These people are both idealists and realists – they know politics is the art of the possible. They don't have principles; they think they can't afford them.

Their theories are summed up by the Father of Community Organising; not Barack Obama but Chicago's Saul Alinsky.

“Only two kinds of people can afford the luxury of acting on principle, those with absolute power and those with none and no desire to get any... everyone else who wants to be effective in politics has to learn to be 'unprincipled' enough to compromise in order to see their principles succeed.” (Rogers, 1990: 12)

Alinsky shows us the rules of the world and its power. He let's us see the way the darkness really is.

“The Radical may resort to the sword but when he does he is not filled with hatred against those individuals whom he attacks. He hates these individuals not as persons but as symbols representing ideas or interests which he believes to be inimical to the welfare of the people.” (Alinsky, 1946: 23)

This view: that people who oppose us may be harmed because they are not truly people but rather *symbols* – this is the very heart of the darkness.

I've had it done to me; you have to you.

That's a clue to Psalm 88 I think. We'll come back to that. But it still begs the question – *how can darkness be our closest friend?*

What I have said so far explains how Alinsky decides there is no price unworthy of the revolution – even the price of truth, goodness, and my own soul.

“He who sacrifices the mass good for his personal conscience has a peculiar conception of ‘personal salvation’; he doesn’t care enough for people to ‘be corrupted’ for them.”
(Alinsky, 1972: 25)

This means, too, that those who want a revolution will use children to get it. Children like Greta Thunberg who has her own personal eco-coach funded by George Soros. Because the revolutionaries, too, believe they are living in darkness and have convinced children this is so.

Here's what Alinsky says:

“The man of action views the issue of means and ends in pragmatic and strategic terms. He has no other problem; he thinks only of his actual resources and the possibilities of various choices of action. He asks of ends only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means, only whether they will work. To say that corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles.” (Alinsky, 1972: 24)

When we see the quote (above) we may ask – what has happened to virtue?

Virtue concerns the type of person I am becoming as I learn to act. But if there is no inherent connection between means and ends, if worthy ends don't dictate righteous means, then it matters little who does the action once the end has been decided. If power is the end, does it matter *how* power is attained or who I become in the process of attaining it?

Alinsky thus says:

“Our cause had to be all shining justice, allied with the angels; theirs had to be all evil, tied to the Devil; in no war has the enemy or the cause ever been gray.” (Alinsky, 1972: 3)

Not only does Alinsky endorse a Machiavellian relativism here, but also a kind of political Manichaeism. (Splitting the world between good and evil powers.) My political side is good and angelic, yours is evil and demonic.

That sets the scene for Greta Thunberg's remarks cited above.

She excoriates her listeners at the UN (upsetting the French and Germans in the process!) but she says, if you keep going doing it your way not my way on climate action, you'd be evil – but *I refuse to believe your evil!* In other words – I'll pressure you into seeing it my way and that will prove you're not truly evil.

Greta Thunberg's speech was an exercise in public *shaming* (yet we have been told for two generations now by child psychologists how shaming is harmful!), as also an exercise in the modern equivalent of the children's crusade.

This is a fight about darkness, is it not? Men like Saul Alinsky (and George Soros) have convinced young people that we are living into a planetary darkness; they are in exile from the societies they imagine, and revolution is the tool to build the angelic society of light.

Psalm 88 could be Greta Thunberg's story:

*From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair. (v.15)*

To be in the darkness is to know a kind of despair, as we see in vv.8-9:

*I am confined and cannot escape;
my eyes are dim with grief.*

Exile is my captivity in the darkness.

Like Greta Thunberg, each of us has moments where we are dismayed by what life hurls at us, by what we cannot apparently control. The Psalmist says of exile into darkness:

*You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths. (v.6)*

There are five phases to this experience and the Psalmist lays it out.

Primally, this is expressed by the following sentiment: I feel trapped. I can't get out.

There is a powerlessness, secondly, that goes with this feeling:

*I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength. (v.4)*

If you listen closely to Greta Thunberg, there is a desperate anger that borders on what is born of despair.

Primally, we express this feeling as – I feel powerless.

Eventually, these primal feelings lead to a third one, having to do with mental, moral, and emotional bankruptcy: I feel overwhelmed.

*I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death. (v.3)*

And when I hear Greta Thunberg this week: I heard someone who is overwhelmed.

Being overwhelmed emotionally leads to isolation. Fourthly, I feel alone.

You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. (v.8)

Eventually one comes to this, fifthly, I feel uncared for.

Nobody cares for me or what I care for.

*I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care. (v.5)*

This is the depth of the darkness of the exile. It's a universal feeling of homelessness. I imagine every refugee feels it.

"I am pessimistic because I don't trust history. But at the same time, I am optimistic. Out of despair, one creates. What else can one do? There is no good reason to go on living, but you must go on living. There is no good reason to bring a child into this world but you must have children to give the world a new innocence, a new reason to aspire towards innocence. As Camus said, in a world of unhappiness, you must create happiness." (- Elie Wiesel, New York Times interview, April 7, 1981)

The exile is when it looks like the darkness wins.

When darkness takes over, we have several choices. The first was pointed out by Alinsky and also by the Psalmist.

We can make the darkness *our closest friend*.

Greta Thunberg seems to share Alinsky's views here; revolution is the answer.

"We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not."

But, the Psalmists raises, I think, a real question ere.

...darkness is my closest friend (v.15)

This is here a statement of historical fact but not a moral judgement.

He's not necessarily saying darkness is a *good* friend to have. He's rather admitting the darkness is real and surrounds him creating the experience of his exile.

Is the Psalmist becoming an Alinskyite? *Do the ends justify the means?* Do we have to save ourselves? If so, as Marx saw revolution is the answer. Is politics the only way? If it were, what are you doing here? You should be marching on the streets!

This is not to deny marching or protesting or politics. But it is to locate politics *in the darkness*, in the exile, in a world at odds with itself.

2. THE PENULTIMATE

It is to address politics by its rightful name – as *penultimate*.

What is penultimate can never be *ultimate*! The second-to-last syllable of a word can never be the ultimate or last!

GARAGE - GARAGE

If we make darkness our closest friend in this sense we may miss what the Psalmist says about exile.

So I don't think so.

Actually, Alinsky gives us a clue.

Look at what else here says, as summarised by someone else:

"Only two kinds of people can afford the luxury of acting on principle, those with absolute power and those with none and no desire to get any... everyone else who wants to be effective in politics has to learn to be 'unprincipled' enough to compromise in order to see their principles succeed." (Rogers, 1990: 12)

I want to reiterate there is a second group of people, free to act on principle:

...those with none and no desire to get any [power]

Alinsky despised these people. Let us call them real Christians, whom Alinsky Knew. If the darkness is constituted by what is penultimate, and what is penultimate is merely a battle for power, then only the powerless who seek no power are truly free to act for what is right.

That is the road through the darkness we are on as the Christian church in the 21st Century. Mark my words!

Now let us see how the Psalmist marks out a pathway through the darkness.

How does he find it?

First, he starts by knowing what the true END is. Over against what is penultimate – Babylonian power politics – he sets out what is ULTIMATE!

He says it in v.1:

Lord, you are the God who saves me!

He sets out the ULTIMATE God against which every other god, be it the nation state, money, politics, earthly power, is PENULTIMATE!

You have to start life right here! Where does my real salvation lie? What is ULTIMATE here?

I can show you this if you'll indulge me.

Babylon was once sacked by the Hittites; they took away the statue of the God Marduk. The Kassites then took over the city but when

"the Kassite tribes took over the city, ... they were soon babylonized. The first king of the Kassite dynasty, Agum-Kakrîme, is reported to have defeated the Hittites and received back the statue of Marduk."

What was ultimate in Babylon as it is today is *political power*! Saul Alinsky did not invent this theory; it is Babylonian, eventually Roman. That's why the Kassites brought back the statue

of Marduk. They had become Babylonian, had made what is PENULTIMATE into what is ULTIMATE.

But our Psalmist too is living in Babylonian, sitting their thinking

...darkness is my closest friend (v.15)

But he knows it's not truly any friend.

This is what the world does to you and your kids. It wants you to come to believe that the darkness is your only friend.

3. THE ULTIMATE

So our Psalmist resists. Sitting in the darkness of Babylon he cries out

Lord, you are the God who saves me!

Lord means Jesus. Only Jesus saves.

By seeing what is ULTIMATE, the Psalmist points out the road out of darkness. That road is by prayer:

- A. He first says, he prays by a pattern:

Lord, you are the God who saves me;

day and night I cry out to you.

2 May my prayer come before you;

turn your ear to my cry. (vv.1-2)

- B. Then again he says, secondly, he prays every day:

I call to you, Lord, every day;

I spread out my hands to you.

- C. Thirdly, he prays at the start of his day:

But I cry to you for help, Lord;

in the morning my prayer comes before you. (v.13)

This is a threefold reiteration that the road from the darkness does not lie in the *political* which is penultimate but in the *theological*, which is true prayer.

Why did he start to pray here in the darkness?

It's one of the great mysteries that God leaves us with the darkness to wrestle against. He puts us into exile. Why?

To strip us of what is PENULTIMATE, so that we may learn to depend on the ULTIMATE.

This is about faith; v.8 is the clue:

*You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them. (v.8)*

My closest friends are my health, my bank balance, my reputation, my family, my career, my education, my trophies, my successes, my box of newspaper clippings.

But the darkness of exile has a purpose – to strip me of these *penultimate* things.

To teach me to depend on what is ultimate.

God shakes the outer person in order to secure the inner person.

You wonder, why am I suffering? Why is my child the one who ...? Why did I get this debilitating disease? How come I have to live with this?

The *darkness* comes in many forms. Business collapse. Ill health. A near-death experience.

But the darkness is our best friend when we see it as PENULTIMATE, pointing me to what is ULTIMATE. This is how

...darkness is my closest friend (v.15)

Darkness forces me to pray! In the midst of darkness I discover the deepest desire to pray. So darkness is my closest friend.