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Colorado Springs, Colorado
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“Tossings and Tears and Tenacity”

Selections from Psalms 56 & 57 Adapted from the New Revised Standard Version. Be gracious to me, O God, for I am trampled upon; all day long foes oppress me; [yet] when I am afraid, I shall put my trust in you. For in You I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me? You have kept count of my tossings; You have put my tears in Your bottle. You have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling.... Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in You my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by. My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations

After almost three years of hearing me preach, you know that I am fond of beginning my sermons with a story or even a joke as a way into the topic and scripture for the morning. But not today. Not this morning. For today is **not** like any other Sunday, is it? The eight-year-old son of a friend of Barbara’s and mine said this week, as he and his family fled the flames that were encroaching on them, *“Dad, this isn’t like the movies, is it? This is our life!”* No, today is not like any other Sunday, is it? No other Sunday has seen a week in which 30,000+ residents of our community – including many among our own church family – were given, in some cases, ten minutes to decide what to take with them knowing that whatever they left behind might never be seen again. It is **not** like any other Sunday when one of our own beloved families also fled their home, first thinking themselves safe in a hotel, but then having had to flee even that as the flames exploded yet again and now that home is gone – along with the homes of 346 other families in the Springs and hundreds more across the state. Today is **not** like any other Sunday in that today and forever and always when we smell wood-smoke we will no longer first think of campfires and S’mores and crisp fall days, but

instead will flash to those searing images of flames exploding, of houses erupting, of giant air-tankers flying perilously close to the ground disgorging fantastic deluges of slurry that sometimes still weren't enough, of firefighters and police and soldiers risking their lives, of frightened children and scared pets. No, today is **not** like any other Sunday.

And yet, as we gather here in one worship service on this day when we need to come before God as one family with our hopes and our horrors, our pleas and our prayers, our tears and our travails, at the same time we must say that it **IS** like any other Sunday as well. For on this Lord's Day we do what we do every Lord's Day – we gather to remember that God is overwhelmingly gracious, overwhelmingly good, that God is never absent and that God works through all things always and forever to bring good even in the midst of such things as we have been through this week. After all, how many of you have suffered the death of a spouse or parent or brother or sister and have found yourself having those moments when you simply craved routine and normalcy. You go to the kitchen to make the coffee because even though there are a dozen people in your house who would do it for you, in the midst of your grief you need oh-so-much to do that normal thing yourself, to cling to that bit of routine and habit because it is a comfort. And so it is today when we gather just like on any other Sunday because we too need that routine, we need these people around us who give us life and bear us up, we pray and we sing because not to do so is unthinkable. If we did not gather on this day, like any other Sunday, to proclaim the gentle goodness of a gracious God who never gives up and who grieves with us and holds us and will never leave us, then it would be as if we were saying that the fire has not only destroyed but it

has won, it has proven more powerful than God. And we cannot and will not say that.

As you know, I had begun a my vacation on Tuesday, driving a small U-Haul of books and other things to my wife Barbara in Tacoma, Washington, where she started an interim ministry last month. And it was late that afternoon, 400 miles away, when I began to get word of what that wind-whipped fire was doing, seeing the pictures, hearing the reports, watching the evacuation line move ever further outward, aching for those among our church family whom I knew were inside those lines. After consulting with our leadership, I decided both to continue that drive, while keeping in touch through all the electronic marvels of our age, and yet also to return to you today because I could not imagine not being with you after what this church family and this community have been through this week. During that drive, particularly on Tuesday night and Wednesday, as each new text and email seemed to bring astonishingly bad news, I took a strange comfort in watching the display on the GPS in that rental truck. Because it always knew where it was headed. It always knew what was the next town. It always knew the route. It always knew exactly how many miles lay behind and ahead. There was no uncertainty to it, no ambiguity.

Today and in the coming weeks and months and years, we don't have a GPS for our ***lives*** that will do those sort of things for us, much as we might wish it were so. Our Building Security Assistant Ray Killian said to me in one of those Wednesday emails that "*Colorado Springs will never be the same.*" Indeed that is so. And in the midst of such uncertainty, in the midst of the losses that some in this room have suffered and the losses that have occurred to our family, friends, co-workers, in the midst of the anxiety we will know today and into the coming months and even years, we will indeed

wish we had a GPS for our lives and our community, something that would accurately always know exactly what is next, exactly the distance to the next milestone of grief and recovery. But we don't. We will wish we had a GPS for our lives that would answer the question not of where the nearest Starbucks is, but questions like *"Why, Lord, why?!"* Questions like *"How is this fair?"* Questions like *"What do I tell my children?"* It would be oh-so-nice to have a GPS that would indeed allow us to confidently and accurately and precisely navigate the shoals that we have faced and will continue to face, a machine that would give us the answers to those hard questions that spring to our lips and find us at 3:00 a.m.

But we don't. But what we **do** have is a faith. What we **do** have is a community that will uphold us. What we **do** have is the marvelous witness of a scripture that is the testimony of those who have also faced hard things, those who have also asked the same questions we ask, those who have also come to God in anger or frustration or guilt at having come through the storm unscathed and wonder *"Why, God, why?"* In times like these, I counsel folks – I counsel myself – to read the Psalms. Because while the Psalms contain some of the most beautiful and wondrous lines ever written – *"The Lord is my shepherd!"* – they also contain honest, raw, and sometimes angry cries. We find in the Psalms such brutally honest questions as this: *"How long, O Lord, will my foes assail me?"* This morning, in the midst of stories of houses broken into and vandalized and cars burgled, it is a kind of reassurance to know that David gave vent long ago to honest anger in the face of human mendacity: *"Why do my enemies prosper, O God?"*

But the Psalms also offer the most vivid and compelling testimony to a faith that

can be lived even in the midst of anger, ambiguity and anxiety; they offer us something to cling to about God amidst all our tossings and our tears. Psalms 56 and 57, our scripture for this morning, is such a testimony. And while these Psalms don't give us all the answers, they do give us a striking and beautiful image for what God is doing in the midst of hard things. Did you hear it? *"You have kept count of my tossings; You have put my tears in Your bottle."*

I am very grateful to Barbara for pointing out these Psalms and this striking image,¹ because it can speak to us on this morning which is both not like any other Sunday but which also needs to be like every other Sunday as we come to praise. So what does it mean that God *"puts our tears in His bottle"*? This seems such an odd image, doesn't it? And yet archaeologists have learned that many ancient middle eastern cultures kept containers for their tears. In the National Museum in Jerusalem there is a collection of these various containers. When a person cried, he or she would go to the shelf for the tear bottle, press it to his or her own cheek and gather in the tears. And when the storm of tears had passed, the bottle was carefully sealed and placed back up on the shelf. The bottles were even sometimes labeled, year after year, like vintage wine.

Can you imagine a shelf in your family room, lined with bottles, carefully labeled, like fine wine? Year after year, bottle after bottle, of all of your tears? In David's time they must have functioned something like the family photo album long before the

¹Much of what follows in the next four paragraphs – both content and felicitous phrasings – is oh-so-gratefully adapted from Rev. Barbara Blaisdell's marvelous sermon, "The Tears in God's Bottle," preached at First Christian Church, Portland, Oregon, February 26, 2012.

invention of the camera. Take a bottle down from the shelf, look at the label: 1985, that was a great year! 2001, that was a terrible year! The last week of June, 2012. What a horrible week. Now, in David's time, it was said that those whose tear bottles were the fullest of both sad tears and happy tears, those with the most tears, were the most esteemed in the community. For crying – and isn't this so true? - was understood to be a mark of having lived deeply and greatly and beautifully and meaningfully. Yet such a thing cannot be said lightly. Anyone here who has had his or her body heave with sobbing knows that this could not and cannot be said lightly: our tears *are* the marks of living beautifully and fully – and sometimes oh-so-painfully.

And what David does, when he writes this Psalm, is to extend that practice of gathering up those tears to say that God Himself carries our tears in a bottle. David said that God could be trusted to keep count of those tears and tenaciously treasure them. And what he is therefore suggesting in this Psalm is that **we too** can count on God to gather up our tears, both tears of sadness and tears of joy. As Barbara puts it, *“God gathers them all gently from our wet cheeks and treasures them: all of the tears of this sorry, sorrowful, sometimes scary world and all the tears of beauty and love... – **all** are treasured and honored like fine wine deep in the heart of a God of abundant and everlasting Love. It must be a mighty flask, don't you think?”*²

Did you know that there are two chemically distinct kind of tears that we cry? We've all had those times when we laugh so hard that the tears squeeze out of our eyes and we cannot seem to stop. But those tears are chemically different from the

²Ibid.

tears we cry when we are sad. You see, the tears born of tragedy actually contain poisons. And so when you weep in woe and grief, you are literally being cleansed in body and in mind. When you are moved to sob in sadness there is a physical release of the tensions and the toxins so that your body can begin to heal. Tears are a sign from God – don't you see? – that we were not meant to hold onto our grief and bear it forever, more and more weighed down, tension built up until we explode from the stress of carrying it alone. No, tears are God's sign that the poisons of our grief and pain are meant to be poured out of us that we might begin healing. Tears that God will treasure in God's own bottle, a bottle that is boundless, a bottle that never grows tired of you, a bottle that will never turn away your tears but will always be a place you can trust.

Today and this week we have indeed wept. And it is good to do so. It is good to release the poison and the pain. And then there are two things we need to do next. First, as we gaze upon our neighbors and friends in this community and across the globe, let us ask ourselves if there might be some tears that God could be calling us to help to wipe away. And second, let us sing, let us sing. In the coming weeks and months and even years, as new reminders of the losses of this week emerge, as painful memories and images continue to be our companions, as we join together to build and re-build what was lost, we need to do what David did – sing, sing. Did you hear him? *“..in the shadow of your wings [O God] I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.... [and] I will sing [Your] praises....”* For on this day that is not like any other Sunday, in this week when we can't help but weeping, it is also a day when we come together as on every other Sunday to proclaim that God is here, that God goes with us, that God catches our tears and cherishes them and wipes them away. Isn't that good

news? And so while we can't help but to have wept at loss and pain, we – like David, like the saints in this place who have taught us the faith, like the folks in churches across this country that are praying for us and this community this morning – can't keep from singing either! In the face of God's tenacious and amazing grace, how can we keep from singing? How can we indeed?

And so, let us do that together now. Hymn number 619, "My Life Flows On (How Can I Keep from Singing?)"