

If God Can't Handle It
Psalm 65
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It is not often in the news anymore, but the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan, the one damaged by the earthquake and Tsunami in 2011, is still leaking contaminated water into the ocean. It may not still be on the front page, but the disaster goes on. The main nuclear reactor has cooled, but the grounds are so damaged and contaminated that they are having trouble containing the ground water that enters the site, which is then carried into the ocean. The tragedy continues.

A few weeks after a loved one dies, when the cards and the calls have slowed to a trickle, and the casseroles that once filled the freezer are almost used up, that loved one is still gone, and a spouse, a child, a parent, a family still grieves. Friends and fellow mourners alike have moved on to the cares of their own lives and perhaps to mourn the loss of others, but the hole in that one family's life doesn't get any smaller. The pain lingers.

In Columbine, in Norway, in Connecticut, in Kenya, the police have wrapped up their investigations of the mass murders in those places, but in each community the questions linger. How could that happen here? Is it the guns or the people who use them? How could we produce such an evil from within our midst? What could we have done to stop it? The questions go on and on.

But God is good. Oh yes, God is good. “Praise is due to you, O God in Zion;” says the Psalmist, “Praise is due to you, O God in Zion; and to you vows shall be performed, O you who answer prayer!” There are times and seasons in our lives when reading such words seems like the proverbial rubbing of salt in our wounds, making our anguish or our suffering worse for the discontinuity between the affirmation we know must be true, that God answers prayer, and what seems to be the contradictory evidence that God did not answer our prayers, did not save our loved ones, did not prevent a catastrophe. But the affirmation hangs there in our Bibles and in our lives. It remains there forever, and for every generation, mocking, inviting, challenging us.

That God answers our prayers is not the only affirmation in Psalm 65. It is full of them. “You forgive our transgressions.” “You answer us with deliverance.” “You are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.” “You crown the year with bounty.” Hearing these descriptions of God’s power and goodness, you can’t help but imagine the Psalmist on some morning at sunrise, on a rooftop somewhere in Jerusalem, the mist clearing and slowly revealing the countryside, the words spilling out from an appreciation of the beauty and possibility that emerge in that early morning light. These are not words you write when times are tough. These are words you write when life is good, when the nation is at peace, when you feel blessed. This is what you write in your journal when the kids are safely in their beds after a great day at the beach, or back home from summer

camp, when you've just celebrated a couple's 50th wedding anniversary, when the neighbor's new barn has been raised, when the fireworks show on your country's Independence Day has left your community feeling pretty good about itself, despite its challenges. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answer prayer!" Yes! This is how it should be.

It's easy to take that stuff for granted though, isn't it? At least for those of us for whom life generally isn't a series of misfortunes. We may have our occasional challenges, but overall, were likely to see most of our lives as blessed, with our crops watered and sprouting, with God on our side and looking out for us. And so it takes a lot of discipline, a lot of intentionality to appreciate what's good in the midst of what's good. We get so wrapped up in enjoying what's good that we forget where it really came from, or that it really can be fragile, or that it really has to be shared if it is to remain good. And so maybe we'll have the stray thought that hey, maybe I should take a moment to give thanks, to offer praise, to write some of this stuff down before I forget it, but most of us don't write it down, and it doesn't stick, and the next time adversity comes our way, we have to start all over again in reconstructing our belief that "Praise is due to you, O God in Zion; and to you vows shall be performed, O you who answers prayer!"

Isn't that why it is so wonderful that we have the Psalms? For those times when we have so taken God for granted that we lose our perspective? Or to remind ourselves to pause and give thanks every day and not just on the day our countries

side aside for that purpose? And maybe too these psalms are here as much for those who can no longer see and express God's goodness on their own, but whose minds and hearts need some freshening, some remembering of just when life was good. Of course, the book of Psalms is not only a collection of this type of psalm of praise, but also words of lament, and confession, and glory and anger, each kind just right for the different seasons of our lives. But Psalms like Psalm 65 have a special role to play while the contaminated water still leaks into the ocean, as the hole in our heart continues to grow, when we hear of yet another shooting in yet another town and wonder when it will visit our neighborhood.

Maybe words reminding us that God answers prayer aren't the words we want to hear in times when it seems untrue, but maybe they are the just words we need to hear for another reason. Perhaps our reluctance to hear them is not based on what they actually say, but in the way they are sometimes offered to us by well-meaning friends and associates. You see, nothing amplifies our suffering quite so much as being told in a cheerful voice that well, things aren't really so bad, are they? Or, "Look on the bright side! God is in control of everything." Or "God never gives us more than we can handle." Those are the things people say when they think they have to say something, but they don't really know what to say. Maybe the way words like those of Psalm 65 need to be offered is with the reminder that although they weren't written when times were tough, they offer us an image of when times won't be so tough, and they offer us an image of God

whose grace and mercy sticks to us even when we don't stick with God, a God who believes in us even when we don't believe in God. The image of God I see in this Psalm is of the God who is mighty enough to take whatever we can dish out, the iniquities that overwhelm us, our questions to God so pointed they seem likely to poke God's eyes out, the doubts and fears that govern our lives more than God's grace and our gratitude. You see, God silences the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of their peoples. God visits the earth and waters it; God enriches it greatly. The river of God is full of water; God provide the people with grain, for so God has prepared it. God waters the earth's furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. If that's our God and God can't handle it, well, we're in pretty big trouble after all.

The land of Israel was hard and parched, chaotic and unmanageable, just like our lives sometimes are today. But how does this psalm end? "The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy." But all that is the end of the process of God's caring and nurturing and patience and mercy. It's not like that all the time. Growth is hard work. We have to wait for the seed to sprout and the bud to emerge and the flower to blossom. It doesn't happen now just because we want it to happen now. But it *does* happen eventually, and so we *can* affirm, "Praise is due to you, O God in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answers prayer."

Of all the images in this wonderful psalm, the one that struck me most forcefully was that of God's river, especially in light of an article I read this week about the contaminated water still flowing from that Japanese nuclear accident. It may well be that the entire Pacific Ocean will become too contaminated to fish from, that it will cease to be a place of life. But the Psalmist says, "The river of God is full of water," and that river can never stop bringing life, no matter how much crap we throw in there, no matter how toxic or painful our lives become, no matter how bad it gets. In fact, God invites us to cast our burdens, our fears, our doubts on those waters precisely because they are God's waters, and they are big enough and wide enough and graceful enough and holy enough to continue to give life in the midst of whatever challenges or trials we may be facing. You see, God's river is full of living water, and no one who comes to that water will ever go thirsty.

Tonight I would like to offer you the opportunity to cast your burdens, your fears, your doubts into that glorious river, that living water. On these tables you'll find some rice paper and some markers. I invite those of you who wish to come forward and write on that rice paper what you would like God to handle in your life, and then put it in God's river and see just what happens to them. And for those who may not feel so burdened tonight, I invite you to come forward and write a few words of praise to the God who is worthy of all our praise. Those words you

can take home with you and keep until you need another reminder of just how great is our God, now and forever more. Amen.