

How Long Shall My Enemy Triumph Over Me?

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Psalm 13

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How long, O Lord:

will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

*How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,
and grief in my heart, day after day?*

How long shall my enemy triumph over me?

One of the treasures of my childhood is the album of photos my father took during World War II. These photos begin with basic training at Jefferson Barracks, outside St. Louis, where he pitched on the base team and went into the city to see the Browns and Cardinals play. His parents were visiting him there when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor: they had to leave immediately as the Army Air Corps shifted into high gear.

The last group of photos in his album features troops in New Guinea loading heavy equipment into LST's for the long voyage home. I didn't realize it as a child, but my dad and his fellow airmen on New Guinea had been spared invading Japan when we dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Most intriguing to me were the photos of Japan and the Philippine Islands, exotic places incredibly far from the Upper Peninsula town that was home, and from the beautiful woman my father looked forward to taking as his wife.

I've been thinking about those photos a good bit the last week or two as the Philippines have been much in the news. I'm a news junkie—always have been—and so I check online stories several times a day. This proves useful in my ministry of shaping the weekly prayers of the people so that they reflect accurately the needs and concerns of the world. We

have, of course, prayed for the Philippines in the past, when they were ravaged by Typhoon Yolanda in 2013. The images of the dead haunt me still, their bodies shoved into trenches because there was no time in the suffocating heat to hold proper burials. Now those islands, taken back from the Japanese in 1945 at such cost to the Filipinos and the Allies, and now ruled by a man with an iron fist, are besieged by rebel gunmen who hope to establish themselves as the stronghold for the Islamic State in southeast Asia. In Marawi, a largely Islamic city that is also a provincial capital on Mindanao, the large southern island, rebels have been killing citizens who could not recite verses of the Quran, then tying to their bodies signs proclaiming “traitor.” These islands are a long way from the victory over Japan in 1945; a long way from the presidency of Corazon Aquino, who succeeded her murdered husband in 1988 and led the movement that restored democracy to the islands.

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me.”

It seems that the world is destined to flounder forever, victim to the violence of nature, to the injustice of leaders motivated by their selfish hunger for power, to the brutality of various sects who threaten those who will not bow to their religious or political agendas. I’ve been especially conscious, in these days leading up to the birth of this nation, which was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal,” that we are at war. It’s not a war in the traditional sense: pockets of violence crop up unexpectedly, shaking us with a realization that we are no longer as safe as we once believed we were. In this nation, we are at war among ourselves, flinging angry words at one another, shouting at the images on the evening news. Most of us manage to be civil in public, but others venture beyond shouting to physical violence, as did the man who shot members of Congress at a baseball practice a few weeks ago.

And we are not alone: anger seems the reigning emotion of our world: countries that have always seemed to me safe havens (Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden) have been hit with unspeakable violence. No nation remains immune to assaults on its hard-won liberties.

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me.”

The people of this nation must have asked this question in 1863, in the depths of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln, in his famous address at Gettysburg, a few months after the Union victory there, spoke eloquently of the principles that drove the nation to fight for peace. Commentators of its day gave the speech poor reviews, but it has gone down as one of the best of all time, its words meant to comfort a grieving nation. On this week of our nation’s birthday, I would like to read for you a portion of this tribute to the lofty ideals of our nation’s founders:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. . . . It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they

gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom— and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

As we approach the birthday of our nation—241 years of triumphs and failures—we pray to our Creator to see us, to hear us, to help us keep alive the dream that sustained our founders. And not just us, but every people and nation under the sun as they struggle to govern themselves, to fulfill their dreams, to drive away the forces of evil. The writer of today's psalm does not suggest easy answers to our cries for help, but he does ask us to trust in God's mercy, in God's "saving help." He asks us to believe that the Lord has "dealt with [us] richly." I believe that we are called to act in like manner to all whom we encounter, and so we pray today with one voice for our nation, and for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who struggle for the peace and prosperity that our loving God desires for all creation.

Amen.