

Sermon prepared by Crystal Hall
for St. Lydia's at Trinity Lower East Side Church
New York, NY
31 July 2011
Text: Psalm 9

To tell a story is to remember it. In telling a story, you remember its parts: the beginning, middle and end, and how they're each connected. St. Lydia's story's has many beginnings. It was first conceived as an idea. That idea was birthed into reality in Advent 2008. St. Lydia's first began meeting in a Financial District apartment. After taking those first steps, St. Lydia's began gathering here at Trinity Lower East Side.

This church has a definite sense of place in its story. It's difficult to forget, especially when we worship outside, that this church is across the street from Tompkins Square Park.

The first time I set foot in Tompkins Square Park, I felt that I was walking on sacred ground. As if I should take my shoes off. This may seem odd, as many of New York City's public parks have a decidedly secular quality about them. It was already dark at 6:30 on a February Sunday. That night I decided to leave my shoes on. I noticed the rats rummaging through the garbage cans, the smell of that enormous dog park, and the lights glaring from the brick pavilion. I also noticed that I felt as though I was paying my respects. This surprised me. I felt the kind of reverence I feel when I visit the grave of a family member. Standing beside a grave is, for me, a moment to remember. It is a reminder of where I've come from.

Walking through the park that first night evoked my sacred memory. Before I even knew it, the story of this place was becoming part of my story. Just the month before I had read excerpts from Ron Casanova's autobiography *Each One, Teach One*. Cas' story didn't begin in this park. But he wound up here, homeless, in the summer of 1989. He writes of his experience that summer:

Our community grew, and we soon gave it the name 'Tent City.'...It started as a place where people came because they needed a place to stay...Tent City was open to anyone and everyone who rejected the city's so-called solutions to homelessness. We had a slogan: 'No Housing, No Peace.' Now that did not mean that we wanted a violent confrontation with the authorities. That meant we were not going to allow ourselves to be quietly put out of sight and mind in jails or dangerous shelters.¹

Cas and many others were thrust into a struggle for survival in the summer of 1989. The police and the Parks Department conducted over a dozen raids on the 300 to 350 people sleeping in Tompkins Square Park on any given night.

Cas emerged a natural leader in attack after attack. The homeless people in the park organized themselves. They fed hundreds of people in the neighborhood with food donated to them. They redistributed the donated clothing they received. They began handing out information about the Tent City, poverty, and access to social services at the entrance of the park over on Avenue A.

Tent City soon became part of an organization called the Nation Union of the Homeless. Cas was catapulted into leadership on the national stage. At its height, the National Union of the Homeless had over 20 local chapters and 15,000 members in cities across the US. Under the slogan, “Homeless, Not Helpless,” the Homeless Union organized in ways in which the poor and homeless thought for themselves, spoke for themselves, and produced from their ranks capable and creative leaders like Cas.

When I walked through Tompkins Square Park that first night I knew a little of that history, enough to appreciate how much I didn’t know. Since then I’ve spent part of my work with the Poverty Initiative, at Union Theological Seminary, coordinating the Homeless Union History Project. I’ve delved far deeper into this untold story. There’s no plaque or memorial to the righteous history of struggle that’s taken place in Tompkins Square Park, to the people that have died there. And yet its story is part of my story. Because of my commitments to building a movement to end poverty, I am becoming a part of that story.

In tonight’s psalm we read,

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, /
nor shall the hope of the poor be taken away.

As many of you know, I’ve been taking an intensive course in biblical Hebrew this summer. The Hebrew word for the Psalms is the *Tehillim*, which means “praises.” Psalm 9 is both an individual psalm of praise, and a prayer for help from an individual in crisis. This psalm is an acrostic, which means that each stanza begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Aleph. Beit. Gimmel. Dalet. He. And it goes on. (Ask me to sing the alphabet song later...) But this alphabetical form doesn’t stop at the end of Psalm 9. It continues into Psalm 10. Psalm 9 and 10 were originally the same psalm, but were later separated.

These psalms share similar themes of the rescue of the poor from their enemies, and God’s judgment of the world. In this psalm God is not the divine Judge that will appear at the end of time. In the tradition of the Psalms, God is the ruler of the universe, the judge of the nations. God hears the cry of the poor and sees injustice, even when it seems that no one is paying attention.

We don’t know the poet’s story. We don’t know why the poet is both crying out for deliverance from her enemies, or from what he has already been delivered. We don’t know the causes of the poet’s suffering. Yet there is a deep connection between the personal and the universal held in tension in this psalm. God both judges the entire world and listens to the prayer of an individual.

In this psalm there is an expectation that God will grant specific requests. In the world of the Hebrew Bible, this would have been a prayer for actual, visible intervention. It was a prayer for tangible things like bread and protection. If this psalm were written today, it might be from someone facing eviction, or from someone who doesn’t know where he’s going to sleep tonight. If the poet were writing today, she might be worried whether she’ll qualify for food stamps, or be able to find a job in a country where an almost 10% unemployment rate is becoming “the new normal.”

The National Union of the Homeless organized with the slogan, “You’re Only One Paycheck Away From Homelessness.” More and more people today are one medical crisis, one student loan payment, or one last unemployment benefit check away from homelessness. This is part of our story today, as individuals and as the Church. We are each bound up in this story as a community, whether we have directly experienced poverty or not.

Part of God’s story in this psalm is that God is revealed in acts of justice. God hears the cries of the poor and does not forget them. God calls us to hear and to not forget.

To remember a story is to tell it. Tompkins Square Park and Trinity Lower East Side are part of our story as a community. They are reminders of where we come from. They can sink deeply into the wells of our sacred memory. I invite you, as we move to The Church of the Redeemer in Brooklyn this fall, to tell our story. Tell the story of St. Lydia’s. Tell your own story. And in telling them, remember where you come from.

ⁱ Casanova, Ronald and Stephen Blackburn. *Each One, Teach One Up And Out Of Poverty: Memoirs of a Street Activist*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1996. 127.