

It's fair to say that the author of Psalm 55 is in distress. That's obvious not only by the descriptions of personal anguish that mark the psalm end-to-end but also by the abrupt, chaotic way the text itself is laid out.

It starts with familiar complaints heard in psalms of lament. Enemies are all around, turmoil and violence runs riot through the streets of the city, nature itself seems threatening with its "raging wind and tempest."

But then, out of the blue in v.8, the lament shifts gears; grinds gears would be more accurate, because the psalmist blurts out: "It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that...". No, the author continues, "it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend..." who has betrayed me.

And so we come, the Sunday before Holy Week, to a topic that will dominate those seven days – betrayal. Of course, we know that the religious and political plot to betray Jesus began long before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The scribes and priests were looking for an opening to take Jesus down even before he left Galilee so threatening to their self-interest was his presence and his message.

But alongside that ongoing plot of the Temple authorities, all the gospels within their first few chapters go out of their way to identify specifically who will betray Jesus -- Judas. In those early chapters they don't describe what Judas eventually will do, they just attach the label to him, "traitor." So long before Jesus and the disciples approach Jerusalem, and the Temple authorities and Roman thugs shift into high gear, the stage has been set for one of the most odious crimes and sins that can be committed, stabbing a friend, literally or figuratively, in the back.

Turning to our text for this morning, it was hundreds of years earlier that Psalm 55 vividly communicated the stomach-churning pain that only betrayal can bring, the same emotions we experience as we stumble through Holy Week. The villain of the psalm, after all, is identified as the one "with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God."

That would-be companion is in fact someone "who attacks his friends, violates his covenant." The offender's actions are recalled with piercing accuracy: "His speech is smoother than butter; yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords." Judas himself could not be better described.

It's quite a portrait of double-dealing that Psalm 55 paints, and it resonates not only with the troubling events that begin a week from now, on Palm Sunday, but I think in our experience broadly.

Think about it. How often is betrayal depicted in popular culture? Has there been a soap opera since the beginning of television that has not featured infidelity on a daily basis? Is that not the lifeblood of TV's dramatic confrontations involving cuckolded husband or cheated-upon wife?

Or think of the soap operas of an earlier age, like Shakespeare's plays. Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Julius Caesar – that one with the signature line, "Et tu, Brute," – all of them have treachery at their core -- betrayals of friend, family, leader, or country.

I can tell you from my own experience in the intelligence business that the most feared – and the most repulsive – act one of your colleagues can commit is treason, to sell out your friends, your agency, and your country and violate your oath to keep secret things secret. Many a spy novel and film is built on just how corruption of a person's loyalty comes about, and the disastrous and destructive effects that follow.

So what Psalm 55 plays out before our eyes is timeless human behavior. And while the reasons one person might betray another are near infinite, one thing the psalmist points to in his circumstances is that his faithless friend has no fear of God. The person who participated in the festivals of the temple is flying a false flag; religion has no meaning and friendship has no bonds, and at the center of it is the betrayer's indifference toward, or maybe even, contempt for, God.

This makes the pain of betrayal all the more acute for the petitioner. The psalmist looked to his companion as an upholder of the faith, a religious connection that amplified and deepened the friendship he thought he shared. It intensifies the sting of treachery, drives it even further into the heart. Nevertheless, Psalm 55 closes with an affirmation of trust in God, proclaiming eventual deliverance of the petitioner, and assuring justice for the offender: "...You, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit."

"The lowest pit..." I don't know if Dante had that concluding verse in mind when he wrote "The Inferno" segment of The Divine Comedy, but it certainly resonates with everything Psalm 55 has to say. Because for Dante, betrayal was the worst sin of all, and it's why he consigned traitors to the ninth, and lowest, circle of hell, where Satan himself is held captive. Populating this gloomiest province of hell are betrayers of family, of country, and of mentors and benefactors. And right there alongside Satan, in Dante's imaginative work, is Judas.

In Lent we do a lot of meditating about sin and the disfiguring of the bond between God and humanity. But none of the offenses against good and right carries quite the wallop of betrayal. The reason for that will become abundantly clear next week, when denial, treachery, and abandonment will be constants of the story the gospels have to tell. All of which will echo with a warning against this most heinous crime: do not a betrayer be. Amen.

1 Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea;
2 hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
3 because of what my enemy is saying, because of the threats of the wicked; for they
bring down suffering on me and assail me in their anger.
4 My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me.
5 Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.
6 I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.
7 I would flee far away and stay in the desert;
8 I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."
9 Lord, confuse the wicked, confound their words, for I see violence and strife in the
city.
10 Day and night they prowl about on its walls; malice and abuse are within it.
11 Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets.
12 If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were rising against me, I
could hide.
13 But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend,
14 with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship at the house of God, as we walked about
among the worshippers.
15 Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the realm of the
dead, for evil finds lodging among them.
16 As for me, I call to God, and the LORD saves me.
17 Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.
18 He rescues me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many
oppose me.
19 God, who is enthroned from of old, who does not change— he will hear them and
humble them, because they have no fear of God.
20 My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant.
21 His talk is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than
oil, yet they are drawn swords.
22 Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous
be shaken.
23 But you, God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of decay; the bloodthirsty and
deceitful will not live out half their days. But as for me, I trust in you.