

“What a second chance looks like”

A sermon shared on March 15, 2015 by Catherine Somerville

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind, that when asked, not one of you would say that Psalm 107 is your all time favourite psalm. If asked, you would likely speak of Psalm 121 for its picture of majesty.... I lift up mine eyes to the hills... or you might speak of the adoration revealed in Psalm 139 ... Lord you have searched me and known me, you knit me together in my mother's womb, I am fearfully and wonderfully made, or Psalm 23 for its vision of hope... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Or even Psalm 1; Blessed are those who delight in the following the ways of God.

But Psalm 107 is not going to be on anyone's top pick list. That is, until now. My job this morning, is to convince you that this is a psalm is worth paying attention to, and I know I will have accomplished my job if at least one of you tells me when you leave today that Psalm 107 is now your hands down favourite psalm. So, that is my challenge.

It begins at the point where all good worship must start.... With a word of praise about the nature of God. “O give thanks for God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.” Then it moves into the reason why this psalm is so noteworthy. It offers up a picture of real life. Any of us can understand what this psalm is about because we have been there. It is the lament of one who has made a mistake, and now is afraid to look themselves in the mirror, for they know the sense of disappointment, embarrassment and even shame. We have all been there. Here is how the psalmist says it: “Some wandered as if in the deserts, alone and hungry and thirsty. Their troubles were so horrible that they were reduced to tears. Their hearts were broken by the distress of what they had done wrong. It was like sitting in the dark, and being a prisoner to misery. It was as if they had fallen and no one came along to offer a hand up. Their bodies grew weak and they felt as though they were going to die. They were left broken and alone.”

This is the point where God becomes known. At this place of deepest darkness, the writer called out to God, and God hears their cries. We are told how God

raises up the needy and strengthens families. God turns the deserts into pools of water. The hungry live. They find a place to call home.

This is the juncture between need and gratitude, for those who have never suffered truly appreciate God as much as those who have lived through hardship. The verse that is echoed three times in this psalm says it all: Let the people give thanks to the Lord for God's unfailing love, and his wonderful deeds for the people.

Psalm 107 is the psalm written for those who believe in second chances. Just as we know despair, so we also can tell stories of the person who forgave us when we did something horrible. We yearn for the freedom that comes when told that we can try again. There are parts in all of our lives, where we wait in longing, to hear the assurance "you can do it", of knowing that someone loves you enough to see beyond the mistake, and to move beyond the words of remorse. This is not a psalm for those who live with the maxim, "I will forgive you, but I will never forget." This is a different kind of wisdom, which teaches that there is a place where letting go and moving on is so much more life-giving than being stuck in shame. This is the story of a second chance offered.

I invite you to hold that idea for a few moments, listen as it echoes off these walls, and hear it resonating in your heart, as I tell you a story that demonstrates this psalm in all its wonder. The story I am going to tell you is not mine. It was written up in a MacLean's magazine about a year ago. More than many stories about the second chance, this one left an impression on me that I have not been able to forget.

Here is the article. And I can't help but acknowledge, that it took place in the Easter season of hope.

The bones of this story can be told in two deceptively simple sentences written by Margot Van Slightman, a poet who lives in Calgary with her two daughters and the memories of a father stolen from her on an Easter Monday, 35 years ago. She wrote, "The man, Glen Flett, who murdered my dad, wrote to me. And I chose to respond."

The man, Glen Flett, who murdered Ted Van Slightman at a Hudson's Bay store in Scarborough, Ontario, told his story in a Greek restaurant in Mission, British

Columbia, where he now lives. He is 63 years old, more than one-third of his years spent in Canadian prisons.

The evidence is written in deep creases cross-hatching his face. The truth though, is that Flett looks better than he had in years. He seems younger, healthier, and lighter in spirit. He told the story of Margot Van Slightman, and the unlikely kinship that they have developed over the past two years via a steady email correspondence and a few powerful face to face meetings.

“It’s strange”, says Flett: “Victims and offenders have a huge amount in common.”

What Flett and Van Slightman share is the memory of Ted Van Slightman, who worked in the menswear department at the Bay. He had moved his family to Canada in 1969. He thought they would be safe here. Margot was 16 when her dad died. There were three younger children and Ted’s wife in the family.

Flett’s memories of Ted Van Slightman consist of a frantic ten or twenty seconds on the afternoon of April 27, 1978. Time enough for a tussle, as Van Slightman, then 40, stepped into his path as Flett and an accomplice, fled after robbing a Brink’s guard at the store’s cash deposit. Time enough for the accomplice to shoot Van Slightman in the back, as Flett shot him point blank in the left front shoulder. Time enough to hear him cry out and fall unconscious to the floor. “I was 27, but I probably looked 20,” Flett says. “I’ll never forget when he grabbed hold of me, and said, “Give it up, son. It’s not worth it.”

It was actually Sherry Flett who send “the email”, as Margot calls it, the one that set her and Glen on a path of reconciliation. It was a bit of an accident, but Sherry is a strong woman with a way of cutting through the garbage to get things done. She had married Glen when he was still in prison, 22 years ago. He had turned his life around, and embraced Christianity. He was paroled in 1992, and he founded an organization that helps inmates move into the community in Mission, BC. He worked long and hard, so hard, that he came close to burning out and one night the police pulled him over for speeding. He was drunk and there was a handgun in the car. The judge who sentenced him the second time called him a ticking time bomb. In his sentencing, the judge told Flett to let go of the mistakes of the past, adding, “He is riddled, addled, and saddled with guilt, some of which

he should be, some of which he is carrying when he shouldn't." The ghosts of the past had to be confronted.

Sherry learned from a friend that Margot Van Slightman was a poet, a publisher, and a writing coach who emphasized the power of words to bring healing and therapy. Years before, when he was in prison, Glen Flett had contacted Margot's family, but he discovered the family wanted nothing to do with him.

Sherry sent an anonymous donation to the organization Margot worked for. Somehow Margot found out about the donor. She wrote back and asked if Sherry was related to the man who had killed her father.

"You've put your foot in it now," Glen Flett told his wife. "Now you have to respond."

Sherry wrote back: "I am married to Glen Flett. I am sorry if I have offended or hurt you in any way."

And that is how the correspondence began, tentatively at first, with Sherry acting as the intermediary. Finally, Glen wrote directly:

Dear Ms. Van Slightman;

I read your words and truthfully I am without words. For so long, I have prayed for this moment. Every day I pray that somehow you and your family have been able to move on from the despicable thing I did. Every day I say I am sorry but it never seems enough. I don't expect you to ever forgive me, but I so hope that your wounds are healing. I would like you to know that I have put my whole heart into being a different man than I was."

Margot Van Slightman believes in words, but she didn't know what to make of these words. Ever since her father died, she has used words to try and come to terms with the terrible pain that has filled her life. Before there were words, she overdosed on pills, struggled at school, and divorced. Until she began to write, she could not let go of the pain of her dad's death.

Finally, she decided that she had lived too long with grief. She needed this connection. She wanted her life back. So Margot Van Slightman, victim, decided to meet Glen Flett, murderer.

They met on July 14, 2013 at a Benedictine monastery above Mission BC. Sherry picked Margot up at the airport and delivered her to Glen.

Margot remembers it this way. She said, "You must be Glen Flett.

And he said "Yes."

And I said, "I am Margot Van Slightman. And we looked at each other and we started to cry. And we hugged. And we cried for awhile, and he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

And I said, "I know. I believe you."

There have been a few meetings since. It took 30 years to meet one of her father's killers, to get her questions answered, and see they were both locked in a sentence running since April 27, 1978. She accepted his apology at the abbey because she needed the release as much as he did. And today, they would both safely say that they are living a miracle.

Do not let the past control your present. That is what Psalm 107 is all about. When we feel as if we are suffocating under the pain from the past, God is near and waiting. Paul summed it up in that section he wrote in the letter to the Ephesians. God, who is rich in mercy, in love, has offered us life in Christ. By grace we have been saved. It is not of our own doing, but it is a gift from God. We were created for good, which God has prepared beforehand to be to us a way of life.

To those of us who live with anger, to those of us who do not think we can move on, know that God offers another way. "Let the people give thanks for God's unfailing love- a love that looks beyond what we have done or not done, a steadfast love that pardons and forgives, a love that endures forever."