

“A Place for Pessimism”
Psalm 90: 1-12

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If you are on Facebook or spend time reading online news sources, chances are you have become aware of a new style of journalism. Gone is the long-form essay or human interest newspaper articles of yesteryear—if you want to be published or you want your work to be read by a wide audience, it needs to be written in the form of a listicle. Listicle is a made up word describing a list article. Listicles follow a strict form. You might recognize some of their titles:

- ▲ 10 Ways to Know You Are Introverted
- ▲ 12 Places You Have to Visit in 2015
- ▲ 7 Things You Should Be Eating That You Aren't
- ▲ 5 Ways You Are Ruining Your Child's Life

I see this style of article pop up daily in my email news recaps and from my Facebook friends. This style of pairing a numbered list on a boldly stated topic can cover just about any aspect of our lives—and thanks to its recent booming popularity it probably has. These articles full of lists are not new—late night hosts have been creating top 10 lists for decades—but in the last year they have taken on a new zealotry in mainstream media. They have begun to represent a list that is selling an absolute truth, something we must know in this moment and that we can't possibly live without reading and absorbing for another second.

List articles, have become such a widespread style of writing that other writers have started to make fun of them, but still, they keep appearing in news sites and blogs because it works. When we see those bold titles staring at us—claiming 5 New Ways To Achieve Happiness or 7 Secrets to Everlasting Life—we click on them. We read them. We share them. I don't fault the countless authors who continue to exploit this style of writing—I have been guilty of using them in my own writing. Instead, I'm left

wondering what it says about us readers.

It intrigues me that we keep reading these articles—knowing deep down they probably won't change our lives or deliver the in depth information their titles promise—but still we keep hopefully reading them. It makes sense. There is so much uncertainty in the world, in our lives, and in the rest of the news. Stories typically unfold in fragments and pieces, leaving us on the edge and worried, having to fill in the blanks for ourselves lest we succumb to the stress of the unknown. We yearn for something of certitude to bring clarity and wisdom to the things we are witnessing or experiencing.

Take Ebola for example. This fall I heard stories about how easy it is to get Ebola, what the warning signs are that you might have it, what parts of the United States it was appearing and what places were predicted to have the next outbreak. But a lot of the news was circumspect and hearsay. They fed us morsels of facts and left our imaginations, which ran wild, to fill in the blanks. The whole Ebola outbreak was and is filled with unknowns, which caused panic, stress, concern, and fear. They told us just enough to freak out the public but not enough for us to feel equipped or prepared.

Now, I guarantee you that if, at the height of the fear of Ebola spreading to our communities, someone had written an article called “29 Ways You Can Be Guaranteed Not To Contract Ebola” Or “12 Ways To Fight The Ebola Outbreak” it would have trumped any other news story on the same subject. It appears definitive. It gives us answers we crave. It fills in the blanks and puts us at ease, even if it didn't actually provide practical advice or even if, like every other news article, it had no way to guarantee anything.

In our uncertain world, we look to sources that confidently state that they have the answers. We look for definitive responses. We look for clarity. We are eager to accept things as the capital T Truth so that we can be put at ease. We long to escape the anxiety and discomfort of our daily experiences—having to live in the grey because so little is actually black and white.

In our search for certainty, we are drawn to things, like lists, that clearly show us how to live or what to believe. I think this desire for clarity and cohesion also extends to sources like the Bible. Often,

we approach the scriptures, seeking God and looking for answers. If we can just find the right verse or the right story our predicament will be illuminated. Our struggles will be resolved. Our questions will be answered and all will be alright. And sometimes, that works, There are a lot of verses that bring us comfort and relief—a lot of stories that we return to when we need to be reminded of God's presence or our purpose in a particular way. And, sometimes that works.

Then, other times, you encounter scriptures like Psalm 90. Psalm 90 which starts to beautifully with a reminder that God is our dwelling place and God's existence has surpassed our understanding or experience of time—God is everlasting and will be everlasting. Such a comforting thought. But before we can get too dreamy eyed about God's presence, the Psalmist takes a sharp turn and says of God,

All our days pass away under your wrath. Our years come to an end like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger?

Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

To recap: we have wrath, toil, trouble, the power of God's anger, and more wrath with a side of fear.

Who wants to hear that?? What kind of reminder is that for us readers?? As a modern day Biblical reader and Christian believer, I can tell you that God's wrath and anger is the last thing I want to hear about or the last thing I want to read as a Bible devotional before attempting to go to sleep at night.

This Psalm, and other scriptures like it, can be jarring or make us uneasy because we really want it to be a definitive answer to our hard questions. We want it to assuage our fears and let us know that God has a plan, and that plan is a good one. We want it to be like our modern listicles giving us the “10 Reasons We Know God Love's Us and Protects Us from Harm.” Instead, the Psalm is doing something very different.

Psalms weren't written by the experts. They weren't written by journalists hoping to convey an absolute truth or shed impartial light on the Holy Creator. Psalms are poetry, and poems often say as

much with words as they do by leaving things out—Psalms are all about capturing our imaginations and helping us dive deeper into our feelings, leaving logic and reason behind.

These poems, these Psalms, were written by people very similar to us—people concerned for their futures, concerned for the world, seeking sense and reason for the hardships they have encountered, hoping for a clear sign from God, and when they don't receive it, deciding that God must not be happy with them. It is not meant to be impartial. It is not meant to be factual. It is not meant to be authoritative.

This Psalm in particular is a lament—the cry of an anguished person. To imagine what place the Psalmist might have been in when this was written—imagine the feelings of someone pacing the ICU waiting room, waiting to hear if their loved one will live through the night or succumb to their disease. Imagine the feelings of a family whose country is torn by war, who escapes their house under cover of night knowing that to be a refugee means never to return to their home. Imagine those unspeakable places of pain and sorrow, and we can begin to imagine the lament of the Psalmist.

This Psalm isn't about answers. It isn't about clarity. It is about sorrow. It is about trying to make sense of the incomprehensible tragedies and private pain that all humans, at some point and in some form, walk through.

This Psalm takes us by surprise and leaves us with an unappreciated level of discomfort because we start reading it in the same way we read list articles, hoping to be enlightened and enlivened—hoping that we will walk away more prepared, more knowledgeable than we previously were. Psalms serve a different purpose. Psalms are meant to open our hearts up, to peer into our wounds, to watch the tears fall from our face, and to remind us that we are not alone. To remind us that we are not the only ones with anguish. To remind us that we are not the only ones who have doubted or questioned or cursed God's very being.

In our modern world, we don't pay a lot of attention to the Psalms, skipping them in favor of colorful stories with obvious heroes where God swoops in and saves the day. In times of pain and

sorrow, we pass the Bible by all together, instead looking to comfort and clarity from numbered lists, declaring that they have 5 Ways To Make Sure You Never Falter or Stumble Again. But I've now read enough of these to begin to realize that though they might have easy answers, though they might make feel better for a moment, they haven't fixed my problems. They haven't cured those places of grief that dwell in my heart.

If, like me, you are starting to become suspect of the usefulness of listicles, of endlessly numbered lists, I would invite you back to the Psalms. Back to poetry that doesn't seek to define or clarify, but instead acts as a mirror—naming the pain and grief and the anger that we have encountered in our own lives or witnessed in people close to us. The Psalms don't try to impartially describe the nature of God—wrath or anger is not seen as an absolute, but instead it lifts up the innermost feelings of someone in the time of their deepest pain. It echoes the same questions and doubts that we ourselves have asked—not looking for a definitive answer but just longing to be heard. It doesn't erase the pain or wipe away our tears but instead it reminds us, it reminds you, you are not alone. There are others who have journeyed this road before you, and who will journey alongside you. There are others who know what this feels like, and we will be there with you through the pain and into the light. Amen.