April 2, 2017

Psalm 130

One of the things I’ve learned about the Psalm we just read is how profoundly it has spoken to people over the centuries:

* It was a favorite of Martin Luther, the great Reformer—Luther counted it among his favorite Psalms, having heard Psalm 130 sung--during a time of deep depression in his life—found that it lifted him from the depths—even became the Psalm sung at his funeral…
* It was true for John Wesley, the founder of Methodism—who also heard it sung—then went and read it—and found that it helped him reject the legalism of his upbringing—came to embrace the truth that we are saved “by faith alone”—that, as verse three has it, “If God keeps score of our sin, why, who can stand?” But thanks be to God, he’s a God of forgiveness (v. 4). It’s that truth that there’s nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there’s nothing we can do to make God love us less—God just loves… And knowing that turned John Wesley upside down, and inside out…
* And I can hear these words as a backdrop of one of our favorite hymns… Thomas Dorsey--known as the “Father of Black Gospel Music”—watched his beloved wife, Nettie, die in childbirth--only to have their baby die two days later--so that out of the depths of that grief he wrote, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand—*what would become one of the most beloved spirituals in the English language. And when I hear (especially) the second verse, I think of the 130th Psalm… Listen as Sandy sings that stanza…

So, God has spoken through these words; and God is still speaking through them…

I don’t know what you hear when you hear the word “depths”—that verse for which this Psalm is most known: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.* It’s usually a metaphor for trouble, “depths” is... Economists talk about the depths of a recession--therapists about the depths of depression, of human grief—diplomats may refer to the depths of an international crisis. You go down into the depths, right?—have to get back out—you come down with the flu—get down in the mouth—down in the dumps—down for the count—down on your luck—down to the wire (and I’ve finally run out of idioms, for this!) We sometimes talk about getting “in too deep.” Ever get to feeling that depth? What was that post making its way around Facebook this week:



(And thank you for all you who posted that one!)

But the Psalmist doesn’t wallow, here—doesn’t just roll around in the mud of the depths—no, this is somebody who cries out to God—somebody who demands to be heard… And I find that significant. I mean, doesn’t it just go against the grain of our more natural instinct? We find ourselves going down the tubes (OK—I promise that’s the last one!)--but the last thing we want to do when we’re down is turn to God, right?—we’d rather complain—rather grumble—which is the difference between our natural instinct and the faith of the Psalmist. See, crying out to God is actually an expression of faith—it is profound faith. In fact, our English word “depths” in Latin is the word *profundis*—the word from which we get our word, “profound.” Crying out is profound, because it shows that the shouter has faith—faith that God is present, faith that God hears, faith that God is willing and able to act. And our crying out to God is what keeps hope alive—means the shame or the hopelessness of our situation--what so often silences us—that gets turned inside out and upside down: “Lord, hear my voice!” It means that if you have somehow gotten the idea that God is offended by your shouting—that God can’t handle your raised voice—that God somehow prefers that you just suffer in silence—well, keep shouting—because God can handle it! (Oh, yeah…)

So, that’s the first word, here—we “cry out…” But then what? Well, we wait, that’s what—we wait—and what does it mean to wait? We’re not told to wait patiently, here—or how long we’re expected to wait—or how we’re supposed to know what we’re waiting for—just “wait”—period--which is hard. I can tell you that one of the loneliest places on earth is the family waiting room--outside surgery at the hospital. (Ever been there?) “Wait here—the doctor will call you when it’s over.” Or I think of a family separated from a loved one—separated by military service, say—waiting for a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, to come home. Somebody’s waiting for a house to sell so they can move closer to family—waiting for a lab report—waiting for a jury verdict—waiting for justice--waiting for forgiveness… It’s hard.

A man named Lawrence Ferlinghetti just turned 98 years old last week. Mr. Ferlinghetti is a poet and activist—began writing in the 1950s--wrote about the plight of the individual in a mass society—how easy it is to get lost—wrote about the dream and betrayal of democracy that too many people in this world experience. So you can imagine his work having been so very threatening to the keepers of the status quo—got him in a heap of trouble over the years… But listen to a slice of one of his poems, one he titled, *I Am Waiting*:

*I am waiting for my case to come up—waiting for a rebirth of wonder--waiting for somebody to really discover America… I am waiting for the American Eagle to spread its wings—to “straighten up and fly right”—waiting for a rebirth of wonder…*

*I am waiting for a religious revival--to sweep thru the state of Arizona—waiting for the grapes of wrath to be stored—waiting for the last supper to be served again-- waiting for a rebirth of wonder…*

*I am waiting for my number to be called—waiting for the meek to be blessed--and inherit the earth--without taxes… I am waiting for a way to be devised to destroy all nationalisms--without killing anybody--waiting for the great divide to be crossed—waiting for the storms of life to be over (so I can) set sail for happiness… I am waiting for a reconstructed Mayflower to reach America--the TV rights sold in advance to the natives--and I am waiting for a new rebirth of wonder--a renaissance of wonder.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I don’t know what you’re waiting for, this morning—but God calls us to “wait in his word” (verse 5 says). For apparently, that’s where the hope lies… It means we don’t just wait idly—to “wait in his word” means we keep seeking, keep watching, keep inquiring. And here’s the thing: we do not wait alone. Because I don’t know if you noticed, but the Psalm goes from singular to plural at the end—for six verses it’s “I and my,” but now the psalmist stretches it out: O Israel, hope in the Lord” (v. 7); for “it is God who will redeem Israel from all their sins” (v. 8). It’s what the Bible is so clear about, time and again—that the life of faith is never intended to be lived as a solo—we are in this together—and when one member of the community is in the depths—when one has to wait, and agonize, when one is left to wonder if God‘s ever gonna show up—we wait with them. Because our God is about the business of redeeming whole communities, whole families—is a steadfast loving God, a powerful God, a redeeming God—so that we dare not underestimate the power of God’s love…

There’s a story I sometimes tell at funerals—one I’ve always been moved by--something Robert Fulgham wrote (back when he first told us that everything we really need to know we learned in Kindergarten).[[2]](#footnote-2) But he was looking out his window one evening--neighborhood kids were playing hide and seek. “How long since I played hide and seek?” he asked himself. “Thirty years; maybe more. I remember how--could get in the game in a heartbeat, if invited... But adults don’t play hide and seek--not for fun, anyway. Too bad…

Did you ever have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good nobody could find him? We did. After a while we’d give up on him--go off--leave him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he’d show up, all mad ‘cause we didn’t keep looking for him. And we’d be mad back ‘cause he wasn’t playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. ‘There’s hiding and there’s finding we’d say.’ And he’d say it was hide and seek, not hide and give up! Hide and seek and yell.”

Well, the neighborhood game went on--and Fulgham saw this kid under a pile of leaves, just beneath his window--had been there a long time--everybody else found--the other kids about to give up on him… He says, “I thought about going out and just telling them where he was--thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled out the window, ‘GET FOUND, KID!’—and scared him so bad he probably wet his pants--started crying--ran home to tell his momma. It’s real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes…”

And then Fulgham says this: “A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer--was a doctor—and knew about dying--didn’t want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret--and died. People said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence--to not tell anybody... But privately, his family and friends said how angry they were—angry that he didn’t need them, didn’t trust their strength. And it hurt—hurt that he never said goodbye… He hid too well, don’t you see… Getting found would have kept him in the game—hide and seek, grown-up style. ‘I don’t want anybody to know; what will people think--don’t want to bother anybody.’

So, ‘Olly-olly-oxen-free’—what kids say at the end of the game--the cry that says ‘Come on in--wherever you are--it’s a new game.’ And so say I--to anybody who’s hid too good: ‘Get found, kid! Olly-olly-oxen-free…’”

You see, the faith Jesus calls us to is a faith that’s shared—a sharing that begins not with what we do for God, but with what God has done for us. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, learn from me; and you’ll find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy, my burden is light.” And we do that together--we find that rest together… It’s Jesus’ way of reminding us that those who please God--those who experience the rest of God--are not those carrying the heaviest loads, but are those willing to share their loads--willing to share their yokes--by entering into a relationship with the One whose invitation is always and forever, and by entering into a relationship with his family…

**Prayer**: Lord, I pray that you would open unto us:

* light for our darkness
* and courage for our fear
* and hope for our despair
* and peace for our turmoil
* and joy for our sorrow
* and strength for our weakness
* and forgiveness for our sin
* and love for our hatred
* and Thy self for ourselves…

~~ Paraphrased from a prayer of Howard Thurman

1. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “I Am Waiting” from *A Coney Island of the Mind*, 1958, New Directions Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *All I Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, Robert Fulgham, Villard Books: 1986, pp. 56-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)