

Psalm 13

Today is the second week of five that we are devoting to the Book of Psalms. Let's review what we learned last week: Psalms imitate life by moving from "orientation" through "disorientation" and then to "new orientation." The psalms of "orientation" sing the faith of Israel. The orientation psalm says that this world is the loving creation of the Creator. It sings that we walk daily through a creation that God loves, and that God loves us. God's character is marked by "steadfast love" and "faithfulness."

The Psalms of orientation see God as always good and faithful. His Torah, or Law, is always just. The world is viewed as a stable, fair, and orderly place. God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. These are prayers of joy, peace, and contentment with God, helping us express a life of simple faith and deep trust.

The second type of Psalms are psalms of "disorientation" or psalms of lament, when our world has crumbled under our feet. They express anguish, betrayal, confusion, and self-pity. They question whether or not God is as good as we believed, whether the world is as fair and orderly as we imagined. There is still faith, but there are also many deep and troubling questions. These psalms or songs come from the long, dark nights of the soul, when God seems absent and our world makes no sense.

The third kind of psalm is a type of praise Psalm known as "psalms of new orientation." They follow a time when God's people have experienced disorientation,

have come through the crisis, and God has surprised them on the other side of their ordeal with new gifts and blessings and insights into God's faithfulness. These are Psalms about coming out of darkness into light, death emerging from life. This kind of prayer can only be prayed by someone who has come through a dark and lonely season of life, and realized that God had never left their side.

Today's psalm is a psalm of disorientation – a prayer for when the bottom drops out. It is a prayer for help, which is the most common type of psalm. Roughly, one-third of the psalms are prayers for help. These psalms are cried “out of the depths” or when “the waters have come up to my neck”. As such, these psalms give expression to the deepest moments of human pain. But, they do so in a way which claims the promise of God's presence in the midst of our suffering and also the promise that God-who-is-with-us will preserve us from evil and bring us to a new day when the sun will rise and light will dawn.

An important part of these psalms is the expression of anger, confusion, questioning and despair. These psalms also express trust - “I trusted in your steadfast love,” and they promise to praise God once the crisis has passed – “I will sing to the Lord.” These psalms of disorientation admit that life is not as well-ordered as a simple Sunday School faith may pretend. They acknowledge that life is really messy, and they protest to heaven that things should not be as they are. And these psalms through prayer, evoke action from God – they help move the sufferer to a new place.

In corporate worship, we tend to focus on the positive emotions. After all, praise and thanksgiving are key elements of worship and they are definitely happy. However, it is important to acknowledge the dark times in our lives as well. God is not only present in our “highs” but also our “lows.”

Sadly, everyone encounters some sort of trouble in their lives. It’s important to teach and remind each other that these times can be opportunities for faith formation. God guided the forebears of our faith to the faith practice of lament when they experienced loss, suffering, and sadness. We practice lament when we complain to God about all that has upset us . We bring all of the injustice, suffering, and pain in the larger world or our own world before God in tears and angry shouts. We dump the wreckage of life, hope, and love at God’s feet and cry or wail or scream or sit in stunned silence.

Most of us did not grow up thinking it was appropriate to yell, complain, or despair before God. We could ask for God’s help, but leave the negative emotions buried inside. So, how is lament a faith formation practice?

Lament is a biblical practice. Besides today’s Psalm, there are many other passages, psalms, and an entire book of Lament in the Bible. Our ancestors of the faith not only believed it was appropriate to lament, but also that these laments were inspired enough to make it into our canon of Scripture.

But, simply knowing that God is with us, when in the depths of despair, is not always enough so we ask - Where is God? A couple of ten-year-old boys known for

getting in trouble at school were accused of stealing the teacher's cell phone that she had left on her desk. The principal called the boys to his office. Wanting to question them separately he brought them in one at a time. Without coming right out and telling them why he called them to the office, he only said: "Tell me what happened."

The first little boy said, "I don't know." The principal repeated the question again: "Tell me what happened and I want the truth." Again the boy repeated the same answer. The principal, growing frustrated, said in disgust, "Where is God?" Feeling defeated he sent the first boy out and called for the second boy hoping to get some information out of him. As the first boy passed the second boy coming in he told him, "We're in big trouble." The second boy said, "Yeah, why?" The first boy said, "God is missing and they think we took him."

That may be a funny story, but a serious question – have you ever gone through a time in your life when you asked yourself "Where is God?" ... a time in your life in which God seemed distant? ... when God seemed far away? ... when you felt dry and empty spiritually?

You pray, but God doesn't seem to answer. You read the Bible, but it does not speak to you. You seek God, but it seems as if God is hiding. You may be going through a time like this right now or have just come out of a time like this. You've searched your heart and know that it is not because of lack of faith. If or when this happens, know that this has happened to others.

David, the man after God's own heart, had the same experience. He describes it in today's Psalm. David is asking, "Where are you God?" "Why are you hiding your face from me?" There is no indication here that David has sinned. He hasn't bailed on God. He's kept the faith. Yet to David, God seems distant, too far away.

For some reason there's this odd belief that Christians are never depressed; we never get down because we've got the "joy of the Lord". But here we see David, a man after God's own heart, and he's in deep sorrow. King Saul is trying to kill him as David hides in caves. He feels that God has abandoned him, that God is never coming back. But then he prays and he's upheld by his faith in God's mercy.

"How long?" - A cry from sorrow - "How long, Lord, will you continue to ignore me? How long will you pay no attention to me? How long must I worry, and suffer in broad daylight? How long will my enemy gloat over me?"

Notice that "how long" appears four times. How long will you ignore me? How long will you pay not attention to me? How long must I worry, and suffer? How long will my enemy gloat over me?

Now we know that God never forgets us, but there are times when God does hide His face. There are times when we feel as though God has forgotten all about us and God is not coming back. Consider the New Testament example when the disciples were out on the boat in the midst of the windstorm. Jesus was sleeping when the frantic disciples woke him up during a terrible storm. He let them reach a point where they actually asked, "Don't you care that we are going to drown?" In

another psalm it says: “Weeping may go on all night.”

And for us there are similar circumstances. Maybe we’re in great danger or very sick. Maybe there’s something causing us to feel troubled. Maybe we’re just depressed for no reason or full of doubts. These are the times when we sense that God is hiding His face and He’s forgotten all about us. It often feels unendurable and I suppose it might well be if not for grace. It’s the time when life feels more like a burden than it’s worth; everything seems futile and empty; it’s painful just to be alive.

But these painful times are normal. According to Isaiah, these are times of being refined: “I have refined you but not in the way silver is refined. Rather I have refined you in furnace of suffering.” Paul writes: Be strong with the Lord’s mighty power. Put on all of God’s armour.”

And so, David suffers until he prays: “Consider and hear” - a prayer for salvation: “Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God! Revive me, or else I will die! Then my enemy will say, ‘I have defeated him!’ Then my foes will rejoice because I am upended.”

His prayer is that God will consider him and hear his request. The Hebrew actually means to “look” which is fitting because he feels like God’s face is turned away. “Just look at me and hear me. Answer me.”

His request is “revive me before I die; bring me away from all this sorrow!” He’s so overwhelmed that he thinks it may end in death. His enemies seem to

prevail over him. They rejoice. He isn't so steady. His foundation doesn't seem so sure. You can almost hear them asking, "So, where is your God now?"

And so David makes this prayer for salvation - a declaration of faith: "But I trust in your faithfulness. May I rejoice because of your deliverance! I will sing praises to the Lord when he vindicates me." His trust is in God's mercy.

But David, realizes that this sorrow is from God and that it's God's will that he should feel so overwhelmed, and that God won't allow him to continue in it forever. All of his doubt and fear and pain are for a reason and God will not leave David to fall. "I trust in your faithfulness."

David trusts in mercy. And the result is that his heart rejoices and he breaks out in song. He thought he was going to die, but now he's aware of his salvation. He acknowledges that God has "been good to me." But, the idea behind the Hebrew word here is something that's ripe or full. In other words, God hasn't left anything undone. He sings because God has given him everything that He wants him to have. If he struggles with doubt today it's because God has put him in this fire to set his faith into action and purge away the dross. And the result is that he has confidence in God which is the point. He starts out saying, "how long?" but ends up saying "I trust in your faithfulness!"

Even though it seemed that God has forgotten David, during that time God was building maturity into him as he learned to trust God. Just as it takes years to grow a sturdy oak tree, so it takes years to build the godly character qualities needed

to be an effective servant of God.

There is no such thing as instant godliness. We have instant everything in our society, but there is no instant godliness. David was anointed king in his teens. He had a strong faith at that time, as seen in his victory over Goliath. Did God put him on the throne when he turned twenty-one? No. Twenty-five? No. Twenty-seven? No. Twenty-nine? No. Through all those years of running from Saul and living in caves, David learned to wait upon God. God was developing His man.

That is so out-of-joint with our rush-rush world! But that's how God works. If God has you shut up in some frustrating circumstances; and you have racked your brain trying to figure a way out, but nothing has worked; and you see the godless prospering while you suffer; and it seems like God is far away; hang on! Let God do God's perfect work in you. He hasn't forgotten you. Learn to wait on God.

So, why do so many Christians not grow to maturity and are not used by God in a powerful way? It's because when God seems distant to them, instead of calling out to God, they just shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh, well," and go back into the world. Or, they go buy the latest self-help book that promises to fix their problem, but it doesn't help them to trust in God alone.

David didn't do that. When God seemed distant, he called on God to answer him. Instead of turning from God, he turned to God. Instead of complaining to others about God, David complained to God about others. David was sensitive to the presence of God in his life. If he lost the sense of God's presence, he went after it

with a holy fervour. The test of faith is not when God's presence is real, when you see God at work in your life. The real test of faith is when God seems distant. If you seek God, you will find him, but if your turn to the world to look for quick fix for your problems without seeking God, you won't find him. Seek God especially when God seems distant.

Sometimes God seems distant and allows us to go right to the brink, to come to the end of ourselves, so that we learn to trust God more. Whatever their intensity, all trials are designed to bring us to a deeper trust in God. If we dodge them without learning that lesson, we miss what God had for us. David came to that point of trust. So, we see that David's problem led to his petition which led to his praise.

David has not yet been answered, but he trusts in the "lovingkindness" or "unfailing love" of God, and a calm assurance comes over him. His heart is filled with joy as he thinks of the deliverance which God will bring about. By faith, David counts God's future deliverance as past and says, "I will sing to the Lord, because has been so good to me."

David's circumstances had not changed from the start of the psalm, when he felt confused, depressed, and forsaken by God. David was still hiding in caves; Saul was still on the throne, trying to kill David. So, what changed? David's focus! From focussing on himself and his problems at the start of the psalm, David shifted his thoughts to God's loyal love and salvation. That shift in focus moved him from confusion and depression to joy and praise! And it didn't happen accidentally. "But

I” - in Hebrew the use of “I” is emphatic and points to David’s deliberate choice to rely on God’s loyal love. He chose to interpret his circumstances by God’s love rather than to interpret God’s love by his circumstances. God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God. So, we deliberately choose to trust in God’s love.

One of the main reasons people do not trust God is that they’re too proud to admit their total need. Or they mistakenly think that they must earn God’s love. But God’s love does not stem from any merit on our part, but only from God’s nature. It is pure grace, undeserved on our part. But since God’s love stems from his unchanging nature rather than from our feeble effort, we can trust in it.

When God seems distant, like David, trust in God’s unfailing love, however the winds of circumstance are blowing. You can count on God, even when your circumstances seem contrary. God is only taking you through the difficulty to develop maturity and godly character. Maybe it’s been months or even years!” That’s the way God works. God builds things to last, and that takes time. But the finished product is so much better in quality than quick imitations that don’t develop trust in the living God.

God loves all of us. Not only does God love each and every person, but God also loves each and every part of us. God loves us when we are suffering or angry just as much as God loves us when we are joyful or at peace. We cannot love God with our whole selves if we only show God our Sunday best.

Lament, although an unusual type of prayer, is still keeping the lines of communication open to God. God knows everything about us, so we are not going to surprise or offend God.

God's love is big enough to encompass the whole of our human experience. When we cannot handle our suffering, God can handle it all for us. Lament, along with praise and thanksgiving is an act of faith. So do not be afraid to lament, to even to yell at God. Just remember that God feels your anguish, God knows your circumstance, and God will always be at your side, God will always be with you.

Amen.