

A Psalm of Thanks

Today's Psalm, Psalm 30, is a song of thanks, which was composed for the moment when the person of faith has made it through the time of crisis – when one has climbed out of the darkest vale of Psalm 23 which we heard last week, and now can look back from a place and time of safety. This psalm *“bears witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected”*. They recognize that the ship has sailed through the storm and a new shore has been reached. But there is no going back to the old naïve outlook on life's expectations. This psalm speaks for those who have been brought through a deep crisis, an experience through which they learn that the faith that speaks the truth can never pretend that all will always be well and that all is as it should be. And yet, through their experience of new life and grace – they know that despair is not all powerful and evil does not have the last word.

This psalm is typical of the songs of thanks: it calls for praise, bearing witness to who God is and what God has done; it describes the time of crisis and how the psalmist asked God for help; it describes the help that God gave. In this sense, the song of thanksgiving is related to the prayer for help. In the prayer for help, which we saw earlier in this series, the psalmist asks God for help and promises to praise God after that help has been received. Now that the help has been received, the song gives the praise that was promised earlier, recalls both the initial “ask,” and describes the help that was received.

Whoever first prayed this psalm, also invited his friends to pray with him, inviting them to join him in prayer because he had come out of a time of trouble and deep distress. He called out to everyone who could hear: *“Sing to the Lord, all you godly ones! Praise his holy name!”*

He wanted everyone else to join him in thanking God and singing God’s praises, because God listened to his cries for help and saved him. God’s faithful and generous people recognize that God is working in their lives and offer their praise in response.

We often invite our friends to pray with us when we’re sick, in trouble, hurting, or confused. But how often do we invite others to join with us in prayers of celebration when God has answered our cries for help?

The Psalms teach us to call our friends to thank God with us when God has answered our personal prayers, and they call us to offer prayers of thanks with our friends whose prayers for help have been answered. The Psalms teach us both to cry with those who are crying and to be happy with those who are happy. Paul writes in Romans: *“When others are happy; be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow.”* And praying in community is one important way we are able to do that.

This song is an individual and corporate hymn of thanksgiving and praise, acknowledging a tidal wave of grief and joy, the pull of sadness and the return to gladness. Life is not a smooth, linear path to ultimate success. Life is peaks and valleys, rain and stars, gravel and sand, love and ambivalence, sun and wind, bitter

and sweet. It's what we have in the present, but it's not the final destination. There is more, there is hope and promise that we experience as resurrection people, and faith in Jesus is the vehicle that carries us through it all.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples if they want to leave him like other followers who are finding the going tough. Peter confesses, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and we know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

Following the way of Christ doesn't seem to be the easiest path - especially in the eyes of the world - but there is no one else to whom we can turn, and there is no turning back. The way forward may look straight uphill, and the forecast may be tough sledding, but we do not go it alone. We go with Jesus, the Son of the living God.

When we first began this series, we talked about Walter Brueggemann's helpful way of classifying the Psalms. According to Brueggemann, there are three kinds of Psalms:

1. There are psalms of **orientation**. Prayers of simple, trusting faith, when all is right with the world. But these are prayers of people whose faith has never really been tested or challenged by harsh circumstances. These are prayers from people who see the world as just and orderly, because God is good and just.
2. Then there are psalms of disorientation, anguished prayers, crying out

when you've been punched in the gut by life. The world seems random and chaotic, and you question if God is really good, or if God is even paying attention. We heard one of these a couple of weeks ago. Psalm 13 begins by asking: "How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

3. Finally, there are psalms of **new orientation**. These prayers are for the times when we've gone through hell and back and lived to tell about it. Life is not as simple as we once thought. The world is at times chaotic and random, and often unjust. But we've also learned that God really is good and faithful. Last week Psalm 23 said that, even when we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us. God's beauty and love are chasing after us, every single day of our lives.

Today's Psalm is one of those new orientation psalms. Whoever first prayed it has been rescued from death's door. He says: "Lord, you brought me up from the grave, brought me back to life from among those going down to the pit." The Psalmist's life has been given back to him, and he wants everyone to know about it and celebrate with him. He wants all his friends to join him in prayers and songs of thanksgiving to the God who answered his prayers.

All three kinds of Psalms - orientation, disorientation, and reorientation - are needed for a healthy, well-rounded prayer life. They teach us how to pray in different seasons of our lives. But what's interesting about Psalm 30 is that it actually shows

us the movement from orientation to disorientation to new orientation in one prayer. The journey from one realm of faith to another is recorded in this prayer.

Here, the Psalmist remembers his initial orientation. He looks back to a time: When I was comfortable, [and] I said, *"I will never stumble."* He was so confident in God's faithful love and care, so convinced that there was justice and order in the universe, he believed: It can't happen here! It won't happen to me! It's awesome to be confident in God's goodness. It's also really easy to believe God works all things together for good for the ones who love God as Paul wrote to the Romans: *"And we know that God causes everything to work together."*

But there's a dark side to it, as well. You might lose empathy for people who are in trouble, who've never had a good day in their life, who struggle to survive in this world. You might start to think it's all their fault, they'd be better off if they made better choices. You might even believe that God likes you better than them. One of the psalms of orientation even says: *"Yet I have never seen the godly forsaken, nor seen their children begging for bread."* It's good to affirm that God takes care of his people. But the danger is seeing someone with their back against a wall, and their children going hungry, and then thinking: "Well, God takes care of the righteous; so if this person is alone and hungry, they must not be righteous."

That's when it becomes easy to become self-righteous, too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good. You can cocoon yourself in a protective faith bubble that makes you oblivious to the struggles of others, and unable to see that God loves

them just as he loves you. If that happens, you **need** to be disoriented. You **need** the rug pulled out from under you. You **need** to feel godforsaken, so that you can learn to cry with those who are crying. If God could inject empathy into us any other way, I'm sure he would. But we typically only learn by suffering ourselves. So our Psalmist records how the rug was pulled from under him, how he prayed the prayer of the godforsaken: *"But then you hid your presence: I was terrified. I cried out to you, Lord. I begged my Lord for mercy: ...Lord, listen and have mercy on me! Lord, be my helper!"*

That's the prayer of disorientation. The bad things the Psalmist thought could never happen to him did. He felt abandoned and let down by God. What did he do wrong? Why did God let this happen? He had believed the righteous were never forsaken, and never had to beg. But here he was, all alone and begging. His world was shaken to its core.

But then, out of nowhere, when all hope had run out, God surprised him with grace. God gave him a future when it seemed that he didn't have one. So the Psalmist, awed by God's mercy, tells his story: *"Lord, my God, I cried out to you for help, and you healed me. You have turned my mourning into dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy."*

Now the Psalmist has a new perspective – a new orientation. And he wants the memory of his journey preserved in a prayer. And he wants others to join with him - to hear his story, and how it was God who rescued him. He was on top of the world,

then he fell. But God picked him up. Because he has personally experienced good and evil, he has learned how to both be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying.

There's a geography to the life of faith, and there's a geography to prayer. There are the safe, lush parks and playgrounds and sunny meadows of a young, untested faith. But this eventually gives way to bone-dry deserts; or barren, icy tundras; or dark, stormy seas of danger, distress, disease, or depression. Sometimes you go through those a long time and you wonder if you're ever going to make it through. But then, suddenly, the sun rises. The landscape changes. God has brought you to a wide-open field, with orchards and streams of cool water. The Psalms give us prayers for all the spiritual terrains we may encounter. They teach us how to speak to God, and listen for God, wherever we are on our journey. Better yet, they show us how other saints have been on this journey before us, and God brought them through. Psalm 30 is probably one of the best resources for showing this to us.

When we began this series, we talked about how prayer doesn't come naturally to us. We need to be taught to pray. The Psalms become our teachers, mentors, and friends – guiding us in prayer, shaping our prayers, and giving us new ways to experience God. Our Psalm teaches us three important things about prayer:

First, just like you can re-purpose the headboard and frame of a bed to make a chair, or wine bottles as candle holders, great prayers can be re-purposed. Consider the title of this Psalm – “A Psalm of David, sung at the dedication of the

Temple.” Titles were added to the psalms at a later date. And last week you heard that “of David” doesn’t necessarily mean David wrote it. It could have been written in David’s honour or style. That’s obviously the case with this Psalm. David didn’t live to see the temple dedicated. His son Solomon built the first temple. This Psalm tells the story of someone God rescued from disaster or disease - someone who thought their life was over. That doesn’t fit the dedication of Solomon’s temple. So what could it actually fit?... the dedication of the new temple after the remnant returned from exile in Babylon? ... or perhaps the rededication during the days of the Maccabees, after enemy armies had defiled it? Our ancestors in the faith re-purposed an old prayer for a new use.

Just like the one who first prayed this prayer, they thought everything was lost. But then God, by his grace and mercy, rescued them. So they joined together as a community to celebrate. In the same way, we too can re-purpose these old psalms by praying them. We can express contentment with the psalms of orientation. We can protest and cry for help with the psalms of disorientation. And we can celebrate God’s grace and mercy with the psalms of new orientation. We have been given these 150 prayers to use to express our life’s journey. We can sample them, recycle, and even upcycle them.

Second, the Psalmist says: *“O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.”* and calls on his neighbours to *“Praise his holy name.”* Thanksgiving is more than just gratitude. It involves being thankful for God’s good gifts by committing ourselves to live in a new way because God has blessed us. If God has shown us grace and

mercy, we ought to show others the same grace and mercy. If God has shown up in our darkness and comforted us, we show our thankfulness by comforting others in their distress. Then our whole life becomes a prayer to God for grace and mercy and healing.

Third, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples: *“when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place.”* Yet, in Psalm 30 all the Psalmist’s neighbours are invited to join him in prayers of thanksgiving and songs of praise to celebrate God’s rescue. There are times when community prayer and praise are not only appropriate, but necessary.

Recall Luke’s Gospel and Jesus’ stories about a shepherd who lost a sheep; a poor woman who lost a coin; and a father who lost a son. But when the sheep, coin, and son are found, their neighbours were invited to come and celebrate with them. We need to be more intentional about inviting others into our joy, so that the prayer life of the church community is well-rounded, and affirms every aspect of the human experience.

Psalm 30 takes us on a spiritual and emotional roller coaster. From the mountaintop, to the edge of the pit, to God acting to raise us up again. This is the reality of life – the whole geography of the life of faith. And as we wander through all the terrains and seasons of life, the Psalms reassure us we aren’t alone. God is with us. And we have a community of saints - present and past - to walk with us. Psalm 30 is an important gift for God’s people through the ages. It gives us perspective on

troubled times, and teaches us to invite God and one another to share all the struggles and seasons of life - together.

It proclaims that endings are not as final as we may think they are. It does not deny the reality of the darkness. It does not deny the experience of the absence of God. And it does not deny the dismay of finding that our beliefs do not always stand up to the realities of life. But it affirms that out of that grievous experience of death can emerge a new joy, a new hope, a new future, and a new confirmation of what it is to be the people of God.

Amen.