

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church  
 "A Prayer for Help"

Scripture: Psalm 13, John 6:35-40

Hymns: Praise, my soul, the King of heaven 407, Lord, listen to your children praying  
 449, What a friend we have in Jesus 746, (10,000 reasons) Bless the Lord oh my  
 soul, O God our help in ages past, You are my all in all, My all in all  
 June 18, 2017

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In his book *The Folly of Prayer*,  
 Matthew Woodley recounts "a Yiddish story  
 about a grandmother who took her grandson  
 to an ocean beach.

As the boy innocently played with his bucket and shovel  
 in the sand by the ocean,  
 a huge wave suddenly descended on the beach,  
 swallowed the boy in its fury,  
 and carried him out to sea.

Every trace of the boy disappeared—  
 his bucket, shovel and even his tiny hat.

Panic-stricken and enraged,  
 the grandmother started to prayer:

"Lord God of the universe,  
 how can you allow such a thing to happen?  
 My only grandson has been swallowed by a wave.  
 You must not let him drown.

With all due respect,  
 I expect better treatment from you, Lord God.  
 This is outrageous.  
 Bring him back to me at once!"

Suddenly another massive wave rolled in,  
 dropped the boy unharmed on the beach  
 and then receded into the ocean.

For a moment the grandmother stared at the startled boy,  
 and then she looked up at God and said,  
 "Lord God, you know he also had a hat."<sup>i</sup>

PAUSE...

Can you imagine speaking to God like that?  
 Probably not.

Woodley tells this story to bring into relief  
 Something that is missing in contemporary Christian culture:  
 Our ability to argue or complain.

No we haven't lost our ability to argue or complain with each other.  
 We grouse about our work or our health.  
 We argue about local and provincial politics.

But those arguments, those complaints are made to each other.  
 We rarely raise such matters to God.

So why is that?

Maybe it's because we remember those admonishments  
 We find in the epistles:  
 "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,  
 give thanks in all circumstances..."<sup>ii</sup>

Maybe it's because we remember what happened  
 To those Israelites who grumbled in the wilderness.  
 They didn't get to see the promised land.

Maybe it's because we recognise that most of our complaints  
 Aren't all that serious:

We can still get around, while our car is in the shop.  
 We can put up with the nausea from the virus we've caught.  
 Whether the Liberals or NDP are in power  
 Won't make a huge dent in our bottom line.

But what about those turns in life  
 that are by all accounts oppressive and challenging.  
 Do we have any model  
 for bringing these situations before God?

Today we are continuing our journey through the Psalms.

In his commentary on the Psalms,  
 John Calvin started calling the psalms  
 “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul”.

He called it that because in the psalms he discovered  
 “there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious  
 that is not here represented as in a mirror...”<sup>iii</sup>

When it comes to experiences of injustice or illness  
 Of neglect or oppression,  
 you don't have to go far into the psalms  
 To see the raw emotions,  
 The human response on display.

In the Psalms of lament these human emotions  
 Are brought before God,  
 In argument and complaint.

The Psalms of Lament...

“This class of psalms... is the largest type in all the psalms...  
 Exact numbers vary,  
 but there may be as many as 65 or 67 lament psalms,  
 depending on who is doing the counting.

Also known as psalms of complaint, or protest,  
 these are found throughout the Psalter.  
 Indeed, they are found throughout the Bible.  
 An entire book of lament has been written...  
 the Book of Lamentations.

The lament psalms are cries of despair, anger, protest and doubt.  
 They feature regularly in the psalms,  
 and are not something the biblical writers  
 or God himself  
 were ashamed to put into Holy Scripture.”<sup>iv</sup>

Let me review just a few lines from some of these psalms of lament:

From Psalm 142:

“In the path where I walk  
 they have hidden a trap for me.

Look on my right hand and see—  
 there is no one who takes notice of me;  
 no refuge remains to me;  
 no one cares for me.”

From Psalm 88:

“O Lord, why do you cast me off?  
 Why do you hide your face from me?  
 Your wrath has swept over me;  
 your dread assaults destroy me.

They surround me like a flood all day long;  
 from all sides they close in on me.  
 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
 [darkness is my only friend].

From Psalm 22, words quoted by Jesus:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
 Why are you so far from helping me,  
 from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
 and by night, but find no rest.

As theologian, D.A. Carson said,  
 "There is no attempt in Scripture  
 to whitewash the anguish of God's people  
 when they undergo suffering.

They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God.  
 Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism,  
 but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God".<sup>v</sup>

So have you ever wrestled with God?  
 Maybe you need an example, a model...  
 Please turn with me to Psalm 13.

Psalm 13, a psalm of David,  
 A psalm that many consider the very model  
 Of the psalm of lament.

The psalmist begins by addressing God:  
 "How long, O Lord?" (repeat)

The psalm, you will note,  
 is not an "interior reflection or meditative musing"  
 But a prayer, a prayer that is addressed to God  
 "using the name God has given the people.."<sup>vi</sup>

"How long, O Lord?"

Following this personal address,  
 There is a description of the trouble  
 The psalmist is enduring:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
 How long will you hide your face from me?  
 How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
 and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
 How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"<sup>vii</sup>

Repeating those words, "How long",  
 Adds urgency to the undefined problem.  
 A problem that is related to both God and self and others.

The fact that the first  
 "two "how long's" [are] directed toward the [Lord]...  
 gives the impression that the following two are the result...

God's forgetfulness and hidden face  
 leads directly to the psalmist's soul-pain and heart-sorrow,  
 as well as to the triumph of the psalmist's enemy."<sup>viii</sup>

After describing the trouble  
 The psalmist moves on to make a petition  
 Asking God to notice him, and to respond him,  
 And to give light to his eyes.

Experiencing God as having turned away  
 The psalmist asks God to now turn toward him,  
 To recognise his trouble and to deliver him.

The psalmist makes this petition  
 and then continues to note  
 What will happen should God not be moved,  
 Should God not answer.

The psalmist sees his present pathway leading to death  
 And the victory of his enemy,  
 Indeed the rejoicing of his enemy.

Maybe an insinuation that his defeat,  
 Is also God's loss.  
 Indeed he claims the Lord as "my God".

Up to this point the psalmist's words  
 are a plea for help, a cry of despair.

But something happens at verse five.  
 The tone of the psalm changes dramatically:  
 The psalmist now speaks of trusting in God's faithfulness;  
 and anticipates a day when he will be singing God's  
 praise.

What has happened to produce this dramatic change?

Some suggest that the psalmist has received an oracle;  
That there has been a word, sign, a promise of God's rescue.

Some suggest that there has been an act of deliverance.  
In the intervening period, God has acted.

But it equally possible  
That while his situation has not changed,  
The faith of the psalmist has been rekindled.

That in this act of prayer,  
In his crying out to God,  
The psalm has found consolation and courage.

Could that be the power of prayer?  
Not that all our prayers are immediately  
Or positively answered,  
But that in honest conversation with God  
We find unexpected strength..

Could it be that when are feeling abandoned by God,  
When we are beginning to despair...

When we have waited too long for that job...  
When the medical treatments are failing...  
When all our efforts for good have come to no avail...

Could it be that the best thing we can do is  
be honest about our feelings  
Of anger and disappointment  
And bring them to God in prayer of sorrow  
And anger and complaint?

Complaining to God, doesn't need to be an act of faithlessness.  
Complaining to God means that you trust in God's sovereignty  
And are defiantly counting on God's lovingkindness  
Even when all that is happening makes no sense.

"Some churches worship mainly in a major key.  
It's almost all rejoicing,  
even though everyone's life  
also includes loss, grief, anger and protest.

Other congregations major in select minor keys,  
with lots of focus on personal guilt and sin  
but no way of making sense of profound evil and tragedy  
not directly connected with our personal sin."<sup>ix</sup>

Maybe the next step in our faith  
The next step toward our wholeness  
Is to bring all our life before God  
And to learn the practise of lament.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matt Woodley *The Folly of Prayer* 85-86

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NRSV

<sup>iii</sup> John Calvin in his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1*

<sup>iv</sup> Bill Muehlenberg "The Lament Psalms" Feb 2, 2012  
billmuehlenberg.com/2012/02/02/the-lament-psalms/

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> James L. Mays *Psalms* 78

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 13:1-2 NRSV

<sup>viii</sup> Brent A. Strawn "Psalm 13" *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* 70

<sup>ix</sup> C. J. Kingdom-Grier, Mary Hulst, J. Todd Billings, Mark Charles, Joan Huyser-Honig  
"Rejoicing in Lament" [worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/rejoicing-in-lament/](http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/rejoicing-in-lament/)