

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's  
LENT 2017 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES  
*"The Psalms: Tools for Being & Becoming"*

***Study #3: "The Agony and the Ecstasy"- March 14/15, 2017***  
**Psalm 13**

***Opening Prayer:***

*Heavenly Father, through your Son Jesus, you have told us that we are to carry our crosses if we are to be true disciples; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to see how we can so work through the agony in our lives that we can come to experience the ecstasy of your salvation through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Ten years ago, a book of Mother Theresa's letters was released and caused quite a stir.<sup>1</sup> The commotion has come because in her correspondence, she expresses many doubts about her faith. I was travelling somewhere in the middle of Minnesota during that time and listened in on a PBS program discussing the book. How could such a great saint possibly have doubts was the question people were commenting on. Well, although I had not read the book, I thought "She's just following in the steps of David and all the other psalmists!"

You see, over one third of the psalms<sup>2</sup> are full of cries of anguish and despair at what is going on around the psalmist and questioning where God is in all of this.

***How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?***

***How long will you hide your face from me?***

***How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?***

***How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)***

Jesus himself prayed one of them as he hung on the cross,

**"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1)**

These hymns and songs are called psalms of lament – cries in the darkness. Walter Brueggemann has termed them, "Psalms of Disorientation."<sup>3</sup>

In this third study in our series on Psalms, we are going to look at one of these laments today, Psalm 13. I hope to show that far from being merely expressions of doubt or cries of agony, they

<sup>1</sup> Mother Teresa and Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> About 10 could be seen as "national" laments (e.g. Psalms 44, 60, 70, etc.) and about 50 individual or personal (e.g. Psalms 13, 22, 28, etc.). Walter A. Elwell, Ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), pgs. 1801f.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), pg. 51 ff.

are, in fact, “acts of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith.”<sup>4</sup> These psalms take us on a journey from “the agony to the ecstasy.”

## LAMENTS

Before we examine how that journey proceeds, I want us to look briefly at where laments fit in with our spirituality – the expression of our faith. If the Psalter – the hymnbook of the ancient Temple is over one-third laments, then do our hymnbooks and song sheets reflect this? I don’t think so. I and others racked our brains to think of some laments amongst the music we sing today. The closest are found in the more penitential seasons when we move to hymns in a minor key such as “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and “Forty Days and Forty Nights” but these hymns and most of our songs don’t touch on our own disorientation and frustrations with God like the psalms do.

However, in today’s wider culture there is an expression of lament and that is through blues music and country and western songs. Here, crooners cry out their tragic life story – loss of their girl or truck or dog or whatever and sing of the sadness that has filled their lives. But there is a genre of music that is much more part of the faith and echoes the psalms and that is songs that arose from within the black slave culture of the US - the old term is Negro Spirituals. “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” or “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” are very much in the style of Biblical laments:

***Refrain:***

**Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.  
Nobody knows but Jesus.  
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.  
Glory Hallelujah!**

**Sometimes I'm up,  
Sometimes I'm down  
Oh, yes, Lord.  
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground  
Oh, yes, Lord.  
*Refrain***

Without the psalms in our worship we omit this important dimension of Biblical devotion and so one third of this study series (the proportion in which they are found in the Psalter) will be looking at laments: Psalm 13 today and Psalm 137 in two weeks' time. We now look at Psalm 13 to see why laments are important for our journey of faith.

The Psalm is divided into three sections of two verses each. The first section is the complaint; the second is the petition for help, the third is the affirmation of trust. We will look at each in turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg. 52.

## COMPLAINT

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?*

*How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)*

One of the most important functions of the psalms is that they can act as a channel for our emotions. They run the gamut between love and hate, fear and joy and when we read them, our truest feelings can be expressed. We saw in the first study how the Hebrew approach to God is very direct and frank. Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” is not afraid to ask God to make him wealthy. Here, however, the tone is more than frankness – there is pain and anger – and it is with God. I have seen that a lot of people find it hard to be honest and frank with God when there is anger involved. Why? Is it for fear of owning up to their own emotions, where they really are? For some, there is almost a fear of “hurting God’s feelings” or shocking him with what’s really going on. People want to protect God – they say, “Oh, I can’t bother him with that.” Well, I have news for you – God has heard it all before and God knows the situation. The psalms allow us to channel our emotions, to move out of denial, to start where we really are.

In these first two verses “How Long” is repeated four times – David is really in pain – and the pain is at three levels:

1. The first level is problems with God: “Will you forget me forever”... “You hide your face.” In the Old Testament, God’s “remembering” and “seeing” are preludes to God acting with practical help, so God hasn’t done something David thinks he should have. But there is something much deeper – there is a feeling of abandonment – God is absent. This pain can be much worse than the loss that is being experienced – whether it is death of a spouse, being laid off a job, a serious medical diagnosis or whatever. If God is not there - then all is lost.
2. Inner pain comes next – “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?” There is an inner restlessness, David can’t think straight, there is “sorrow in his heart.” He is in inner turmoil. As a Pastor, from time-to-time I receive communication that I perceive as a personal attack and full of misunderstanding, along with some truth about how I have behaved. I become a basket case – I don’t know what to do – I am a mixture of anger and hurt and try desperately to figure out what is going on. How could God allow that to happen to me – his faithful servant - when I feel I have been doing what is right?
3. The next level is external problems – enemies: “How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Now this is not just a personal enemy – any threat to David’s kingship was a threat to God and *his* plans – how could God let things go awry? Putting this together with the whole of these two verses, we see that the external problems David was facing were causing a problem with his internal relationship with God. No wonder he – and we - cry out to God, “How Long, O Lord? – I can’t put up with this any longer!”

So what does this cry of complaint do for us? It brings us face-to face with reality – which may be chaos and disorder. It helps us see life as it really is. Much of the modern world tries desperately to have everything managed and controlled – but that’s not how we experience much of life. It is not true that if you have enough power and knowledge you can “tame the terror and

eliminate the darkness.”<sup>5</sup> When we cry out these words of agony, we “embrace the darkness” as a reality to be faced - but the chaos and disorder is not faced alone – it is faced in the presence of God.

## PETITION

*Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;  
my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.  
(Psalm 13:3-4)*

- **Express your true feelings:** Having faced up to reality, we are now ready to move to the next step – petition for help. This next step is crucial. It is vital to express your true feelings – including and especially anger – but things must not stop there. I often tell the story of when I was a theological student and my field placement was in an orthopaedic hospital in Oxford. We not only took Sunday services on a multi-bed ward, but went visiting during the week. It was during one of these visits, as I approached the bed of one man who was in traction, that I received one of the strongest antagonistic reactions I have ever had. I was about fifteen feet away and was wearing my clerical collar, and the chap yelled out to me, "I don't want to talk about religion." I was a little taken aback at the vehemence of his tone, and gently assured him that we didn't have to talk about religion at all. I was available just on the basis of friendship. He grumbled, "All right, then" or words to that effect, and I sat down. For the next fifteen minutes, he then proceeded to talk to me all about religion! He went on about how angry he was at God for an incident many years before involving his child. The sad thing was that although he had expressed his anger at God he was not willing to listen afterwards. His anger had shut the door and so he could not work through to any resolution. When you complain to God, you must then listen for an answer. Express your feelings,
- **Expect a response:** This is the focus of the petition for help. David actually says here – “Look on me and answer” – he is expecting a response. David wants God’s look, his personal attention and gaze – this is underlined by his use of “my God” in verse 3. A personal relationship already exists. Having vented in verses 1 and 2 David is now freer to reaffirm this and he calls upon God to live up to his promises. Honesty with God is very difficult if you don’t have that personal relationship – which was the case with the man in the hospital bed. If you are angry at God but do not really know him – open yourself up to a relationship with him and allow him to enter into conversation with you about your situation. When you know God, you also know you can expect him to pay attention and answer you.
- **Ask to see clearly:** David then prays, “Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death.” It is interesting that in ethnic groups where there has been experience of subjugation or slavery, people have a tendency to avert their eyes from yours. Their collective self-esteem is so low that they can not allow your gaze to see into the emptiness and pain – the darkness that they have experienced. When the situation is not addressed, then such people die within themselves and often actual suicide results. David is asking God to flood his life with light, to take away the shame and inner turmoil and to allow him see things from the divine

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 53.

perspective: “Let me see some progress, some way of understanding.” The sharing of painful stories in Aboriginal sharing circles acknowledging the presence of God is one way of allowing light to enter a dark place.

Verse 4 brings in the presence of the enemy again – “my enemy will say...my foes will rejoice.” There is a double awareness here – of God and of enemy – “Awareness of God and the enemy is virtually the hallmark of every psalm of David; the positive and negative charge which produced the driving force of his best years.”<sup>6</sup> David is calling on God to defend not only him personally but also to defend his own reputation. If God’s servant is diminished, so is God. David has moved from complaint to petition – for God to put things right – internally and externally.

## TRUST

*But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord,  
for he has been good to me  
(Psalm 13:5-6)*

- **Great reversal!** We have moved from complaining that God has not heard us to affirming that he has! What a reversal – in just six verses! What has happened here? Has God fixed things up between verses 4 and 5? Not necessarily – but David’s perspective has changed. There is a new confidence as he gives three declarations: “I trust...my heart rejoices...I will sing” (verses 5-6). There is a new focus as he speaks of God’s “unfailing love”...his salvation...his goodness to David.
- 1. **New focus:** We will look at the focus first. When David speaks of God’s “Unfailing love” there is the sense here of covenant love, God’s commitment, his pledged love...his wedding vow to us. God is not going to disappoint us ultimately. When he speaks of God’s salvation, he looks back to God’s action in history – his choosing and rescue of Israel - a rag-tag group of slaves through whom he has decided to save the world. David also looks back to what God has done in his life personally – “he has been good to me” (verse 6). He can think of how God has worked in his life before – the stories of how God has transformed him. We can do the same - the Christian faith is rooted in reality – rooted in the history of God’s saving acts – especially in Jesus. We can look to the cross, the resurrection, the work of the Spirit in the Church. We, too, can look to God’s past work in our lives – the difference he has made and the things he has done for us.
- 2. **New confidence:** All this is vitally important to enable the second thing that has changed between verses 4 and 5 - David’s confidence. You see, when the focus moves away from how much trust I have to what (or who) my trust is in, then my confidence increases. When we speak of someone whose spiritual life you admire we often say, “Oh, she has great faith;” we should say rather, “She has faith in a great God.” When we look to the focus of our faith rather than our faith itself, we can then speak with confidence that God will act – and even

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), pg. 78.

talk as if he has already acted - to put things right. This is a step of faith, but a step that is based on evidence and arising out of acknowledgement of the negativity you experience. This is neither false hope nor manipulation of God but a coming to terms with the reality not only of the situation but also of God.

## CONCLUSION

I quoted Walter Brueggemann earlier as saying that the psalms of lament are “acts of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith.”<sup>7</sup>

- **A *bold* faith:** He explains that “It is an act of *bold* faith because “it insists that the world must be experienced as it is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God.”<sup>8</sup> Nothing is out of bounds with God – you are to bring everything to him – speak it out, name it.
- **A *transformed* faith:** It is a *transformed* faith because it is not a faith that goes “from strength to strength” but a trust in a God who is with us in the depths – One who has walked with us – “*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” (*Isaiah 53:3*). It is a faith that recognizes that it is often in dark places and through suffering that we experience new life from the One who himself, cried out in lament, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

Are you bold and transformed enough to move through complaint to prayer and then to trust – to move through agony to ecstasy?

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<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit..

<sup>8</sup> Ibid..