

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

Study #4: "From Death to Life"- March 21/22, 2017
Psalm 30

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, through your son Jesus Christ you have taught us to pray always and not give up; when we experience your momentary anger, show us now, by your Holy Spirit, how to cry out for mercy and experience your everlasting favour, and praise you for bringing us from death to life, in the fellowship of your Church, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

We cry to God for help: Last week, we looked at Psalm 13, a psalm of lament, a cry to God for help, and noted that one third of the Psalter is composed of these. When I gave this series in my last church, I was able to cover more psalms and had another member of the congregation, Dr. Stewart Wakeman, a psychiatrist, take us through the most depressing psalm in the Bible – Psalm 88. This is the lament to end all laments!

Unlike Psalm 13 which we looked at last week, which moves from complaint to petition for help and ends with an affirmation of trust, Psalm 88 is one long cry of agony ending with, "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me – the darkness is my closest friend." (verse 18). Dr. Wakeman pointed out that the purpose of this psalm of desolation was "To know that God is not ashamed and not offended by our despair, our rage, our lostness. He does not promise immediate relief from our pain, but he will draw near."¹ At the heart of that psalm is the prayer "But I cry to you for help, O Lord" (Psalm 88:13). In Psalm 88, there is no answer.

In Psalm 30, this week's psalm, there is an answer. In Psalm 88, we are "close to death" (verse 15); in Psalm 30, we are "brought up from the grave" (verse 3) – we move from death to life. "Ah, phew!" some of you will say, "Here's the good news to counter the depressing psalms!" Others of you will say, "There, I knew it! Psalm 88 is only one psalm out of 150 – all the *others* have happy endings. Everyone else sees the light at the end of the tunnel – I knew I was the only one stuck in the middle of it!" To these cries of joy or anguish I want to say that it is important to hold both the psalms of lament such as Psalm 88 and Psalm 30 together. Your experience of life may be all gloom at the moment or it may be all joy. Both situations need to be held in tension with the other. As we shall see, in Psalm 30, it is presumption that all is OK that leads the psalmist into trouble. Likewise, the one living at the bottom of the pit needs to hear that there is hope.

¹ Stewart Wakeman, MD, "Despair and Intimacy with Christ," sermon given at St. Aidan's Church, Winnipeg, October 14, 2007.

Problem of individualism: One of our problems in balancing out joy and sorrow is that we westerners tend to see things from such an individualistic point of view. We look at many of the psalms and see that they are written in the first person, like this one: “*I* will exalt you...you lifted *me*...*I* called to you...you healed *me*...you brought *me* up...you spared *me*” (verses 1-3) and this seems to confirm our perspective of personal isolation – whether in joy or despair. But this is not the context of the psalms. They were used collectively. These were the hymns and songs of the ancient Temple.

Many of the psalms have headings or introductions. This one reads: “A psalm. A song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.” In later Jewish writings,² we are told that this temple dedication commemorated the end of terrible persecution under the Hellenistic ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century before Christ. So this psalm of the experience of personal deliverance by David is used to celebrate the collective liberation of God’s people. Even in its original use by David, it was designed as a personal testimony in the presence of the family of God: “Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name” (verse 4). Whether we are in joy or sorrow, we need to come into fellowship with others. When we are together in God’s presence, our own personal situations are set in the larger perspective. This helps bring balance and encouragement. This is underlined by the affirmations we make in the baptismal service where we are asked:

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”³

You are not meant to live the joys and struggles of life alone - you need fellowship - you need to be in Church!

PSALM 30 – A PSALM OF PRAISE

So what do we see when we look at Psalm 30? It is a psalm of praise! The first three verses spell this out clearly:

I will exalt you, O LORD,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
O LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
O LORD, you brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit. (verses 1-3).

David is full of praise about his deliverance but never gets specific about his problem. There were enemies (verse 1) and there was sickness of some kind (“you healed me – verse 2) but we have no more details than this. It was obviously serious as he uses the imagery of death⁴ and the grave to cover its gravity. He is full of praise and thanks for what God has done for him:

- you lifted me out
- you did not let my enemies gloat
- you healed me
- you brought me up from the realm of the dead
- you spared me from going down into the pit

² The Talmud, as noted by J. H. Eaton in *Psalms*. (London: SCM Press, 1967), pg. 91.

³ Baptismal Service, *Book of Alternative Services*, (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), pg. 159.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), pg. 126.

The story of David's life was full of many stressful situations where he could have uttered this psalm. It could also have been easily used by Job or the prophet Jonah - and, of course, Jesus. All of these men had "to learn to pray from the pit"⁵ (e.g. Jonah 2) whether in facing enmity and misunderstanding as did David or the depths of sickness and misery as did Job or the literal watery depths as did Jonah. One of my commentators says that "An experience of deliverance and expressions of thanks lie at the heart of our experience of God."⁶ How is your experience of deliverance and expression of praise? Do you find it easy to praise and thank God? Why do some of us find it difficult?

One reason is that, in order to praise, you need to know what God has delivered you from or for. Jesus said "The one who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). If you think you're not really that bad and a pretty nice person, then maybe that's why you have difficulty praising God. (More on this in a moment.)

Another reason some of us don't find it easy to praise because we are more concretely or analytically inclined in our demonstration of thanks. We might show forth our gratitude to God more by our actions. I don't find it easy to praise God spontaneously – my mind races around trying to work out an appropriate response and I am awkward about displaying my emotions. I find singing, liturgy and Scripture a great help in formulating my praise to God. I think those of us in that category need to be stretched a little, though – and this happens in the psalm. You see, you can't analyse or explain praise – as I often point out, it's like trying to analyse or explain a kiss. Those of you who are more intuitive will wonder why I am labouring this point as it is much easier for you just to DO IT! But bear with those of us more analytically inclined as I analyse the psalmist's journey because I think it will help us.

PSALM 30 – A PSALM OF TESTIMONY

After the initial three verses of praise, the David moves into a testimony of why he wants to glorify God. Testimonies are great – we need to hear more of what God is doing in our lives. The Bible is full of testimonies. For example, in John 4, after Jesus spoke to the women at the well of Samaria, she went back to tell her townsfolk: "Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:29). In Mark 5, after the Gerasene demoniac is delivered from the legion of demons, it says that he "went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. (Mark 5:20).

In my last parish, I was thrilled to receive a call from a person who had come to one of our evening healing services some three years before. She had seen it advertised in the paper and had turned up to find out what it was all about. She was very much involved in New Age thinking and needed counselling and deep healing. Through the parish she received much help and achieved a major healing. She didn't yet know Jesus and would appear from time-to-time at the healing services. Unknown to me she had come to another service just a few weeks prior to her call and been prayed for by one of our prayer teams through whom she gave her life to Christ. She phoned to tell me what had happened and to thank us as a parish for her new life. When we hear testimonies like this, we want to give praise to God. When did you last share what God has been doing in your life? You can do it one-on-one, in a small group or you can do

⁵ Phrase used in an anonymous testimony, quoted by Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God, The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pg. 131.

⁶ John Grayston, in *Encounter with God*, Scripture Union Bible Reading notes, October-December 2006, pg. 68.

it publicly. The aim is to give praise to God and be an encouragement and example for others.

This is what David now does. He begins his testimony by addressing the fellowship of believers:

Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people;

praise his holy name. (verse 4)...

and he gives them a general reason to be grateful:

For his anger lasts only a moment,

but his favour lasts a lifetime;

weeping may stay for the night,

but rejoicing comes in the morning. (verse 5)...

After this he gets more personal:

When I felt secure, I said...etc. (verse 6). We will look at this in a moment.

David rejoices because God's negatives are minimal compared to his positives. God's anger is momentary but his favour is eternal. There may be sorrow, but it is temporary – to be replaced by joy as surely as dawn ends the night. This is the message of the prophet Jeremiah:

“Just as I watched over (the house of Israel and the house of Judah) to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD...“I will be their God, and they will be my people...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:28, 33, 34).

Such a declaration of hope may seem rather remote and disconnected to those now at the bottom of the pit, but remember that Jeremiah's prophecy was not completely fulfilled in the lifetime of his hearers – the restoration to their land was at least 70 years in the future and its full effect for us was only to be achieved with the death and resurrection of Jesus 400 years later still. For many of us with major disabilities and woundedness the full experience of God's favour and rejoicing may come only after death.

But that is not the whole picture either. There is transformation available for all and relief for many in this life. This was the experience of David as he goes on to testify:

When I felt secure, I said,

‘I shall never be shaken.’

O LORD, when you favoured me,

you made my royal mountain stand firm;

but when you hid your face,

I was dismayed. (verses 6-7).

This is “the before” of a testimony – where I was before God intervened in my life. In verse 5, David spoke of “God's anger.” Now we hear what the anger was all about – and it may shock some of us. There is no mention here of deceit or lies, violence or lust, but the attitude of the heart. His problem was self-reliance: he “felt secure” – his “mountain” (= personal fortunes, state of the kingdom, life situation, etc.) “stood firm,” “never (to) be shaken.” He depended upon himself rather than God. “In his prosperity he had become self-sufficient, self-reliant - trusting in the gift rather than the giver”⁷ Here was complacency, not gross sin or wickedness.

Is this the reason why we find it difficult to praise? We think things are going just fine without God's involvement. Things are good – but they are not the best - not God's best for you. This was my own experience - here's my testimony. When I was in university, I went on a weekend

⁷ J. H. Eaton, *Psalms*. (London: SCM Press, 1967), pg. 92.

retreat and heard the story of the two house-builders – the one who listened to Jesus’ words and did not obey was like a person who built a house on the sand which collapsed when the floods came. The one who listened and obeyed was like a person who built a house on the rock which stood firm when the floods came. Being an architectural student, the image came through loud and clear. Now, I was a “goody-goody” – not involved in anything bad or immoral. But I was resistant to letting Jesus have control of my whole life. I didn’t want to be thought of as “abnormal” or “unbalanced” by living a thoroughly Christian life. I was a believer – but holding back; When I heard the story of the two house-builders, I realized that I had been trying to build my house half on the sand and half on the rock. I knew that half a house was no good. Jesus had to have all of me...so I offered him the whole of my life. I wanted to build my life on the rock. That was the beginning of an exciting journey with God from which I have not looked back.

But returning to the psalm - God wants the best for us – so the response to self-sufficiency was that God “hid his face” and the psalmist “was dismayed” (verse 7). However God’s absence was felt – through sickness, financial distress, loss of friends, depression or whatever - it got a response. In verse 9-10, the David cries out in lament:

‘What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?

What surprises us here is that he doesn’t wallow in self-pity and moan about “poor me.” He appeals to God’s interests – “God, If I go down, you’ll loose a worshipper – you’ll look bad!” Not that God couldn’t survive that – but there’s a partnership motif here - “we’re in this together.” What a refreshing approach – when you feel God has “hid his face” from you, don’t just focus on yourself - draw God into it. This is not plea-bargaining but a reminder to God (and actually to yourself) that he needs to act to protect his interests, to be true to himself. What this really means is not settling for second-best from you. The argument ends in verse 10 with a simple appeal to grace: “Be merciful to me; O Lord be my help.”

What happens next? There is a major transformation:

You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will praise you for ever. (verses 11-12).

The “removal of sackcloth” – a sign of repentance – shows that the psalmist had seen the poverty of his self-sufficiency in the light of God’s total provision for his life. This was the experience of Job – he was a very good person, but at the end of his ordeal, he exclaims, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). The psalmist echoes this when he says in Psalm 119, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word...It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees” (Psalm 119:67, 71). The pain of God’s absence was, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “God’s megaphone” to wake him up and turn him around: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁸

The change David experiences as a result is a complete turnaround as he describes what God has

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1940/1996), pg. 91.

done:

- you turned my wailing into dancing
- you removed my sackcloth
- (you) clothed me with joy (verses 11-12):

This parallels God's actions David spoke of in verses 1-3:

- you lifted me out of the depths
- you did not let my enemies gloat
- you healed me
- you brought me up from the dead
- you spared me from the pit

The result is that David can't keep quiet!:

"My heart (will) sing your praises and not be silent...I will praise you forever" (verse 12)

There is exuberant singing, joy, giving thanks and dancing.

Do you get embarrassed by this? In 2 Samuel, when the ark of God is brought into Jerusalem for the first time, it says that, "David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets" (2 Samuel 6:14-15). It goes on to say how David's wife despises him for this exuberance but he is undeterred and says, "I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes" (verse 22). David had no fear of embarrassment and God invites us to embrace this same sense of abandonment in praise to him.

CONCLUSION

So how do we move from death to life, from sorrow to praise? Do what David did - keep the memory alive of what God has done for you – avoid complacency and self-sufficiency. Remember his transformation of you – because "In that movement of transformation are found both the power to live and the passion for praise of God."⁹

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), pg. 128.