

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Psalm 130:1-8 (NRSV)
A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

[2] Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

[3] If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

[4] But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

[5] I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

[6] my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

[7] O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

[8] It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

PUTTING OUR GRIEF INTO WORDS

“Help, God--the bottom has fallen out of my life.”

That’s the title of my sermon this morning. By the way, that title is a direct quote of Psalm 130, verse 1 as translated by Eugene Peterson in the Message. We read a more formal version of that verse from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible this morning. It went, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”

But, both translations mean the same thing. God, I’m in trouble. My world is coming apart at the seams. The word translated “depths” refers to the primal chaos of creation, the churning out of control flood waters that threaten to close in upon us.

Over the years I’ve found that people often read the Psalms more than any other book in the Bible for their devotions. They love the Psalms because the writers of that book skillfully express to God what we also would often like to say. The Psalms are a very human book that enables us to put our grief into words.

We don’t know why the bottom has fallen out of the Psalmist’s life. Perhaps he has experienced a terrible personal loss, a death or some family problem. Verse eight might allude to a possible national tragedy due to a moral failure. But, whatever the problem, most of us can identify with this feeling of having the rug pulled out from under us.

“Help God—the bottom has fallen out of my life.”

Every week someone tells me that they think the world is on the road to perdition. And who can argue with that? Gas prices are going through the roof, terrorists plot to blow up even more airplanes, and the nation is once again on red alert.

Every week I meet with people who are facing big problems ... death, debilitating illness, divorce and terribly dysfunctional relationships. We try gamely to carry on but sometimes we wonder if we’re in this all alone. We

pray to God and feel like we've been put on hold or gotten his voice mail. And so with the Psalmist we cry out,

“Help God—the bottom has fallen out of my life.”

There was an article in the newspaper this past Thursday about what to say and what not to say when you're trying to comfort a person who is bereaved. In essence the article says that we want to be of help to the grieving person but their emotions are so raw and powerful that we are sometimes reluctant to hear them out.

Their cry from the pit of life is so profound and threatening that we want to run away from them or minimize their grief. We say things like, “Time heals all wounds” or “you'll feel better once you get back into your routine.”

We may want to help, but those statements do not help. When the bottom has fallen out of someone's life, they don't need someone telling them things are not so bad! We need to let them make their cry for help just as the Psalmist made his cry long ago.

Depression is not cured by denying it. If you think that Christians are never depressed or shouldn't be depressed, you're wrong. The bottom falls out for us just as it does for everyone else.

And the first step toward dealing with our trouble is to be honest with God and with everyone else. Don't pretend that all is well when it isn't. It can be a great relief just to cry out, “Lord, my life is in the pits, and I need someone to pull me out.”

It can be a great relief to acknowledge that it seems like if the Lord is there, at the moment he's not listening to what we have to say. That's what the Psalmist said. He said to God, “Listen hard. Open up your ears! ...” (130:2 Msg.)

Someone once said that the first step in finding God in our life is to recognize that God is absent. We live much of our lives under the illusion that we have things under control. But, that is just not true. The bottom can drop out at

any moment. Any of us can at any moment be overwhelmed by grief and despair.

When I think back on those times in my life when the bottom dropped out, I'm stuck by how normal things seemed on the day of the big event. Who would have thought that tragedy could strike on a beautiful, clear blue day in September? Who would have thought that this day would be the last "normal" day of our life?

I'm a big believer in preparing for the inevitable times of tragedy by reflecting upon the grace of God before the tragedy occurs. We need to ask ourselves, "If the bottom were to fall out of my life today, what would I need to know about God that would bring me comfort? What is God's word to a people who are overwhelmed by tragedy?"

FORGIVENESS

The first word, according to the Psalmist is a word of forgiveness. The Psalmist wrote in our lesson for today that if the Lord were to keep a record of our wrongdoings we "wouldn't stand a chance." (130:3 Msg.) But, fortunately God doesn't treat us as we deserve to be treated. God is gracious and compassionate. God is forgiving. (130:4)

Why is this important to know when the bottom drops out of our life?

Well, the first thing many people want to ask when tragedy comes their way is "What did I do to deserve this?" Tragedy brings us face to face with our shortcomings. Why didn't we pay more attention to our loved one when we had the opportunity? Is God punishing me for something I did?

We do bring some tragedies upon ourselves. Sometimes we don't appreciate our loved ones enough before it is too late. Sometimes we do deserve punishment for our sinful ways. Many of us often say, "I am my own worst enemy." And that may indeed be true.

Many of us are haunted by a past that we cannot change. No matter how much we would like to do it, we cannot turn back the clock or take back the hard words.

If God were to keep a record of our wrongdoings, we would be out of luck.

But, the Bible tells us that God is not into record keeping. God does not relate to us according to our sins but according to his merciful nature. And that's the reason we revere God. That's the reason we worship God. That's the reason we have a holy fear of God.

We are humbled by the enormity of God's grace.

In Psalm 103:10 we read that God doesn't give us what we deserve. God doesn't pay us back in full for our sins. Thank God for that. And because of that we can approach the throne of God's grace with confidence. Our lives are not ruled by guilt and shame. Our lives are ruled by grace and hope.

So, according to the Psalmist we first prepare for the tough times by reflecting upon the grace and forgiveness of God.

WAITING

And the second thing we need to do is "wait," wait upon the Lord. The Psalmist wrote that he waits for the Lord, his "soul" waits for the Lord. That is, the Psalmist focuses all his energy and attention upon God. The Psalmist longs for God.

The Psalmist wrote, "My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning." A prophet was known as a seer, one who watched carefully for the advent of God's kingdom. I think that it's in this sense that the Psalmist talked about watching carefully for the first light of morning.

In the midst of his despair, the Psalmist cheered himself with the promise that the coming of God's new day was as certain as the rising of the sun. And it would be so glorious that he couldn't wait to see it. God's new day would be a day in which everything would be bathed in the light of God's glory. The dark spots of the world would be illuminated by the glory of His grace and forgiveness.

Have you ever watched for the dawn of a new day? Perhaps you were out on the lake fishing or maybe you woke up early and decided to sit on the back porch. My favorite thing to do is to be on the beach as the sun comes up. The world comes alive as the creatures that surround the ocean begin their morning rounds.

There's even a new TV show called "Sunrise Earth" that records spectacular sunrises from all over the planet. As mundane as it sounds sometimes that show can be breathtaking. Sunrises can be so spectacular that we are taken aback by the glory of a new day even if we watch them on a video screen. They are worth waiting and watching for. They remind us that there is something greater than our small lives.

In the same way we need to learn how to wait on God's glory. James Mays put it this way in his commentary on this passage. He wrote that waiting on the Lord "is trust that finds strength and courage from the certainty of what is yet to be." I love that way of expressing the hope of God's future, the "certainty of what is yet to be."

But, many of us do not know that certainty. Many of us are not waiting for anything. We do not strain to see beyond what is available to sight and touch. We do not long for the sunrise of God's presence in our life. Instead, we are bogged down in the everyday task of putting one foot in front of another. We slog through life, hoping for little and expecting less.

And when the time of testing comes we are rudely awakened. We recognize the error of our ways. And out of the depths of despair we long for a light that is above and beyond us.

Today is the day to begin looking for that holy light. Today is the day to wait on the sunrise. Today is the day to recognize that hope is found above the clouds. Today is the day that we need to learn what it means to wait for the Lord as the watchman waits for the sunrise.

Waiting is an essential part of faith. If we do not wait, if we do not strain toward the future, then we claim to have possession of God's glory today. And that simply is not true.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that the “condition of man’s relation to God is first of all one of not having, not seeing, not knowing and not grasping.” And if we do not appreciate the mystery of what we do not know about God, we are always in danger of idolatry. We are in danger of replacing the one true God with a graven image of God, an image that looks suspiciously like our own.

Tillich wrote, “I think of the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within a doctrine. I think of the Biblical student who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in a book. I think of the churchman who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in an institution. I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within his own experience.”

I am convinced that we live in the age of the smug, self-satisfied Christian. We say that we wait for God, but quite often we really believe that we can make it on our own with “just a little help” from “the man upstairs” from time to time.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Many of the stories of the Bible are about those who develop a new depth of faith when life becomes a struggle. For example, people like Job and Jeremiah lost everything ... family, friends, job and reputation. And yet in the end they did not lose faith. They learned that the God who blessed them in the good times could also be trusted in the tough times.

I’ve said this before, but I think it bears repeating. I saw more expressions of true faith and longing for God after the attacks of September 11 than I had in a long time. The shocking loss of life forced us to consider the truth that we were not in control. For the first time in a long time, instead of seeking God on our own terms we waited on God. We longed for God and the salvation only He could bring.

The experience of despair reminds us that we control nothing. We are always waiting on the Lord. We are always dependent upon his grace for the living of each day. And we need to remember that. We need to focus upon that.

Instead of a spirit of independence, we need to cultivate a spirit of dependence. When we learn to wait upon the Lord, we tap into a source of power that is above and beyond us. And it is that power that we need most when the bottom falls out of life.

STEADFAST LOVE AND REDEMPTION

There is a word used throughout the Old Testament to describe God's love, and it's used in our lesson for today. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, and it means steadfast love. God's love is reliable and steadfast. When the world is coming apart at the seams, when the bottom has dropped out of our life, the love and forgiveness of God is constant.

As I said earlier, the context of this Psalm may be some great national failure. Verse 8 speaks of Israel and her iniquities. And indeed, the Old Testament is a record of how Israel often failed to live up to her part of the bargain when it came to her covenant with God. The history of Israel is a history of a people who didn't make the grade. It is a history of those who chose idolatry and self-gratification instead of God's law.

And often Israel paid the price for her apostasy. Years of captivity and military defeat were a result of her unwillingness to heed the word of God's prophets. And yet, despite her unfaithfulness, despite her sins, despite the fact that Israel did not live up to her part of the bargain, God lived up to his part of the bargain.

God did not cancel the covenant, the agreement He had with Israel on account of her sins. Though Israel was unfaithful to God, God was faithful. God's love and forgiveness were steadfast. God continued to redeem Israel from captivity, saving her from herself.

Israel's history is also our history. When trouble strikes we are reminded of the many ways that we have failed God. We have not lived up to our end of the bargain. Our love is fickle and unreliable. And yet God's love is steadfast. God ransoms us from our self-imposed exile. God pays the price so that we might be free.

Of course, we believe that the steadfast love and glorious ransom of God is seen most clearly in the sacrifice made by his Son, Jesus on the cross. Jesus was not above the human condition. He was a part of the human condition in every way. Jesus knew the pain of rejection, the sorrow at the loss of a friend, the fear of betrayal and death, the anguish of Gethsemane and the torture of Calvary.

And as he watched it all slip away from the vantage point of the cross of Calvary, it looked like that his life's work was all for nothing. Out of the depths of his despair, Jesus quoted another Psalm that begins very much like our lesson for today. He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As incredible as it may sound, the Son of God knew what it meant to be God forsaken. The Bible tells us that such a sacrifice was necessary. In the letter to the Hebrews we read that only by being "tempted in every way" as we are could there be a final atonement for sin. He is a great high priest who understands the human condition and brings us salvation and hope in our most difficult hour. (Hebrews 4:15)

To put it another way, God understands us. God is with us, in good times and in bad. And when the bad times come we need to avoid the all too common temptation to run away from God. We need to run toward God.

As Hebrews 4:16 puts it, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

One preacher wrote,
"... nowhere does Jesus say, 'God bless you; grin and bear this, for this is God's will for you.' Instead, his aching heart reaches out with a healing touch. Our God revealed in Jesus longs for our wholeness and happiness."

Has the bottom fallen out of your life? God loves you, and God cares about your pain.

Run toward God instead of running away from him. Approach the throne of grace with boldness.

God will give you the mercy and grace and help that you need. He will lift you out of the depths.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN