



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Out of the Depths”

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The Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 130

What do you do when you find yourself in the depths? When the pain and chaos and brokenness of life feels like more than you can bear? When your marriage is falling apart? When you learn you can't get pregnant? When you're diagnosed with cancer? When someone you love dies unexpectedly? When you slow down long enough to be quiet and listen to the longings in your heart?

Many of us have learned to blame ourselves. “If I had taken better care of myself, I wouldn't have gotten sick.” “If I had been more desirable, he wouldn't have left.” “God is punishing me for not being more faithful. I deserve this.”

Or we choose to blame others. “If he was wasn't so driven, I wouldn't be unhappy.” “If she wasn't so controlling, we wouldn't fight all the time.”

Or maybe we try to numb our experience of the depths in alcohol, the Internet, reality TV, work — so “good” at staying busy and running from one thing to the next that we are not even aware of being in the depths.

All of these are ways to try and control the chaos, to make sense of the depths, to figure out what's wrong and fix it. And isn't this what our culture teaches us to do? If we take our cues from the world around, this will be our reaction to the depths.

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, author Gerald May writes, “In our society, we have come to believe that discomfort always means something is wrong. We are conditioned to believe that feelings of distress, pain, deprivation, yearning and longing mean something is wrong with the way we are living our lives. Conversely, we are convinced that a rightly lived life must give us serenity, completion and fulfillment. Comfort means ‘right’ and distress means ‘wrong.’ The influence of such convictions is stifling to the human spirit. Individually and collectively, we must somehow recover the truth.”

Psalm 130 gives us a way to recover the truth. Instead of trying so hard to avoid or explain or escape from the depths, we can admit we are in the depths, and join with the psalmist, making his prayer our prayer. “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O LORD.”

There are risks that go along with this. It takes courage to cry out of the depths.

- It makes us feel desperate. The psalmist is literally crying out. Lord listen to my voice! Pay attention to what I'm saying! Get me out of here!

- It makes us feel vulnerable. My soul waits for the Lord - for the Hebrew people the soul was not an abstract concept, somehow divorced from your body. The soul represented the center of the person — your mind, will, source of life. Every part of us, our whole selves are waiting for God, no expectations of deliverance from self. There's nothing I can do to get myself out of this mess.

- Because our whole selves are waiting for God, this sets us up for a potential crisis of faith. God has to come through. How often are we scared to be bold with God, to ask Him for something that we really need, because if he doesn't show up, what then? What would that say about God and how much He cares for us? So we don't ask. We don't depend on God for the things we really need. But here, the psalmist depends completely on God. Help from God is the only hope.

So it's scary, vulnerable to admit we are in the depths, yet there is also something incredibly freeing about it. We stop using all of our energy trying to avoid the depths and finally acknowledge what is real.

Psalm 130 is part of the collection of Songs of Ascent, sung on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

It awakens us to the fact that suffering is real. Life is messy. There is nothing we can do to resolve the chaos of our lives — we can't make it all go away.

And it's freeing because, if I accept this reality, it means that when I suffer, I'm not missing something or doing it wrong. How much more suffering do we bring on ourselves because we have believed that we're not supposed to suffer? Ever? The reality is, things are never going to be perfect, we are never all going to be fixed. When we suffer, we are simply experiencing part of what it means to be human, and experiencing how deep our need for God really is.

It's ironic that I would choose to preach on this text, because it gets at the heart of what I feel like God is teaching me right now. In my first year as the Director of Campus Ministry, there has been great joy. But it has been a bumpy road. There have been ups and downs, and many days/weeks when I have found myself in the depths— there is has been newness, and at times a deep ache of loneliness that I can't make sense of.

I'm afraid of the depths. I'm afraid of how deep my loneliness goes. That I'm too much for myself and too much for other people. I feel totally confused and disoriented because I'm used to being able to figure things out. This is my M.O.: I try to manage the chaos, and usually I do a pretty good job. But it's not working now, I feel incredibly restless and anxious, because no matter how much I know in my head that I can't resolve it, the message that I'm doing something wrong, that it's my fault, still plagues me. And it just hurts. There is an ache in here that won't go away, and I can't make it go away. All I can do is cry out to God.

Am I alone in this? Is this an incredibly scary and vulnerable and insecure place to be?

And yet what if there's more to it than this? What if the depths are actually an opportunity to start experiencing real life? For God to reveal more of His love and goodness in our lives? For God to make us more fully alive in Him?

As we turn toward God, we discover why the depths bring the opportunity for hope.

Psalm 130 awakens us not only to the reality of suffering, but also to the reality of God.

- The psalmist cries out from the depths, which means God can hear us in the depths! The depths do not separate us from God. God does not say to us, "Get your life together and then I'll come near." God hears us and pursues us in the depths.

- And this isn't just any God, some nebulous idea of the "Other" who is distant from and indifferent to the struggles we face every day. The psalmist addresses his cry to the One who is Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. The One who reminds the Israelites over and over in Scripture "I am the Lord Your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. I have committed myself to you in love and faithfulness. You are my people and I am responsible for you, no matter what." And the psalmist also calls to God as the Lord, the Master, the One with all power and authority to bring about deliverance from the depths. Because God is both Yahweh, who desires to rescue us, and the Lord, who is able to rescue us, we can have the assurance that God is faithful to find us in the depths.

- God's faithfulness goes beyond finding us in the depths. Even more than God getting us out of the depths, we need to know and experience God with us and holding us in the midst of the depths. We need a God who actually gets down into the depths with us. This is the promise of Psalm 130. "O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem." (v.7). This is the heart of the gospel: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." The depths are not too deep for God. God will redeem us from the depths. And not just a little redemption. God doesn't make us survive on the bare minimum. ("It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities." (v. 8). There is no part of our lives that God's redemption does not touch. Redemption is complete. God's love is deeper than the depths, God's power is stronger than the depths. God will redeem us out of the depths, God will make us whole.

But redemption is a process. In the meantime, God gives us a job. "My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning."

Warning: I'm not the expert on waiting. I don't have it all figured out. But I do know this psalm exhorts us to wait, and I want to invite God to teach us a new way together.

Waiting is not passive (watchers had job to do, responsibility to watch for the dangers). Waiting is paying attention, staying awake, being faithful to our responsibilities now, asking God to reveal Himself in the everyday, ordinary places of our lives. Waiting does not mean inventing a fantasy to escape the boredom and the pain. Waiting is not limiting God to the expectations in our head of when and how He is going to work. Just as the watchers could not do anything themselves to make the morning come faster, just as they had no control over what the sky would look like when the dawn breaks, neither is there anything we can do to speed up the process of redemption or predict in what form that redemption will come. It is God who redeems, therefore God determines what redemption looks like and when it will come.

We may be waiting a long time for God to rescue us out of the depths. For the psalmist, deliverance is taking a while.

But if we are open, there is a great gift in the depths. Connection with God – sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Connection with one another – united in our humanness, discovering we are not alone in the depths, we can wait in hope with one another.

In his book on prayer, *With Open Hands*, Henri Nouwen talks about the need for hope in the midst of suffering and shares this reflection from one of his students:

"Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness. Hope is knowing that there is love, it is trust in tomorrow, it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises. In the mist of a gale at sea, it is to discover land. In the eyes of another it is to see that you are understood... As long as there is still hope there will also be prayer... And you will be held in God's hands.

Friends, wherever you and I find ourselves this morning, whether praising God for deliverance or crying out from the depths, we are held in God's hands. Let us discover even more today that with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. Amen.