

Psalms 130 - Waiting for Divine Redemption

A Song of Ascents.

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

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—'I believed, and so I spoke'—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

The morning of March 11, 2011, I did my normal thing. I awoke, had a cup of coffee, and hit the YMCA treadmills at 5:30, occasionally glancing up at CNN and MSNBC on the two televisions beyond my reach, but not my sight and hearing. And there it was — the Tsunami, that wave of water slowly powering over the urban landscape of Sendai City, Japan, engulfing every car, building, power plant, and human being. Helicopter cameras captured the 30-foot water wall from the air. That horrifying image from nine years ago this month re-appeared from the cobwebby corners of my mind and haunts me anew — a surge of water relentlessly rolling, full of churning debris, passing over the land, bringing people to their knees, drowning a nation in despair. Since last December, when the scourge of Covid-19 began slowly moving across the globe, ever expanding its reach, that image returned to me. So too does the image of Hurricane Katrina, as we all watched it off the Louisiana coastline, swirling off-shore but getting closer each day. This is the virus, the spiral of outer bands just now touching several American cities, the eye still far from hitting our human shores, our medical system, our already weary souls.

This virus is a natural disaster that forces us to do something different — finally mastering something of what the apostle Paul told us to do. He urges us to look not at what can be seen, but for what cannot be seen. Visual people, we are fighting a war against an invisible, unseen enemy. We're trying to locate the germs of this dread, this hardship, this agony. We look at what we cannot see, and we sanitize. We look without touching our face.

In this time, it is precisely what *can* be seen that help us survive — what is in front of us. Many of these painful images must be temporary — people out of food, out of work, toilet paper hoarded, businesses shuttered, grandads waving at their little ones through windowpanes, people of all ages withering in hospital hallways, medical professionals gowned in garbage bags. And when the end to this chaos comes, many images must be made permanent — neighbors singing to one another across alleyways, folks putting the well-being of the most vulnerable above their own to deliver them supplies, therapists offering reduced rates to those without insurance who are desperate for guidance, pastors offering nightly prayers online to sustain the faithful, families enjoying the challenges of their forced togetherness, health care workers dedicated to the cause of saving lives and scientific research for cures even when they are abandoned by our federal government.

We are visual people in an invisible world of germs. And yet, we are also faithful people, and so we reach beyond mother nature — to our Mother-Father God, hunting for stories in scripture where our helplessness is no less real, but mitigated by the sure presence of Jesus, places where despite what we can't see and know, God is indisputably among us and for us. I hear a fresh word in the words God spoke to others in a time of great need. To the Israelites in exile in Babylon, through the prophet Isaiah, God also gives us rich images — *when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.* I find myself in the Gospels' harrowing moment when Jesus and his disciples were all together, out on the lake, sharing a boat ride, when an exhausted Jesus slept in the bow. In a dangerous storm, as waves roll over them, they nearly capsized, they did panic. The shortest verse in the bible might have been — Jesus slept. When they woke him, he berated them for being people of little faith. Still, he saved. Is our Lord in this boat of burden with us today feeling our fear and despair? We pray for the Savior to wake up and put our way of life, our economy, our families, our church, our

sanity —back in order. Our prayers won't rouse a God who never slumber nor sleeps, but perhaps in offering them we might sleep a bit better ourselves.

The scriptures Rick and Jay and now I will preach from were chosen months ago, long before Corona was anything to us but a so-so Mexican beer made slightly better with a lime. We might have altered them to fit our current predicament — maybe drawn from the laments of Jeremiah, or the pathos of Job, or even the apocalyptic texts from Revelation — but the musical selections and texts and themes were remarkably appropriate for this current moment. Our Lenten theme asks that poignant and existential question, “Why are we here?” Now tilted on its axis to say — “where is here?” These two passages arrive here at the end of our first week of sheltering in place, the first week of a spike in deaths and unemployment claims so vertical it takes your breath away, the first oppressive week where you keep separating yourself from the fear, the one that comes with every sneeze and cough, that you or someone you love has it. As Terry Gross said this week, “This is a dark time for hypochondriacs.” Why are we here? We are here because our spiritual hunger groans in isolation to be nourished by our togetherness.

The Psalmist is not isolated — she's on a pilgrimage, a journey to Jerusalem, but she writes and sings one of the most powerful laments in all of scripture. “Out of the depths I cry.” This is her prayer of despair, groaning out of the chaos of her human predicament. That depth, the Hebrew word, means all the pain, alienation, and depression that make us despair— the visceral human pathos we are feeling right now. Crying to God out of those depths, without minimizing her experience at all, still she finds hope in the same God we worship — naming the one who is endlessly forgiving, redeeming, steadfast in love and loyalty to us — which in the Hebrew Bible is the closest thing to “grace.” She points to who God is. There is forgiveness. There is salvation. There is grace. The Psalmist will wait it out. We hear her pleading with us to do the same. But read on, friends. This extraordinary four-word lament — out of the depths — becomes confession, and creed, and finally proclamation. With a wider lens, we see that this psalm is a template for worship, a liturgical nugget that we can pray from wherever we are. Use this psalm daily in your personal homes, and pray it out of your depths.

Until recently, perhaps few of *us* saw *us* in this particular psalm. I can't remember anything that has created such complete disorientation and upheaval to our individual and collective lives, our religious lives, our local and national economy, the entire world's ability to function. Today, we pray from our depths, like her, in motion. And no matter when we arrive at the place we need to be, we will move from this leg of the journey to new stages, until we, like the Psalmist and every other human being, do meet God face to face. While we are on the way, let us be guided by what never changes — Forgiveness. Grace. Salvation. First Pres, many things have been canceled because of Covid-19. So much has changed because of this coronavirus. Who God is is not one of them.

Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, the experience of our outer nature wasting away, and our inner nature being renewed, compellingly speaks to our modern moment, and points us to something we can hope for. Our outer nature is changing, we are all aging, time is passing, but we are learning something from this, we are maturing on the inside, our perspective is shifting, our spiritual immunity strengthened. Perhaps you saw the article *supposedly* authored by Bill Gates on what Coronavirus is teaching us. No matter who wrote it, there is wisdom in naming what this virus is revealing to us— our equality, our connections, the fragility of life, the preciousness of our health, our

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free will to cooperate, our ability to be patient or to panic. The fake piece ends with this —the coronavirus reminds us that we need to look at the rate of deforestation just as urgently as we look at the speed at which toilet rolls are disappearing off of shelves. There is nothing phony about that concern. Our outer nature wanes, our inner nature waxes.

But these words stop me hard. “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” Paul writes. He is talking about the body or something else — commentators don’t agree. Through the lens of the coronavirus, I read it anew. In so many ways, the earthly tent we live in has been destroyed. We are now unsheltered. We are unprotected. We are uncovered. So many of the things we built up to make ourselves feel safe, and in control — job, money, time with our grandkids, hair dye, dog groomers, vacation travel, trust in our leaders— with this virus, they have changed. Here in this moment, with no earthly tent, we are completely vulnerable to all those feelings — panic, fear, anger, sadness, confusion and despair. Now we are all John Travolta’s in the 1976 made-for-TV movie, “The Boy in the Plastic Bubble,” a man born without an immune system forced all of his life to live inside plastic bereft of human touch. Unable to take the agony of alienation, he walks across the boundary of his pod now at the mercy of all those germs. Uncovered. Finally, if even for a few hours he gets all those things we human beings crave — love, companionship, sex, compassion. The earthly tent kept him apart. He longed for more. Now we are vulnerable, and without the tent our human hands have spent our lives building for ourselves. We recognize our hunger for that which will make our lives ultimately meaningful. And we are adapting our uncovered lives to find ways to make sure we all still get it.

In so many ways the earthly tent we American people have lived in so blithely, so indifferently, so self-servingly — has now been destroyed. Our invincibility, perceived as it was, is gone. Our self-control, and our mastery of the world — is of little use. Our perceived invulnerability has been shattered. We are fragile, frail, and humbled by the invisible. Our ability to get help is compromised. Covid-19 has uncovered our truest selves as beings in a complex world. What are we learning, just now, naked and uncovered as we are?

Outside of this earthly tent, we have to take care of ourselves and one another in ever new and creative ways. Never before has finding our connections to our source of all divine love in this world been more urgent. Never before has putting our lives right been more necessary. With the antibodies of faith, hope, and love, we can protect our immunity to doubt and despair. That’s how we survive the new uncertainty and vulnerability we live with.

After 9/11, church attendance spiked. Pastors urged us “not to implode and disintegrate emotionally and spiritually as a people and a nation,” but to become stronger through all the struggle. They pleaded with us to love “as though everything depended on it, because everything does depend on it.” We did. For a while. When your earthly tent is destroyed, what will you do? Will you find a temporary shelter in faith — or will you relocate yourself there, letting faith hold you in your fears, in a deeper reliance on God, a stronger spiritual journey, a greater commitment to let love lead your way? The comedian Marc Maron recently said “when I am terrified, I go mystical. I can find my way into faith.” When you are no longer terrified, Marc, will you find your way out of faith?

The question will always be there — why are we here? Our theme is no gimmick to get you into church in Lent, or to find our Youtube channel. The Holy Spirit led First Pres to this question months

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ago. We are here because our outer nature is dying, and in response, our inner nature can grow, can be nourished and nurtured by how we respond. What comes in your uncovering?

Paul points us to this — Grace. We are all grace to one another, you know. And we are grace as it extends more and more. We are grace going viral. Grace, what God has given us, we must give each other —unconditional, forgiving, steadfast love. The grace to follow the rules. The grace to be patient and wait. The grace to pray. The grace to be grateful even for moments of light in the midst of this darkness.

Friends, out of these depths, great things can come. Out of these depths, we will grow and change and be transformed. Out of these depths, we will begin to see the ordinary as extraordinary. Out of these depths, we may be at the mercy of nature, earth, and science, but God's mercy does not die, and we live into our role as the true carriers of it. Out of the depths, we learn to reach outward and upward with compassion. Out of these depths, we will, in two short weeks, proclaim Alleluia. Christ will rise on Easter Morning, God will be with us in our homes and alive in our hearts — just as God always is.

But now — in those depths, cry in the face of sickness, weep in the face of death, wail in the face of torment and despair. Touch those faces with your grace. Even, from six feet apart.