

From Mourning to Dancing

A Reflection on Psalm 30

Psalm 30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Back in my conservative evangelical years I was one of those persons that believed the Bible was an answer book to any question or problem. Growing up Presbyterian in the Midwest, I didn't learn that from my church, or from my family. Rather, it was from my high school friends that were caught up in what was called in the early 1970s, the Jesus Freak Movement. I remember getting to the stage where I would pray for help, then close my eyes and start flipping through Bible and then randomly put my finger down and look at that verse or passage.

In my mind, however, it really wasn't random, because I believed that's where God had me put my finger in order to teach me whatever I needed to know at that moment. I would suspect that some of you with a similar religious background may have done the same thing on occasion.

That particular method of Bible study has changed for me, however. I now believe that if I tried that the Bible verse I happen to put my finger on *is* random, and not magically directed by God. **That doesn't mean, however, there's not something to learn, as guided by the Holy Spirit, from whatever verse or passage is chosen.**

I mention this today because that's exactly how I picked today's sermon text. I wasn't particularly inspired by the assigned lectionary readings for this Sunday. One included Jesus taking a coin, asking who's image is portrayed, and telling folks to give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and give unto God what is God's. It's a great stewardship text during this stewardship season. But like I said, I didn't feel inspired. And I've learned that is clue that it may be best to do something else.

So I tried that old method of 'flip-through-the-Bible' and randomly put my finger down and preach on that. I was hoping to get something really obscure, like a passage from Obadiah, Habakkuk or Zephaniah. I'm pretty sure I've rarely preached from one of those Old Testament prophets. But I missed those and my finger landing on Psalm 30. After reading it, I thought, "Heh, maybe I'll try again." But that would have defeated the purpose.

So lets take a look. As you can see in the bulletin or your pew Bible, the subtitle of Psalm 30 is, "Thanksgiving for Recovery from Grave Illness." That's why I chose as the other scripture passage this morning, Psalm 6, which acts as a sort of precursor to Psalm 30. Its subtitle is "Prayer for Recovery from Grave Illness." Psalm 30 acts, therefore, as a response of thanks and praise for recovery.

Believing in the illumination of the Holy Spirit in and through the reading and preaching of the word, it is my hope that perhaps this Psalm and reflection is just what you, or someone else in this sanctuary this morning might need to hear.

Though not mentioned specifically in this Psalm, it is believed that the psalmist became deathly ill, prayed for healing, and was restored by God to wholeness. This

results in the praising of God. This is an often-repeated pattern not only in the psalms, but often in our own life as well. **There is a need, followed by a petition to God for help, followed by a rescue of some kind, followed by our response of gratitude. Need-petition-rescue-thanks. How many times has that cycle repeated itself throughout our lives?**

Notice the 'before' and 'after' aspects of this pattern. In Psalm 30, the psalmist's 'before' included the mention of his or her foes, Sheol (the place of the dead), and the Pit, all signs of powerless desperation. The 'after' reveals that the psalmist has been 'drawn up,' 'brought up,' and 'restored to life' by God.

The first response to this recovery is to ask the entire community of faith to join in giving thanks to God. That's something we do here during the sharing of joys and concerns each Sunday. It's a reflection of the New Testament admonition to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who are rejoicing. That's something we try hard to live out in our relationships here at College Hill.

The final response by the one rescued is found in the closing verse, "so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever" (v. 12). **How often have we been reminded that gratitude is one of the highest values in the life of persons of faith?**

There's some **problematic theology** embedded in this Psalm, however. The first issue is found in verses 8-9 where **the psalmist offers a bargain in order to coax God to bring healing**. "To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you: Will it tell of your faithfulness?'" Perhaps every person here this morning has prayed a similar bargaining kind of prayer at one time or another in your life.

Let's look closer at the psalmist's interesting understanding that death means the loss of someone praising God, which is a bad thing. **For quite some time now I've been reflecting on the belief held by many that God 'needs' our thanks and praise. I personally have a problem with a needy Divine Being, one that seems to have issues with vanity and apparent low-self esteem. No, I've come to understand God not as a divine being who 'needs' our praise, but rather that we are a people that 'need' to praise God. In other words, we are to live a life of profound gratitude as our response to the goodness of God.**

Praise and thanksgiving become our language of joy and gladness to share with others. An attitude of gratitude (I like that phrase) can and does make a big difference in how we live out our lives on a daily basis. The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth is reported to have declared that there is only one sin, suggesting that the single sin from which every lesser sin emanates is the sin of **ingratitude – the failure to comprehend the theological truth that human life in all its beauty, abundance, and possibility is a gift – not an entitlement.**

One thing I really like about all the psalms, however, is that they complain to God with as much regularity as they praise God. The psalmists do not shy away from their emotions, which run the gamut from anguish, sorrow, fear, despair, loneliness, anger, even rage, to happiness, joy, peace, praise and exultation. I like that because it informs us that **we can take all that we are, and all of what we feel, directly to God. Where are you on that emotional spectrum at this particular moment in your journey of life?**

There's another major theological issue that I find problematic in this psalm. It appears that the psalmist was once a person of proud self-sufficiency. Verse 6 states,

“As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved.’” The psalmist had not learned that self-centeredness and a false sense of security are self-defeating. But he attributes his affliction to God’s momentary anger, and, as he writes in verse 7, “you hid your face; I was dismayed.”

We have talked on numerous occasions that it is our understanding that bad things simply do happen to good people. This is in contrast to the ancient understanding that any misfortune in life was a result of God’s punishment, or as a means to turn people back to God. I will admit, however, that it is in the midst of the troubles in life that we, like the psalmist, are often more intentional in turning to God for comfort, and in a spirit of hope. During those times we tend to increase our awareness of God’s presence. **That does not mean, however, that God is the cause of all our hardship in life. But hey, for many it’s easier to blame God than to take responsibility and look at their misfortune as the possible consequence of their own thoughts and actions, or as simply a random act of tragedy or bad luck or illness.**

Yet, the psalmist is confident that his deliverance from illness, or whatever, is due to God’s loving grace, and connects his praise directly to his *prayers* for deliverance. Here’s my problem with this. As biblical commentator P.C. Enniss states:

It is risky theology to connect healing directly to answered prayer. There is too much evidence of times when conscientious prayer ‘did not work.’ There are too many hucksters offering healing for a mail-in contribution.

Perhaps it’s also helpful to be reminded that **healing does not necessarily mean a cure from illness.** Biblical commentator Cheryl Kirk-Duggan writes:

Healing can occur when a person comes to accept her or his impending death or incurable malady, aware that God remains steadfast. Further, suffering is not an eternal reality... That we suffer does not mean God forsakes or abandons us.

I would add, nor does it mean it is God’s will that we suffer. Suffering is simply a part of each and every human’s life. It is universal.

Yet perhaps we have also experienced the remarkably poetic words of the psalmist, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (v. 5b), and “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off the sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (v. 11).

Here too, however, there is a potential trap in these words. What if you’re one of those who can legitimately cry out, “It is morning, but *I* have no joy!” Or, “My weeping lasted not only through the night but also into the day.” Biblical commentator Chandler Brown Stokes (who was one of my Hebrew professors in seminary as well as a pastor in Marin County in California), puts this pastorally into perspective this way,

Those who continue in mornings without joy can be further diminished by the celebration of grace that another has received. It is an essential word to those whose wounds are still open that we cannot extrapolate from one experience of healing to make conclusions about the proximity of grace of God to those who do not experience present healing.

The redeemed may in their joy shout what seem like eternal verities [truth] – *joy comes in the morning!* – but the suffering can hear such elation as judgment. **Suffering easily compounds itself with the theological fallacy that God is parceling out grace to some and heartache to others, withholding mercy from some and dishing out generously to others.**

So let us be careful not to fall into this trap. Instead, **let us continue to grow into a community that when one member suffers, we all suffer; and when one member rejoices, we all rejoice.** We celebrate, therefore, the healing and wholeness of those who are joyful, perhaps even with a 'happy dance'. And we also embrace the sorrow of those who still weep, knowing that God is present to each and every one of us.

My prayer is that we all can join with the psalmist in declaring, "so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever" (v. 12).

Perhaps out of the randomness in the method of picking this psalm as a sermon text, it has been a message that some of us needed to hear this day.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word