

## **Singing The Lord's Song: Psalms of Orientation**

### **Psalm 24, 33 and 133**

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As many of you know, I was on vacation a few weeks ago in one of my favorite parts of Michigan - in and around Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. This is the second year that we have spent our summer vacation at my sister and brother-in-law's little cottage on Long Lake. Spending time there again this summer, I was reminded of just how frightening everything felt to us last summer. We weren't sure if it was safe to pass by someone on a walk in the woods or to sit on the beach without a mask. We were anticipating Em going back to college but had no idea what that was going to be like. Would they have in person classes or only online? Would students be able to visit each other in their dorm rooms? What about extracurricular activities? And I, of course, was deep into decision-making for the church, worrying about when we would meet in person again and how to keep the congregation connected as we lived out our day to day lives in isolation.

So that was the backdrop to last summer's vacation when one night, we went down to the Lake Michigan beach to watch the sunset. Em had been feeling especially anxious about returning to school that day. So, we sat on the beach and talked as slowly the sky faded from blue to pink and the sun sank closer to the horizon. Soon, the sky was on fire with bright orange, magenta, purple and pink emanating from the setting sun. The beauty overwhelmed us as we sat wordlessly watching God's handiwork. After just a few minutes, the intensity lessened as the sun slipped below the horizon but the sky was still full of color.

I hugged Em and said, "This is how I know everything is going to be alright. Because every night the sun sets and every morning it rises again. Everything is crazy and scary and uncertain right now, but we can be sure of this. The sun will rise in the morning and a new day will dawn. God set it up that way so we always know God is still there, still doing God work in the world, still bringing a new day."

Last week, we began a new sermon series entitled "Singing the Lord's Song". We are exploring the Psalms and how they reflect human emotion and experience. Our framework is Walter Brueggemann's little book, "The Spirituality of the Psalms", in which he groups the Psalms into Psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Today we're talking about the Psalms of orientation - Psalms which capture some of the feeling that I had watching the sunset that night.

The Psalms of Orientation reflect those times in life when we have a sense of well-being and stability. We are able to take a step back from the busyness of day to day life and give thanks for God's creation and all that God has given to us. That sense of gratitude comes in part from having what we need - food, water, shelter, community, faith, and love - and recognizing that everything we have comes from God.

Yet, underneath that gratitude, runs a sense of certainty in God. We look at creation and see that it is ordered with patterns and rhythms that are dependable and, for the most part, consistent. This reassures us that God is good, steadfast, and faithful. We are able to trust in God

because we see evidence of God's constancy all around us. This is what the Psalmist is conveying in Psalm 33.

For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth...Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

What experiences have you had, like when I watched the sunset over Lake Michigan, that have reminded you that we humans are part of something much bigger than ourselves, that God has created a world which, for the most part, works with such magnificent order and structure and beauty, that we take it for granted until something happens that opens our eyes to it again?

Perhaps witnessing the birth of a child, the miraculous process of hormones triggering labor, labor progressing through recognizable stages, and then a new life being born into the world just as lives have arrived in the world since time began. Or, maybe you see it in your children as they grow, each an individual yet passing through predictable stages of learning and development. You may find it in the extraordinary patterns in nature or the incredible intricacies of genetics or the vast beauty of the Milky Way.

This is what many of the Psalms of orientation convey. Woven through them is an awareness of God's presence and constancy that gives us a sense of security. And so, we sing songs of gratitude and joy.

Yet, Walter Brueggemann is quick to point out that not everyone has the basics of what they need. Not everyone has food and water or education or power. Also, sometimes there are irregularities in this ordered world God has created. Some children don't develop physically or mentally in the ways we expect. Some pregnancies fail. Some genes are missing or mutated.

There is a certain privilege in having enough stability in life to sing the Psalms of orientation. This was as true for the psalmist and for the people of Israel thousands of years ago as it is true for us today. When you haven't had a real meal in months, when you are afraid that someone might hurt you, when you always get passed by for a promotion because of the color of your skin or your gender. These are times when it can be hard to feel grateful. Yet, Brueggemann suggests that the Psalms of orientation are not only celebrations of what is for some but also a vision of what could be for all. They reflect the hopes of people who are struggling that God's kingdom will be fulfilled. Human society will be fair and just - with enough resources for everyone and no -isms that alienate one group of people from others. Each human being will have the opportunity to live into the fullness of who God created them to be and the world will be at peace.

This vision is woven throughout the Psalms of orientation. Says Brueggemann, "These Psalms are for those who cling in hope to the conviction that God's good intention for creation will finally be realized and there will be an equity and a Sabbath for all God's creatures...The Psalms acknowledge that God's creation has not been fully completed, but this community waits with confidence...The Psalms speak of a healthy, oriented life that is anticipated, even if not yet experienced."

We see an example of this at the end of Psalm 33:

Our soul waits for the Lord;  
He is our help and shield.  
Our heart is glad in him,  
Because we trust in his holy name.  
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,  
Even as we hope in you.

Given the hopeful vision cast by the Psalms of orientation, it's not surprising that oppressed groups throughout history have found comfort and inspiration in them. In her paper entitled, "My God is a Rock in a Weary Land: A Comparison of the Cries and Hopes of the Psalms and African American Slave Spirituals", Elizabeth Backfish explores both the role of the Psalms in the lives of African American slaves as well as the similarities between the Psalms and African American spirituals concluding, "African American spirituals reveal the faith and theology of a great people who clung to the promises and righteousness of the Lord in spite of the reality that seemed to suggest otherwise, not unlike the righteous Psalmists who lamented their suffering amidst the prosperity of the wicked and all the while maintained their faith in the goodness of God".

As we continue to make our way on this journey through Covid and, simultaneously, on the greater journey of life, where do you see yourself in the Psalms of orientation? Do you, despite all the anxiety and uncertainty around you, have moments when you step back from the fray and recognize the goodness of God? Are you able to see God at work in history or in the patterns and rhythms of nature and life? Does that give you confidence that God's goodness and love are steadfast even when we don't always see them?

Or are you, perhaps, in a time of struggle and looking to the promises of God with hope - hope for a better world, a just world, a healthy world?

This week, I hope you'll spend some time with the Psalms. Seek out the Psalms that speak to you and offer you hope and a sense of assurance that God is at work, predictably and beautifully, in the rhythms of nature and the slow arc of progress toward the fulfillment of God's kingdom. May it be so. Amen.

Go with confidence into the days ahead,  
trusting in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.  
God will not abandon you,  
for you are the work of His hands—His own creation—  
and His love endures forever.  
So go in joy to love and serve the Lord!