

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

### **Psalm 13, 79 and 86**

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The Psalms. A book of worship... filled with songs to be sung... poetry to be shared aloud and offered in private prayer. The Psalms give voice and text to the full range of human emotions. They were written long ago, and yet they shed light on feelings we struggle to express whether in our moments of triumph or depths of sadness.

It's week three of Singing the Lord's Song. And following the lead of Walter Brueggemann's book Spirituality of the Psalms this week's emphasis are the Psalms of Disorientation. You may know them more commonly by the word complaint, or lament. Out of 150 Psalms, forty-two fall into the lament category, nearly 1/3 of them. Our ancestors did not shy away from bringing praise and adoration to God, but they also brought their darkest thoughts of fear, envy, grief, and anger. They did not presume that all is cheery in the Kin-dom of God. These complaints occupy a significant portion of their book of worship.

And perhaps that is why I so love to sing this hymn: *My Life Flows On* verse 1

*My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentations.  
I hear the clear though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

Even amidst grief, doubt, and troubles the words of our faith provide comfort, hope, and assurance in the God who created, loves, shelters, and cares for us. As a church and denomination our services are filled with a predominance of praise and adoration. It seems we avoid passages in the Bible with uncomfortable topics or phrases. They are a struggle to read and understand. Believe me, there are many sighs of relief in every Disciple bible class when we finish the Old Testament portion. It can be dreary hearing repeated warnings by the prophets, and the anticipated lack of response by the Israelites. Can't we skip over the Exodus, exile, destruction of the Temple? Let's get to Jesus.

In a word, "no," for we cannot fully know joy or peace unless we have experienced sorrow and sadness. Context changes the image from pen and ink to watercolors. So why does our liturgy seemingly overflow with praise, adoration, wonder, and awe?

Brueggemann in the Spirituality of Psalms offers a suggestion regarding this:

*"I think that serious religious use of the complaint psalms has been minimal because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God's "loss of control."*

The Psalms are a treasure trove of poetry, poetry meant to express emotions, reveal a different perspective on life, perhaps causing us to learn something new about ourselves, or God or our relationship with God.

I offer that God does not “lose control” as we or the Psalmist perceive it, but rather our personal “loss of control” that may be the obstacle. God is and always has been the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega, creator of all that lives and breathes on the earth. We are most comfortable when the focus is on the positive, and yet the messy, complicated and tragic events of life are when we most need a listening, loving, and caring ear.

Brueggemann uses the title Psalms of Disorientation. Now if you have ever been in an accident or suspected of having a concussion it is commonplace to have the following questions asked of you: What’s your name? Where are you? What day and time is it?

Person, place and time. If these questions are successfully answered, you are oriented. It seems to me hardest times come when person, place and time are in order; but your place in the world, role in your family, personal health, your satisfaction at work, or relationship with God is in turmoil.

I found it compelling Googling the word “disorientation” and that Merriam-Webster defines it as a state of “having lost one’s sense of direction”. To be lost. Without a compass. No illumination on the path before us. Cold, hungry, seeking shelter, tired, scared, angry. Looking for home when home is obscured or unrecognizable. That’s disoriented.

In the book of Psalms, we find a model of where to go in times of disorientation. The Psalmist and our ancestors took their pain directly to God. There was no concern for political correctness. They spoke straight from the heart. Isn’t that necessary in any relationship, especially one grounded in a covenant? For God is who they trusted in, found strength in and ultimately wanted comfort from. Their prayers and songs are our prayers and songs, our book of worship. In them, our ancestors gave name to the breadth and scope of human emotions. They trusted God with their most personal and painful of thoughts.

In Psalm 13, the Psalmist complains -

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul?*

Feelings of abandonment, great sorrow, rejection.....and yet it seems in the course of naming these most private of thoughts, a change is occurring in the soul of the wounded.

*But I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

In Psalm 79, the Psalmist grieves over the devastation and destruction of Jerusalem. The Babylonian assault has left the temple in ruins. The remnant of Israel is marching on foot to Babylon. Psalm 79 is a communal complaint asking for retribution against these same enemies, and yet at the conclusion of the chapter, the psalmist again turns to God. Bargaining still, but attempting to close the distance.

*Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors  
the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord.  
Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,  
will give thanks to you forever;*

And finally, in Psalm 86, the Psalmist is pleading with God

*Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me for I am poor and needy.  
Be gracious to me, O Lord. For to you do I cry all day long.  
Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.  
In the day of my trouble I call on you for you will answer me.*

With every utterance of despair, there is an equally strong expectation that the Psalmist will be listened to until we hear these words of hope and assurance.

*I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,  
For great is your steadfast love toward me;  
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.*

Call it a song, the Lord's song. What flows through our life and sustains us is the steadfastness of God; the knowledge that regardless of circumstance, attitude, confusion, or despair that God loves us and holds us in the warmth of an embrace.

Whether you are navigating personal difficulties, have concern about our denomination's future, are horrified at the images and reports coming from Afghanistan, weep for the residents of Haiti: leave them with God. God can handle it. God loves us. God hears us. God listens to us. God can handle the worst we have to offer. God is the "rock to which we cling." And when we are brave enough, the very naming of our doubts and fears can be the very thing that frees us, that leads us home, that puts the world back on its axis that provides the hope of restoring our orientation.

Are we singing the Lord's song? If only to give voice to the thoughts in our head, until our hearts and soul can sing with equal enthusiasm.

Oh may it be true for each and every one of us. Amen.