

Season after Pentecost/Psalms 13

June 18, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: John 1: 14-17; Psalm 13

"Where's God?"

Grace to you and peace from our Triune God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

A young boy had just gotten his driver's permit and inquired of his father, an evangelist, if they could discuss the use of the car. His father took him to the study and said to the boy, "I'll make a deal with you, son. You bring your grades up from a C to a B-average, study your Bible a little, and get your hair cut and we'll talk about the car."

Well, the boy thought about that for a moment and decided that he'd best settle for the offer, and they agreed. After about six weeks the boy came back and again asked his father about the car.

Again, they went to the study where his father said, "Son, I've been really proud of you. You've brought your grades up, and I've observed that you've been studying your Bible and participating a lot more in the Bible study class on Sunday morning. But I'm really disappointed since you haven't got your hair cut."

The young man paused a moment and then said, "You know dad, I've been thinking about that and I've noticed in my studies of the Bible that Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, and there's even strong argument that Jesus himself had long hair."

To which his father replied, "You're right, son. Did you also notice that they all WALKED everywhere they went?"¹

Sometimes, things do not go the way we anticipate. We think we have it planned out. We think we have our ducks in a row. We think we're ready for what is to come. Then the unexpected happens. The bottom falls out. You are NOT where you thought you would be. And you wonder, "Where is God?"

That is the background for Psalm 13. It is a psalm of lament. It is a prayer of passionate grief and disappointment. The psalms of lament are songs of sorrow, regret, anger and loss. And all those powerful, dark sentiments are aimed directly at God. One-third of the psalms are laments — finger wagging, fist shaking, bitter cries lifted to God from faithful believers who want to know when God plans to show up. “Before someone says, ‘No faithful believer should ever feel that,’ it’s worth noting how many people in the Bible”² did call God out, among them — Abraham, Moses, Naomi, David, writer of Lamentations, and prophets. Jesus himself prayed a psalm of lament from the cross, “Lord, Lord, why have you forsaken me?”

Yet we in the modern church seem to discourage lament. We want to pretend that believing in God will bring us ease, success and exception from hardship or pain. We want those who look at followers of Jesus to think if you believe you will be always able to meet any challenge with a song in our hearts and a smile on our face. Both perceptions are dangerous lies with grave consequences. When we cannot be honest about our pain, discouragement or grief healing becomes more difficult and we build barriers that separate us from one another and even God. When we make people believe that their faith is at fault if they are feeling lost or desperate, we are only causing more hurt, while presenting our Lord as a stern, unfeeling deity. When we portray Christians as above pain or able to cope with any adversity without distress, we are not only being dishonest but turning people away from the church.

“A Presbyterian pastor once spoke of former parishioners, a husband and wife, both college professors, very active in the church, who suddenly stopped coming. Some time passed and one day, while shopping at the mall, she ran into this couple. “I have missed seeing you at church,” she said. They explained that their teenage son had gotten into some terrible trouble with drugs and alcohol and he was taking a great deal of their time and energy. Then they added that lately, instead of the Presbyterian Church, they had been worshiping with a Pentecostal congregation because they felt they could be honest there

and cry there and no one would mind. In fact, the others would cry with them.”³ It grieved the pastor that this couple hadn’t thought their home congregation wouldn’t accept or embrace them in crisis and tears. She thanked God they found a community that did not prize the appearance of having it all together over the messiness of real life and compassionate companionship with one another.

The first lesson of the lament psalms is that faith does not ask us to deny our experiences and feeling. God’s gift of eternal love frees us to be open and honest with ourselves and God. Our Lord is loving and big enough to accept and care about our scolding, tears and rage. God wants nothing to get in the way of our relationship with God. It is a faithful prayer to lament. God hears. At the cross, we see that God bears human pain and suffering into God’s own self until it can be transformed into something different and life-giving. It is not unfaithful to be upset or angry with God. Whether it is for reasons of false piety or fury, the thing that is more hurtful is turning away from the very source of love, life and transformation when we need God most. Psalms of lament teach us to turn toward God with all our hearts, especially when they are broken or seething. Psalm 13 shows a way to do it.

Psalms of lament usually follow the pattern we see in Psalm 13. They begin with addressing God and complaint, holding nothing back. (Ps 13: 1-2) It then moves into petition, telling what is wanted from God. (Vs. 3-4) “Finally, when the hurt and anger are fully vented, something unexpected happens. We see it in psalm 13 in verses 5 and 6. The speaker is, at the end, assured of being heard and ‘dealt with bountifully.’ What follows is praise.” What has changed between verses 4 and 5? **“It is the arrival of hope that is born of memory.** ‘Yes, things are AWFUL, but I can remember a time when they were not awful, when God’s care for me was much more evident, and I am convinced that such a day will come again.’”⁴ That is the second lesson of psalms of lament. Be honest about the situation AND remember that the same Lord who has walked with you through other bad times is walking with you now. It will not always be this way. Jesus did not stay dead in the tomb.

Pastor David Leininger wrote, "It seems to me that the church, when it is at its best, lives its life between verses 4 and 5. We hear that deep SIGH when words cannot come. We hear the laments from both within and without as people feel free and safe to speak to their anguish. Between verse 4 and 5 tears are shed, because when the church is at its best, we rejoice with those who rejoice, but we also weep with those who weep. Between verses 4 and 5 we remember the despair of Good Friday that was answered by the delight of Easter."⁵ The church is at its best when we don't try to deny or ignore the pain of people or the world but instead notice and listen. Believing God is present and love will be victorious somehow, someday, someday, we follow God's lead to be present and supportive with those who are limping, mourning or doubting.

The poet Ann Weems and her Presbyterian minister endured the death of their son Todd, who was brutally murdered just after his 21st birthday. One way Weems battled through the darkness was to dwell with the psalms of lament and write her own feelings. She wrote this about living between verse 4 and 5 of Psalm 13:

*In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of Life,
there is a deafening alleluia
rising from the souls
of those who weep,
and of those who weep with those who weep.
If you watch, you will see
the hand of God
putting the stars back in their skies
one by one.⁶*

"That is life between verse 4 and 5. 'Through Tears — With Hope.' A promise of healing and wholeness"⁷ even as you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. This is God's church — aware, awake and tending to the hurt, needful and alienated, not with platitudes or admonishments, but by accompanying them with tears, hugs, smiles, silent presence, hope and service.

We are living in a time of great lament. The ground has shifted in ways we don't understand. The bottom seems to have fallen in out of peaceful public discourse and mutual

respect in discussions. We have no idea what it will mean that the average cell phone user checks it every 15 minutes. Each day we seem to hold our breath wondering what will be the lead story in the evening news. But I am not just speaking of the world; I am speaking of Haven. We may joke about the number of people who are dealing with difficult and chronic orthopedic problems but we know it's no joke for them. On an average Sunday, we will have among us folks who visited an urgent care that week, or dealt with diabetes, high blood pressure, heart and digestive issues and still others who had their umpteenth argument with their teen, troubles at work, worry about elder parents or financial trials.

And while most do not wear their hurts and pain like a visible badge, I do hope — I do pray — this is a place where you do not have to pretend all is well and you are “just fine” when you are not . . . I hope this is a place where you can celebrate accomplishments and joys and where you can cry during worship and someone will offer you a tissue or squeeze your hand. I hope this is a place where we can lift our best, our worst, our ambivalence and frazzledness to a God, who wants to hear and hold it all in God's own transforming heart and hands. That is a church and persons who live between verses four and five, between tears and hope, trusting one another but most importantly trusting in a God who is fiercely steadfast and compassionate. That is why we still sing and praise together, even when tears may roll and we may lament individually or as a community. We sing and praise God, no matter our feelings or circumstances – not in denial, nor dismissing hurt — but because we hold on to a God who has hold of us always. We sing our alleluias and thanks, because God is always with us, always for us and we don't ever want anyone to forget WE ARE — GOD'S OWN . . . WE ARE — GOD'S OWN . . . WE ARE — GOD'S OWN. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 6/17/19

(Many thanks to Rev. Dr. David Leininger, whose sermon on the Psalm 13 (“Life Between Verses 4 and 5”) provided the direction and inspiration for this sermons.) See Endnotes below.

ENDNOTES

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1. Author unknown
 2. Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, Psalm 13: Life Between Verses 4 and 5" as posted on www.sermonwriter.com
 3. Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, Psalm 13: Life Between Verses 4 and 5" as posted on www.sermonwriter.com
 4. Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, Psalm 13: Life Between Verses 4 and 5" as posted on www.sermonwriter.com
 5. Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, Psalm 13: Life Between Verses 4 and 5" as posted on www.sermonwriter.com
 6. Ann Weems, Psalms of Lament, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), p. 97
 7. Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, Psalm 13: Life Between Verses 4 and 5" as posted on www.sermonwriter.com