

“Out of the Depths”

Introduction: The psalm before us is from a collection of 15, known as the psalms of ascent (120-134). These were likely psalms that were sung and prayed by pilgrims making their way up (ascending) to the holy city – Jerusalem – for one of the major annual Jewish festivals. (Did Tom sing them as he made his way along the Camino de Santiago?!) Additionally, since the temple in Jerusalem had 15 steps, it has been suggested that a different psalm could have been sung or prayed as each step up was taken.

In any case, these psalms helped mark the pilgrim journey as both physical and spiritual. In particular, Psalm 130 has to do with getting the pilgrim’s heart right before God, and inviting the community to do so as well. It begins in the depths and takes us on a steady and sure climb to the heights of God’s love for us.

I. Out of the Depths (vv. 1-2)

A. What are these depths that the pilgrim is experiencing? The word refers to deep waters, and as we said when Jesus and his disciples encountered a storm while out on a boat in the Sea of Galilee, these turbulent waters represented in ancient days the chaotic forces that challenge human life. Psalm 69 voices these turbulent waters more pointedly: “I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me” (69:2). As we read through the psalms, we see the worshippers mentioning several options for the cause of such turbulence – the attacks of various enemies, a period of physical illness, relational difficulties – to name a few

II. The God of Forgiveness (vv. 3-4)

A. What we learn as we read on is that in this case, his despair is self-inflicted. It is caused by his own sin and consequent guilt. This also puts the psalm in the category of a penitential psalm, of which there are 7, each acknowledging that sin is real and that it opens up a yawning chasm of separation between the offender and God. Sin, is of course, something we’d rather not talk too much about. Back in the 1980’s, during what was called the “seeker sensitive” movement in many churches, talk about sin got downsized, and even eliminated during sermons and worship services, in order, it was thought, not to turn people away from church. Let’s just try to be nicer and kinder and all will be well. Certainly, we don’t want to be seen wagging bony fingers in people’s faces condemning them for their sin (that should turn people away!), but nor do we want to ignore it and hope that it goes away. We can learn from this pilgrim who sees himself clearly and honestly, and knows that because of his sin, he cannot stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God.

B. But what he also sees clearly is not a bony finger wagging God, but a God of incredible mercy. This God does not keep a record of sin. Instead, this God has a record of not keeping records! Instead of pulling out a spiritual rap sheet detailing all of our misdeeds, he is busy forgiving us on a rolling basis: “But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.” The way we know the depth of his forgiveness is that we continue to exist! God is in fact so forgiving that it frees us with light hearts, and spirits sensitive to his grace, to serve him.

The order is important here. Not: we try to serve rightly so that God will forgive us. But: we are forgiven, so that we can then experience a relationship that leads to service. As we will sing in a few minutes, “I set my hope on Jesus, my rock, my only trust, who set his heart upon me first.”

III. Faithful Waiting (vv. 5-6)

A. In light of this knowledge, his awareness of his sin, and his awareness of God’s mercy, the pilgrim sees himself in a posture of waiting, banking on the promises of God while he waits – “in his word I put my hope.” It’s a similar posture in his mind to a guard whose job it is to keep watch throughout the darkness of night, yearning for the sun to rise and the dawning of a new day. While he waits, he’s not just sitting around doing nothing. A previous psalm says it best:

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises. [119:147f]

His trust is that no matter how deep his depths, that God can still hear him, still be attentive to his cry, and will forgive him when morning comes. As Tish Harrison-Warren puts it,

I need to develop the habit of admitting the truth of who I am—not running to justify myself or minimize my sin. And yet, in my brokenness and lostness, I also need to form the habit of letting God love me, trusting in his mercy and receiving again his words of forgiveness and absolution over me. [*Liturgy of the Ordinary*, 56]

IV. Communal Confession and Hope (vv. 7-8)

A. Importantly, the pilgrim isn’t done until he widens the focus from his own personal sins and need of forgiveness to those of his nation, inviting his community to experience and enjoy what he has: “O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.” The invitation is to a time of communal confession, a time when we repent and receive forgiveness together (as we do on communion Sundays). It’s a time to acknowledge that our sins do not only affect us but others, and that we participate at some level in the sins the community commits. So it is that we gather for worship, as Harrison-Warren reminds us, not because we are “pretty good people” but because we are a new people marked by grace in spite of ourselves, because of the work of Christ.

B. Christ’s work, though still in its preliminary stage at this point, is anticipated in the very last verse: “He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.” *He himself* is the Gospel. Jesus is God himself, coming and searching earnestly for us, like a woman who has lost a coin or a shepherd who has lost a sheep, dying to rescue us and rising to bring us new life. “He has rescued us,” as Paul writes to the Colossians, “from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13f). Or, as the writer of Hebrews explains: Christ...through his blood, has washed us clean, not outwardly, as with the old sacrificial system, but inwardly, from acts that lead to death, so that we may be fit for a relationship of service with the living God (9:14).

Let us celebrate that washing as we come to the table together.