

July 1, 2018

Psalm 130: Keeping Pace

Welcome! We are starting a five week series on the Psalms. Gabe is out for the month of July. Two of our former senior pastors will be with us: Greg Ogden the next 2 weeks, and Keith Potter the last 2 weeks in July.

It's summer season and that so often means travel! I imagine many of you have made plans for a trip this summer. For the majority of Americans, the month of July is the most popular time for a vacation.

Travel is one of those things that we both anticipate and dread. It's exciting and it's exasperating. It can often be challenging! Long lines at TSA, delayed flights, crowded planes, jet lag...traffic jams...kids asking Are we there yet? The person behind you kicking your seat...the tiredness that comes from long days of travel...We endure it for the adventure that lies ahead; for the joy of seeing friends and family.

If you are planning a road trip, most of us think about what kind of music we want while we're driving. Recent research shows that the most popular playlist for your time in the car is classic rock. 27% of you favor country music while 25% of will tune into Golden Oldies. Travel and music just seem to go together. We create playlists just for our road trips.

The Israelites knew something about travel. Imagine what it was like for them as entire communities – old, young, -- made this trek to Jerusalem. They traveled to Jerusalem in order to worship together at the Temple, to ask and receive forgiveness, to celebrate God's faithfulness. Most observant Jews made three trips a year to Jerusalem. They sacrificed the comforts of home in order to be in Jerusalem to worship God. They accepted the dangers of travel.

When they left home, they had to carry with them everything they would need for the journey – the food for them and their animals, wood for cooking, blankets for sleeping. We can imagine the anxious preparations to leave home, the excitement at the start of the journey, the fatigue of the trip, the tediousness of putting one foot in front of another mile after mile, and perhaps feeling the tiredness dissipate as Jerusalem came into sight.

They knew something about putting together a playlist for their travel too! Their songs of choice were the psalms, specifically those psalms of ascent. Psalms 120 – 134 are referred to as psalms of ascent and were sung as the Jews made their annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for festivals such as Passover and the Day of Atonement. Jerusalem is set on a hill, and it's a steep climb to reach it. On my first trip to Israel, as we traveled to Jerusalem, I was reminded of the road to Tahoe; you know you are traveling up, you are on a steep climb. For the Jews traveling to Jerusalem for the festivals, the ascents were not only literal but a metaphor for life, life lived upward toward God—advancing from one level of maturity to another.

Like the Israelites, we too are called to pilgrimage. The Christian life is a climb—a journey of constant growth, sacrifice, and trusting God for what we cannot see. As Eugene Peterson said, we are pilgrims, and we are also disciples—always moving to be closer to our teacher and Lord and always learning.

We are looking today at Psalm 130. We are going to look at three aspects of this psalm: our distress and God's rescue; God's grace, forgiveness, forgetfulness; the communal nature of the life of faith

The psalm begins with a pilgrim crying out to the Lord in distress. But it's also a psalm of hope. The pilgrim-disciple cries out from the depths, placing her hope in God's forgiving love. Let's read...

Psalm 130 English Standard Version (ESV)

My Soul Waits for the Lord

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

The psalm begins in the depths of despair. This psalm summarizes the searching, grieving, longing to be forgiven, with a one powerful metaphor for trouble...out of the depths... It is a bold prayer offered to God from the universal human experience.

Who among us has not felt, at some point in life, that they were THIS close to drowning? That they were treading water, their strength was failing, and the waters were about to close over their head and they will drown?

These are the times that we need God's help immediately. A person who is in deep water and feels close to death cannot spare many words. He cries out to God with urgency, in desperation and helplessness. Do you know one of THE most spiritual prayers? HELP! We cry out to God, hoping God will respond.

The psalm begins in a place of overwhelming trouble, problems that threaten to drown us, actions that make us feel cut off from God, alienated from our maker. We cry out, and God hears us. God is attentive to our cry for help.

The depths are often a metaphor for deep water, the valley of despair. We experience pain, frustration, fear. We cry out to God trusting in God's mercy...God's character is known. We are asking for tender love rather than tough love. Tough love is when we let others experience the consequences of their action. We often say, "He or she needs to know there are consequences for their actions. You reap what you sow." Tender love is the father in the story of the prodigal son. It's always hoping for reconciliation. It's hardly even notices when others do it wrong. When we feel pressed down, afflicted, oppressed, demoralized, far from the safe haven of comfort, rest, familiar faces and places, we seek comfort, hopes, grace and mercy. We want tender love. We want to be received like the father of the prodigal son welcomed him home.

In this psalm, the idea of deep water, the depths, can mean events outside our control, such as the death of a loved one. Or it can mean events within our control, our sin. It can refer to any chaotic forces that threaten human life.

When we say the word "sin" we often think of actions. And sometimes we do sin through what we do, but there is another definition: I like this Ignatian explanation of sin: sin is disordered attachment. It's when we love anything more than God, when we place our hope in anything other than God. It is any physical or emotional habit that gets in the way of my being available to God? What is my first response to stress, fear, worry, or pain? Is it anger? Fear? Hyperactivity? Any habit that helps us avoid authentic engagement with God is a form of unhealthy attachment.

Verse 3 tells us, that "**If** You (God) were to mark sins...we would be overwhelmed, truly in a deep valley, truly experiencing the waters closing over our head. The psalmist stresses the grace-filled nature of God by emphasizing **But** with You is forgiveness. No matter how horrific our circumstances, we have hope because of God's grace. No matter how much we have sinned, we have hope because God is merciful. He forgives and restores. Notice the unexpected result of our forgiveness: "that we might learn to fear you." If the word "fear" brings to mind negative connotations, we can substitute the word "reverence." You might think that the experience of forgiveness would lead to taking God for granted. In fact, however, when we truly grasp the impact of our sin, and when we truly realize the wonder of God's forgiveness, the more we will be drawn to reverence. One of my seminary professors gave this definition of spiritual maturity: we are becoming spiritually mature when we have a growing awareness of just how great our sin is, and a growing awareness of just how great God's grace is.

Martin Luther called Psalm 130 a "Pauline" psalm because of its emphasis on the forgiveness of sins through God's grace

Psalm 103 reminds us, as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Hebrews 8:12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." Have you ever thought that God is forgetful? The one thing he forgets is our sin.

The psalm begins in the lowest places and takes us up to the heights of God's love. By the grace and love of God, we will be raised out of the depths. God is understood as the one who forgives sin, who come to those who wait, who gives us hope, who is characterized by steadfast love. Eugene Peterson says in everyday language: God makes a difference, God is not rejecting. God is not ambivalent. God is not arbitrary. God is not stingy.

While we wait, we hope. The worshipper waits for God and for His word. To wait for the Lord carries the meaning of hope. We wait and we hope as individuals and we wait and hope as a community.

We see there is a present reality and a future hope expressed in this psalm. The psalmist begins with a personal statement: he is in the depths, he cries out to the Lord. Then the pronouns change. The I/Thou nature of the psalm now becomes I/The Lord, and eventually even the "I" becomes the community. Why?

I think it has to do with the present reality and future hope. As individuals we experience personal valleys, moments of being overwhelmed, needing God's grace in a very personal way. And we experience communal valleys; as part of the body of Christ, what affects one part of the body affects us all. The Lord is faithful not only to us but to the entire community.

Remember that in the Hebrew the word "wait" is almost synonymous with "hope." The psalmist beginning in verse 5, and continuing to the end of the psalm, waits and hopes. He

uses the example of the night watchmen, who guard the city until dawn. This was a fairly uncommon profession; why does he use this example?

In this time when most people were dependent on the sun for light, people worked from dawn to dusk. The coming of the night brings release from work. If the man was a day-laborer, he also receives his wages. With the coming of darkness, there is release, a chance for renewal, an opportunity for rest. You ceased your labors and rested. But that rest – that sense of peace – is dependent on those who keep watch over the city at night – the night watchman.

If you are a night watchman, you are awake during the time that the rest of the community is sleeping and resting. You are the one who must stay awake, brave the cold of the nights, strain your eyes for any dangers appearing on the horizon. There is a sense of anxiety and a tense anticipation of the dawn. I can picture a night watchman walking along the walls surrounding the city, saying, "No breaches of security are happening on MY watch." I can imagine moments of hyper-alertness alternating with moments of fighting sleep. He longs for the dawn, which brings daylight and confidence, and delivers the watchman from his stressful job.

This psalm shows us two different types of stress: the immediate – I'm drowning! Help me now! And the second type of stress may be more hidden from those around us, but just as painful and difficult. Those times of waiting. I wait for the Lord. It is a common human condition – waiting for God. There is not one of us who has not been, at some point in life, in the depths – in a profound place of waiting: waiting for payers to be answered, waiting for surgery to be over, waiting for a yes after hearing no, no, no; waiting for peace to prevail, waiting for things to make sense again, waiting for reconciliation when relationships break down,

waiting for healing to come, waiting for life to end, waiting for new life to begin. We all know what it is like to wait, but we also live in a time and culture increasingly impatient with waiting.

The Bible is filled with stories of people waiting: Noah waiting for the flood waters to recede; Sarah waits for a child; Jacob waits seven years to marry Rebekah; the Israelites wait through oppression in Egypt, then wait 40 more years in the wilderness. Our faith is found on a journey through long seasons of waiting. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits. And in his word I hope. In the Hebrew, the terms wait and hope are rough synonyms. This waiting, hoping for God, means to live with the confidence that things as they are in the depths, are not as they will be. Forgiveness leads to liberation. Life will be transformed.

Like the night watchman, we wait for the dawn. The dawn always comes. Even when God may seem hidden from us, leaving us alone in the dark, God is present. He is at work. God will end our time of waiting – he will restore hope to us – as surely as the dawn comes in the morning.

How do we know this? Because it is God's nature. The psalmist uses the phrase "with God" to express God's character. God is kindness and delivers us. He does this as individuals and as community.

Psalm 130 doesn't make the tense of "wait" clear. It could mean "I have waited," meaning it's an affirmation of God's presence, or his rescue of us in the depths of our crisis. It's remembering something that happened in the past. It could mean, "I am waiting," meaning it's a present need

Think again for a moment of the conditions under which the Jews would have been singing this psalm. It was probably one of the psalms of ascent they would sing as they walked up to Jerusalem for the day of Atonement. They walked

through a land promised to them by God but occupied by a hostile force, the Romans. A time to remember our sins and to ask God for forgiveness. Imagine this whole community on the move. There would be those on the journey who would slow down the rest of the travelers. They might be old, needing to walk at a very slow pace, or even be carried by others. They might be young, needing to stop to eat more frequently. Those physically stronger had to adjust their abilities to accommodate those who moved more slowly. The slower they walked, the longer the trip took, increasing their risk of danger on the road. But for the strong to go ahead and leave behind those more vulnerable also increased risk and danger.

Finding unity with others takes work as well as risk. Walking together as a community requires vulnerability and intimacy, trust and the laying down of self. Why should we bother to slow our strides so others can keep up? Because God created us for community. Life in God, Life with Others, Life for Others. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and love your neighbor as yourself. We belong to God and we belong to one another.

It's easy to be a tourist of Christianity, to enjoy the music, to say a quick prayer, and then to shake ourselves free, to get out for a cup of coffee, and it's easy to leave the group when the pace becomes too burdensome or annoying. But we are called to do life together, to extend grace to others as we wish to receive grace. We are called to be travelers together.

We often want tender love for ourselves while showing tough love to others. As we travel together on our journey to Christ, it's easy to become frustrated and aggravated

when our travel experience doesn't go as we plan. Traveling often brings out our fears, anxieties. It throws us into close contact with those we might prefer to avoid. But there we are...stuck together traveling in the same direction – often with the same goal – to get home.

Eugene Peterson in his book on discipleship based on the Psalms of Ascents, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, It's dangerous – harmful to Christians when we believe that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all it can be done quickly and efficiently. Google does not teach us how to wait.

What happens when we ignore the reality that each of us is connected; that our actions make a difference? I want to show a video that will be difficult to watch. In this video, a 31 year old man has just had a argument with a family member. He needs a cane to walk. In his despair, he walks into a lake with his cane to drown himself. There are 5 boys watching and filming this.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/21/police-see-charges-after-teens-film-mock-drowning-man-mayor-says/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3ad6417fe863

(Diane, please play until 0.49)

This is a shocking story. This is a heartbreakingly sad story. These teenaged boys filmed and made fun of a man who drowned in front of their eyes, saying, "You shouldn't have gone in."

It's easy for us to judge and condemn these boys. It's easy to ask, how could they just stand by and let someone drown? It's easy to say, "I would never do

that." What if God said to us, I told you not to go in the water. You shouldn't have gone in. We would drown. The waters of the deep would close over our heads.

What is our responsibility to help those around us? Even when we don't know them personally? What does Jesus say about loving our neighbor? And how does he define neighbor? We are called to community...because in community, with all our differences, with all the things that might annoy us about the other...that is where God's grace is.

The Psalms of Ascents provide a necessary antidote by directing people of faith to remember who we are and where we are going.

Psalm 130 tells us that with God there is forgiveness, there is redemption. And while we receive forgiveness and redemption as individuals, there is a real sense that we must give to others what God has given to us. As we travel together, slowing our pace so all can keep up with us, so we can walk together, lead us to the New Jerusalem, to the place where God himself will dwell with his people, and will himself wipe away every tear from every eye. We are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father. All will be made clear, all will be healed, all will be forgiven.