

The Prodigal's Psalm

Meta

Date: June 9, 2024; Pentecost 3B

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Genesis 3:1–21

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 4:13–18

Mark 3:20–35

Opening

It's good to be back after a week away. (This is about as tan as I get.)

Last week Fr. Thomas opened our series on the Psalms and spoke about how the musicality of the psalms—singing and chanting—shapes our memory.

Not only do songs shape your memory, they take you somewhere. Many songs mimic the arc of a journey—departure, exploration, and return. A collection of songs becomes a sojourn, whether Vivaldi takes you through the Four Seasons in four movements or U2 meditates on the idea of America across an album of 12 tracks known as the Joshua Tree.

The Soul in Pilgrimage

Our psalm for this Sunday, Psalm 130, belongs to a collection of psalms known as the Songs of Ascent. Much like a hymn book has a section appointed for seasons, such as Advent or Christmas carols, the Songs of Ascent are a section of the Psalms appointed for pilgrimage. Beginning in Psalm 120, the Songs of Ascent include fifteen pilgrimage psalms. These songs are going somewhere.

Three times a year—the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles—God commanded all of Israel to leave their homes and assemble in Jerusalem. To go up to Jerusalem is truly an ascent. Jerusalem indeed is a city set on a hill, so it's a climb. The Song of Ascents are also translated as the Song of Steps. These are the songs one sings and prays on the road, climbing up to Jerusalem.

(It's fascinating how the pattern remains the same, translated to other areas of life. Once September and October rolls around, college football fans will make pilgrimage to their gridiron cathedrals, streaming in from surrounding cities and states. What do they do en route, walking to the stadium?

They tell stories from years past, sing their fight songs, chant their school cheers, watch their band march in procession.)

Israel sings their prayers as they ascend to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was not only Jerusalem's elevated topography that gives the Song of Ascents their meaning. Israel's story shapes these songs. Many of these psalms, if not all of them, were composed coming out of the experience of exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is the destination; Babylon, the background.

When the psalmist sings 'Out of the depths I cry unto you,' we hear the song of a soul in pilgrimage, leaving behind years of imprisonment, longing for home. Saints praying Psalm 130 through the centuries know that Babylon isn't only an ancient pagan kingdom. Babylon can take residence in the heart. The soul praying the Songs of Ascent wants to leave behind the darkness of Babylon, longs, even faints for the presence of God.

Triads of Ascent

The Songs of Ascent follow a specific pattern along this journey. As a collection, the Song of Ascents are arranged in triads. Fifteen psalms comprise the Song of Ascents; five sets of three psalms. The first psalm in each triad prays from distress and despair; the second psalm remembers God's power and past faithfulness; the third psalm in the triad finds safety and security in God's presence. And then the pattern begins again—distress, remember God, finding safety—home again. Wash, rinse, repeat that pattern five times and you have the Song of Ascents.

I mention the pattern of triads in the Song of Ascents for today's purposes, and we'll also have another ascent psalm in a few weeks' time. When we pray the psalms, we hear *whatis* being said, but we scarcely notice *how* things are being said. This pattern of triads shows us the way of wisdom. There's a cadence in these triads that keep us moving Godward, no matter the circumstances.

We pray from our deepest distress, but we don't stay there. We move consciously to remember God, his power and his faithfulness. Our destination is finding safety in God's presence again.

Our culture doesn't know this way of wisdom. Our culture doesn't know how and often does not *want* to leave lament. That is because the world doesn't embrace the Gospel; the world does not live by hope that comes from the Holy Spirit. There's a gravitational pull in our time to seek personal salvation simply by expressing one's grievances.

This is not the way of lament in the psalms. The psalms pray from places of personal and national devastation, never suppressing what has happened. Yet the psalms never cease crying out to God that he be just and good. *I cry out from the depths because I want to return home.*

Praying from the Middle

Psalm 130 is the middle psalm in its triad. Psalm 129 speaks of long suffering. The psalmist has known affliction from his youth. But when we reach Psalm 130—the middle psalm—the psalmist's suffering takes on a different tone. He suffers and he knows the fault is all his own. He is no innocent sufferer in this instance. He's in the depths of distress because of his own choices. Israel *chose* exile in Babylon, just like Adam and Eve chose exile from Eden. The Lord sent prophet after prophet to warn Israel of their foolishness, to call them to repent, to turn away from their beloved idols.

Israel is the prodigal son, you see. Israel squandered everything, cashed in the full inheritance of God's love and ended up in prison. Psalm 130 is a song of the prodigal son, waking up, coming to his senses after wandering into a far country, finding himself broke and alone. Out of the depths have I called unto you, O Lord. I'm in these depths through my own fault. I've sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what I've done, and by what I've left undone. I'm without excuses. I know better, and now I'm a long way off. Hear my cry from a far country. Let your ears hear my soul pleading for grace and help.

Remembering God

Like the son who came to himself in the midst of pig sty, the psalmist remembers his father's goodness. Can you hear the prodigal psalmist praying out of the depths?

I've been a fool, there's no denying it. If you tallied my foolish ways, the amount of times I've fallen down, no one could stand before you. If I fix my attention on my failures, I'll never leave this land of shadows. Despair would swallow me whole.

This is not my home. My home is with you. I cannot make this right; only you can make this right. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

I remember who you are. 'With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.'

No human being, no god has the patience, the longsuffering, the endurance to love me when I wander from you. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave, the God I love. Yet I remember who you are. You are the God who forgives that you may be feared. Your forgiveness is your holiness! You rejoice in forgiveness!

This is who you are.

Was the Apostle Paul thinking of Psalm 130 when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, 'Love is not irritable and does not count up wrongdoing...love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things?'

Our prodigal psalmist remembers the vast forgiveness of his father. So he's leaving the depths of despair to come home. He's leaving the Babylon of his heart, his going up to Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of the heart.

The Waiting Soul, The Posture of the Watchman

And yet here is where the pilgrimage comes in. When one leaves a far country, one doesn't reach the desired destination immediately. When you leave the Gulf Coast to come, your patience must be tested by traveling through the eternal road construction of Chattanooga.

Psalm 130 not only teaches us how to pray when we fall again—into our familiar failures. Psalm 130 teaches us how to pray in the middle of things—to pray from the middle of our unfinished lives. To pray when I'm moving toward God, desiring and pursuing good and holy things, but haven't attained them yet.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchman for the morning, more than watchman for the morning.

When we stray from the Lord, we want the assurance of forgiveness, the sense of being cleansed. But forgiveness is only the beginning. Our psalmist wants more than forgiveness, more than the assurance of cleansing. He wants the Lord. Nothing else will satisfy. And he knows that means waiting.

He does not complain about waiting. He trusts the time of waiting—when nothing is happening, when God seems most hidden. Even after his big wake up call, he accepts that the Lord is forming him in the middle of things before he reaches home. He is being purified, refined, prepared, made ready for a deeper communion with the Lord. He's known the profound emptiness from all lesser gods, so now he has a single eye for the living God. He is a sentinel, the keeper of the lighthouse, scanning his searchlight in the darkness, waiting for God only. 'My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchman for the morning, more than watchman for the morning.'

The Hoping Soul

The prodigal psalmist, remembering God, lives in hope. He has not reached home yet, he has not experienced a newer, deeper communion with the Lord that he desires. He is content to wait, because he hopes in the word of the Lord. The word of the Lord will not return empty. His hope will be fulfilled.

One day all his failures—his iniquities—will be fully healed. He will know forgiveness, but the fullness of redemption, the complete healing only comes when this pilgrimage ends.

He still prays from the middle, but he prays in hope.

*O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is **plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities!***

Conclusion

Next week, our series in the psalms moves outside of the Song of Ascents. Perhaps we should hear the third psalm in this triad, or at least a portion of it. Here's Psalm 131, the song of the psalmist finally at home.

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

While that makes for a fine closing prayer, completing our journey, today we're meditate most of all on how we seek God in the middle. For that is where we live.

In our Anglican tradition, we have a treasure house of wisdom on the psalms from John Mason Neale, a Victorian priest and poet. He is the author of some beloved Christmas carols like *Good Christian Men, Rejoice* and *Good King Wenceslas*. He also composed collects for all 150 psalms. I close with John Mason Neale's collect for Psalm 130:

Let Thine ears, O LORD, unto which our cry and petition is directed, be open unto our prayers, that they may graciously hear us and mercifully answer our petitions. And since there are many mercies with Thee, we pray Thee, O GOD, condemn us not according to the multitude of our iniquities, but quicken with Thy

plenteous compassion those who confess and return unto Thee, so as to receive our cry out of the deep, and delivering us from worldly things, receive us in Thy courts into the joy of perpetual gladness; through Thy mercy, O our GOD, Who art blessed, and livest and governest all things, to ages of ages. Amen.