

PSALM 130
Lent Mid-Week Message
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 30, 2022

Martin Luther wrote a hymn based on psalm 130. Hymn number 600 in our red book. He loved it...called it a "Pauline" psalm. And I also found out that John Wesley had been listening to a musical adaptation of Psalm 130 when he had his famous, powerful experience of God's grace. He was reflecting on his own sinful state. And suddenly he felt God's love in Christ. As he put it, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." According to him, that experience was what set him on the road to establishing Methodism. So the Holy Spirit has used this Psalm to reach people in a powerful way.

The psalmist is crying out from "the depths." So imagine a person drowning, or being carried away, overcome by a flood. That's the sense of the Hebrew. Then think of the first verses of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." So the deep, the waters, were kind of this chaotic mess of unformed materials that God was going to use to create the universe. But as of yet, until he starts forming it all into a beautiful order, it's all just a watery, unformed, fluid mush. Well, the psalmist is describing his situation as being back in that unformed chaos. He's drowning. And that's what Sin with a capital "S" does to us. It strips the order and purpose out of our lives, makes us helpless, makes us flounder and desperately reach out for anything solid to hold onto. Drowns us.

Or think of Jonah, the prophet who tried to run away from God. Gets on a ship, but a storm comes and is going to destroy the boat and everyone in it. So Jonah tells the crew to throw him overboard into the stormy waves, because he's the one running away from God, he's the reason they're about to die. So he's bobbing on the flood in the darkness, carried along by these powerful huge swells, terrified and about to drown. But then remember, God sends the great fish, the sea monster, to swallow him. While he's in the belly of the beast, what does Jonah do? He sings a prayer to God, which is actually a lot like Psalm 130. And in the end, the monster that swallowed him turns out to be God's agent, saving him from the deep. As scripture puts it, the fish vomits Jonah out, safe on the shore. How ironic!

But that helpless feeling of drowning, being overwhelmed under the weight of death and meaninglessness. A lot of experiences in this world can bring us to that place. Things that happen beyond our control, or our own destructive choices.

When we talk about sin, we often (as moderns) think of sins with a small "s"—as in things we do wrong. Where we trespass across a line, go into territory we shouldn't. We hurt people with our words, we fail to follow through on a promise, etc. Often, those "small s" sins are things we can fix. But it's less common for modern people to think of sin with a capital "S," as in "We confess that we are in bondage to sin, and cannot free ourselves." Scripture is always talking about that cosmic power that destroys us. That malign force of chaos that's constantly driving a wedge between us and our Father in heaven. It knows all our weaknesses. It's always working in the dark, coming at us from our blind side. It's way too big for us. It's clever, but its final goal is

simple—it's to unmake us, to put us back in the primordial mush forever, where we can have no life or relationships or form or purpose. The psalmist feels the full weight of sin; he knows he's somehow responsible for his situation, but he also knows that ultimately he's captive to a power that wants him dead.

Capital "S" sin is tough for unbelievers, because it's common to think there's a rational, straightforward solution to every problem we have. It's like, you made that mistake yesterday...well, just don't do it next time. Now that WWII happened, well, we know all the reasons it happened, so of course we won't do that again. Will we? But scripture tells us something we don't want to hear, which is "no matter how smart you are, life and relationships and human beings—these are not something you'll ever really be able to figure out," because of this power....Sin with a capital "S." The Psalmist knows all about it.

And that's why he goes immediately to his only hope. "Out of the depths, I cry to **YOU, LORD**, Lord hear my voice." If he thought he understood all the reasons for his situation, he'd look to himself for the answer. But he's not wasting time with half-measures. He knows where to go first—to that relationship at the heart of his life. He's drowning, he's deep in the chaos, stripped of all meaning and purpose. But he knows who's there in that chaos...his Creator, who said "Let there be light!" And there was light. Yes, he's in pain. You can hear it: "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." You can feel it, God where are you? Where are you? Where are you? Where are you? At the same time, in his pain, he knows that God will come. As sure as the dawn will break, his deliverer will show up.

The psalm makes me think of the distance between believing that God exists, and having faith in the God of Israel. The distance between those two is like East and West. I remember back in grad school, someone asked me "why do you believe God exists?" And not out loud, but in my heart, I was thinking: "you mean the God I call on every day? The one who hears my voice? The one who runs to me and who scoops me up in his arms? My Father in heaven? The One who pours out never-ending forgiveness? The one who has delivered me a thousand times from my own mistakes, and saved me repeatedly from the hands of those who would hurt me? Do you mean the One who was nailed to a cross, who paid for my life once and for all with his life? The one I wait for whenever I'm lost, because I know he's on his way with life and salvation? The One who has always brought the new day to me? The one who has never failed to come through on his promises? The one who's always given me more, and better, than what I asked for? The One who hung on a cross, so that when I'm there, I know he's there with me? The one who was put in a grave, so that when I'm there, I'll know he's there with me? Yes. If that's the God you're talking about, I believe in him." That's what I said in my heart. Out loud, I said "Jesus is my Savior."

I love how the psalm ends, where suddenly the singer is no longer talking about his or her own situation, but is now exhorting other people: "Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love, and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins." Suddenly, after flailing in the bottomless chaos, the psalmist now has her footing. She hasn't found any earthly place to stand. It's not like suddenly the situation has gotten easier. The psalm does not bring us to that happy conclusion: like "no more pain." She hasn't found a

convenient answer or a philosophy to help her cope with the chaos. No. In God himself is where the psalmist has found a place to stand. That's faith. She's waiting on God to act, she's trusting that God will act. But even *before* God acts, she's standing in the darkness before the dawn, proclaiming the glory of her Savior God who is about to bring the day. That's faith. No wonder Luther loved this psalm.

Like the psalmist says, if God kept records of our sin, we would always be flailing around in the depths. But since we can put all our trust in a God who forgives and saves, we can stand on that promise. No longer are we floundering in our own troubles, but we're actual proclaimers of God. And that proclamation is coming straight out of our own lived experience.

How often do we see that? Believers who have trusted God in the chaos of their own lives so often become those who proclaim the salvation of God all the more powerfully into the world's chaos, for the sake of others. The psalm does not end with worldly victory. The psalmist doesn't say he's healthy, happy and wise at the end of it. There's no sense that the chaos has let up its attack on him. But there he is, proclaiming God's faithfulness to Israel, singing God's forgiveness to us. God is on his way into that chaos to meet him, embrace him, and lift him up. From reading the psalm, we cannot be sure the full victory on that particular battlefield has happened quite yet. But is there any question about who has already won the war?