

THE PSALMS GREATEST HITS

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Two weeks ago in my first message on the Psalms, I suggested that these ancient expressions of faith offer a “no holds barred” approach to God. I suggested that in the witness of Psalm 22 and its indictment of God for being absent from the life of the Psalmist, there is a blunt honesty and candor with God that is an essential part of the equation of faith. When the Psalmist gives vent to his inner anguish by crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he is being truly honest with God. And it is, I believe, precisely this honesty that is essential to cultivating an authentic relationship with God. The one thing that an authentic relationship with God cannot tolerate is pretense or posturing. It is, therefore, essential for us to “tell it like it is” with God. And that is, of course, precisely what the Psalmist does in Psalm 22. He tells it like it is—no holds barred.

It is then, out of this honesty that a new relationship is forged with God, one that reflects a new understanding and a new depth. In his book, “The Message of the Psalms,” Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Psalms can be divided into three distinct categories: Psalms of Orientation—Psalms of Disorientation—and Psalms of New Orientation.

Psalms of Orientation reflect, says Brueggemann, a certain state of well-being and contentedness that has not been challenged by adversity, struggle or darkness. This orientation reflects “the good life” where everything seems to fit into place and go along without any unexpected turns or bumps in the road. To be sure, they reflect a genuine sense of gratitude for the pleasant life that has been experienced, but it is a gratitude untested.

Psalms of Disorientation, as the name would suggest, reflect the experience of life that has “come apart at the seams,” life that has been disoriented and disrupted by tragedy, hurt, struggle and pain. Psalm 22 provides a classic example of a Psalm of Disorientation. When the bubble bursts, when illness strikes, when evil appears to have the upper hand, Psalms of Disorientation often come into play. Life simply isn’t fair and the Psalmist chooses to tell God about it.

Finally, there are, says Brueggemann, **Psalms of New Orientation** that reflect a faith that has been tested, a faith that has walked through the storm and has not only survived, but has begun to thrive. This is a faith that has been forged out of the Psalmist’s willingness to be brutally honest with God, a faith is real and genuine in ways that it never had been before. And for this reason, there is, in the language of the Psalmist, a new level of candor, of depth and substance. The old life, the one of perfect symmetry and order is no longer. That world can never be rebuilt or reclaimed—nor does it need to be. Because now, the Psalmist understands not only God, but himself in a whole new way and a whole new light. There is a depth and a substance to this understanding that never was before.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this change, this transformation is speak of the experience that some people go through when they battle a serious and life threatening illness. Previous to their illness, they may have been appropriately grateful for the good gifts of life. They may have offered their prayers of thanksgiving as they counted their blessings. Life was good and they were more than happy to express their praise to God.

But then came an unexpected turn and an illness that threatened everything—including their very life. Suddenly, they found themselves in a battle for survival, both emotionally and physically. There was nothing easy or gracious about their experience of life. It was hard and difficult and demanding. In this experience of disorientation, the Psalm of praise turns to one of protest and complaint. Life is not fair. God is not fair. And the only clear option it to tell God about it by registering one's passionate complaint and protest.

Then, if one is fortunate enough to survive the storm and their life threatening illness, there is, inevitably, a new expression of thanksgiving and a deeper feeling of gratitude. There is nothing superficial or casual or easy about this form of praise. No, this is an expression of thanks and praise that has been forged out of the depths of one's life experience. Only the one who has looked into the eyes of death can feel the depth of this gratitude. Only the one who has been confronted with their own mortality can experience the heights of this joy. Their psalm to God is indeed, a psalm of new orientation—one that is spoken out of an awareness, an understanding that is new to them.

Perhaps you have known someone who has walked this path from offering psalms of orientation to disorientation to a new orientation. Perhaps you, yourself, have experienced this sequence of emotion and understanding. I imagine that, in all likelihood, you have. You see, this sequential experience of life and God is not contingent upon facing a life threatening illness—although that certainly tends to sharpen one's focus.

The experience of **orientation—disorientation—and new orientation** is one that comes to us in many different forms and in many different phases of our lives. It reflects the kind of wisdom and insight that comes with growth in our faith. We do indeed, see the world differently and understand God and ourselves differently because of the journey that we have taken. Life and faith will never again be the same because we have experienced the Presence of God that can never be taken from us.

Psalm 40 is a psalm that reflects, in part, the new orientation of which I speak. The initial outpouring of the Psalmist to God makes that quite clear. The Psalmist has been in the desolate pit, the miry bog of life. He has known the pain of struggle and the disillusionment of despair. His life has come apart at the seams and he has, somehow, managed to survive the onslaught. In other words, he is still standing! And in grateful response for that fact, he offers his praise to God—praise that has been born out of pain:

This note of praise continues, then, over the next nine verses. The Psalmist makes it clear to God that he himself has been eager to give credit where credit is due. He has publicly and proudly given witness to the saving power of God:

***I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the
congregation. (v.10)***

But then, unexpectedly, the psalmist shifts gears abruptly and beginning with verse 13, moves from word of praise to a prayer for deliverance.

This is, I think, a confusing turn of events. In certain other Psalms, there is also an abrupt turn of feeling and emotion, but usually it is the protest that precedes the praise. The Psalmist may begin in protest, but gradually moves into a concluding note of praise and thanksgiving. In Psalm 40, it is the other way around—praise gives way to protest and lament.

Given this unusual flow, Bruegemann comments: ***“Understood logically, the sequence is wrong. A complaint should not come after the joy of a new song, but experientially, the sequence is significant. It reminds us that the move from disorientation to new orientation is not a straight, single line, irreversible and unambiguous. Life moves in and out. In our daily life, the joy of deliverance is immediately beset and assaulted by the despair and fear of the Pit.”***

“There is,” he notes, “a realism to this psalm, but it is a realism set in profound trust. It is to God that Israel turns in deep need, to God and none other, in trouble as well as joy.”

Bruegemann’s point is significant. Life simply does not guarantee a neat and simple progression from struggle to solution, from pain to promise. We never fully and completely arrive at our intended destination of peace and joy. But instead, we often discover that while there are those moments of peace and joy, they are hardly permanent and, most likely, fleeting. Life has a way of turning the tables on us as the struggles and challenges of life have a persistent way of reasserting themselves.

God, then, is the constant in the midst of the ups and downs of life and it is to God that the psalmist has learned to turn to in seasons of trouble and seasons of joy.

This morning, I have chosen to pair Psalm 40 with a fairly obvious musical reference. Bono, the lead singer for U2 was faced with a recording deadline when he flipped open the Book of Psalms and landed on Psalm 40. He was so taken by the message of this Psalm and its connection to his own life that he quickly lifted the Psalmist’s words and set them to the unique musical blend that U2 is famous for. As time passed, it became something of a tradition for U2 to conclude their concerts by sharing this song and inviting the audience to share in its haunting chorus, **“How long to sing this song?”**

As you listen to 40 from U2, I invite you to reflect upon your own experience of life with its ups and its downs...your own experience of orientation—disorientation—and new orientation.

Think of those moments in which you have experienced the deliverance of God, those moments in which you have tasted the joy and peace of God’s presence. And think of the

ways in which that lingering taste has sustained you in those other moments in which the joy has faded in the face of fear and distrust and the struggle of life.

This is, of course, the reality of life and living. There are seasons of joy and seasons of struggle. That is the way it was for the Psalmist and the way it remains for us today. The one constant, however, is the presence of the God who has loved us and will always love us...the God who will not forsake or abandon us...the God who, even now, walks with us on the road that life wherever it may happen to lead. Amen.