

**“Sometimes It’s Not”**  
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**Text: Psalm 88**  
**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**  
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Before I share the scripture for this week, I’d like to say a few words about the coming month in worship. This month our sermon series is entitled, “How Can I Keep from Singing?” We will focus on the Psalms. The Psalms are the songs of faith of the Hebrew people, covering a wide spectrum in the life of faith. Walter Brueggemann writes, “[T]he psalms...present [people]...when they are most vulnerable in hurt, most ecstatic in naïve joy, most sensitized to life, driven to the extremities of life and faith, when all the covers of modern rationality or ancient convention have disappeared and become dysfunctional.”<sup>1</sup>

Linking his analysis to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, Brueggemann proposes that the psalms can be understood through three interpretive lenses: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.<sup>2</sup> In the coming weeks, we’ll look at examples of all these. Psalms of orientation represent, “the mindset and worldview of those who enjoy a serene location of their lives, characterized by a sense of orderliness, goodness, and reliability of life.”<sup>3</sup> In these Psalms, God is in heaven and all is right with the world. The evil are punished, the good are rewarded and everything works the way it is supposed to work. Put another way, these are the “happy-clappy” psalms. Psalms 1, 37, Old 100<sup>th</sup>, 119, 145 represent a few of these psalms. Sometimes that’s where we are in life. That’s a good thing.

Sometimes we’re not. Which brings us to the second group of psalms described by Brueggemann, psalms of disorientation, also known as psalms of lament. He writes, “[These psalms enter] linguistically into a new distressful situation in which the old orientation has collapsed.”<sup>4</sup> They present situations of dislocation, when the world as it has been known ceases to exist, and we cry out to God for help. They follow a typical pattern of complaint about a present situation, remembrance of God’s saving grace in the past, and conclude with hope God will ultimately come through. Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from the cross, is the best known psalm of disorientation. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Others include Psalm 51, 55, 77, and today’s Psalm 88. Sometimes disorientation is where we are in life.

Then there are psalms of reorientation. They represent a reframing of life, a new way of seeing and living on the other side of disorientation. As Brueggemann writes, in these psalms, “Life has disintegrated but has been formed miraculously again.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the best example of reorientation is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which actually has a grammatical reorientation within it. The psalm begins with orientation— “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” going on to describe green pastures and still waters and right paths—life as it should be. But then we enter the valley of the shadow of death and everything changes, including the grammar of the psalm. The psalmist shifts from talking about God— “the Lord is my shepherd,” to talking with God in the second person. Why? Because of the valley of the shadow of death. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1995,) p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*—see especially pp. 8-15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

YOU are with me; YOUR rod, YOUR staff they comfort me. Now that's a reorientation that leaves us living in the house of the Lord forever. Sometimes the life of faith feels like that.

Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes we find ourselves in a very dark place, where there seems to be no hope. Sometimes all we can feel is sadness and grief and despair. Sometimes things don't work out for us—healing isn't achieved, hope is not experienced, help is nowhere to be found. As I shared the miraculous story of our daughter last week, I was mindful that for every story about a scholarship to a special school there are hundreds of stories where that doesn't happen. Sometimes it is too dark for us to see any way forward. Which brings us to the Psalm for today. Psalm 88 is the most intense lament in all of scripture. It's more of a wail than a lament. I've never read Psalm 88 in church, much less preached it. It is relentless in its cry to God and in its utter despair. It's not what we like to hear when we come to church. And yet, sometimes in the life of faith, it's where we are. Listen for God's word to us from Psalm 88:

<sup>1</sup> *O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,*

<sup>2</sup> *let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.*

<sup>3</sup> *For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.*

<sup>4</sup> *I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;*

*I am like those who have no help,*

<sup>5</sup> *like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,*

*like those whom you remember no more,*

*for they are cut off from your hand.*

<sup>6</sup> *You have put me in the depths of the Pit,*

*in the regions dark and deep.*

<sup>7</sup> *Your wrath lies heavy upon me,*

*and you overwhelm me with all your waves.*

<sup>8</sup> *You have caused my companions to shun me;*

*you have made me a thing of horror to them.*

*I am shut in so that I cannot escape;*

<sup>9</sup> *my eye grows dim through sorrow.*

*Every day I call on you, O LORD;*

*I spread out my hands to you.*

<sup>10</sup> *Do you work wonders for the dead?*

*Do the shades rise up to praise you?*

<sup>11</sup> *Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,*

*or your faithfulness in Abaddon?*

<sup>12</sup> *Are your wonders known in the darkness,*

*or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?*

<sup>13</sup> *But I, O LORD, cry out to you;*

*in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

<sup>14</sup> *O LORD, why do you cast me off?*

*Why do you hide your face from me?*

<sup>15</sup> *Wretched and close to death from my youth up,*

*I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.*

<sup>16</sup> *Your wrath has swept over me;*

*your dread assaults destroy me.*

<sup>17</sup> *They surround me like a flood all day long;*

*from all sides they close in on me.*

<sup>18</sup> *You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
my companions are in darkness.*

While I have never shared this Psalm in worship, I have shared it in the confines of pastoral moments. I've shared it with people who find themselves in places so dark, so desperate, that any word of hope or encouragement in that moment would ring hollow, or worse, shallow, or even worse, ludicrous. Sometimes acknowledgement of the present reality is the most pastoral thing we can do.

I've also shared it with people living with clinical depression. In any given year, roughly one in ten Americans live with diagnosed depression, and it is the leading cause of disability for people ages 15-44. <sup>6</sup> Incidents of anxiety and depression are on the rise among our children, with our present population facing the highest rates of depression and anxiety in our nation's history.<sup>7</sup>

In her book, *Jesus Wept: When Faith and Depression Meet*, Episcopal priest, the Rev. Barbara Crafton writes of the realities of this disease and the ways it impacts not only people of faith, but those who care for them. She names the frustrations of loved ones living with a person battling depression. She names the things people say. "Didn't she try that doctor I told her about? Why didn't the new drug work. Did he follow up on that herbal thing I showed him? Didn't she read the book I gave her...Life is tough. It's tough for everyone. You've got it pretty good compared to some people. Get over it."<sup>8</sup>

She goes on to quote Frances who lives with depression who says, "One of my toughest challenges is the ignorance of well-meaning people... They keep trying to fix it for me. When I have a relapse even though I am taking my meds as usual and I talk with my nearest and dearest I am totally talking to a brick wall...I become frustrated and so do they. When I really have a bad day and can hardly move out of bed, I just want the world to go away."<sup>9</sup> Frances could have written Psalm 88. "For my soul is full of troubles, my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, ... like those whom you remember no more."

When I share this psalm with people who find themselves in this place, believe it or not, it's often heard as good news. It's good news to find in scripture a word that describes where you are, to realize that thousands of years ago, someone else was in that same place, articulating similar feelings, crying out to God in a way they can feel, a way that for them is real. In a strange way, that offers hope.

It offers hope in other ways. There is a boldness to the psalmist's words. That boldness carries a certain strength. These words accuse God of being the reason for the mess. "You have put me in the Pit," "your wrath lies heavy upon me," "you have caused friends and companions to shun me." In the midst of the darkness, the Psalmist can blame no one else but God. And apparently, God can take it. God doesn't get defensive—no defense is offered. The Psalmist is free to rail against God, like Job; and God can take it.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited here: [https://www.hopefordepression.org/depression-facts/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwr-tBRCMARIsAN413WQChr4qx2Ko7D6USe0zIFmE-eTopXA7MfWTYeRik7rtqp3kX9Q1FRoaAndwEALw\\_wcB](https://www.hopefordepression.org/depression-facts/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwr-tBRCMARIsAN413WQChr4qx2Ko7D6USe0zIFmE-eTopXA7MfWTYeRik7rtqp3kX9Q1FRoaAndwEALw_wcB)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Crafton. *Jesus Wept: When Faith and Depression Meet*, (Josie Bass: San Francisco, 2005,) pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

A final sense of hope is found in that in the midst of the darkness, in the depths of this depression, the Psalmist still reaches out to God. Brueggemann writes, “the speaker never entertains the possibility of withdrawing from conversation with God, never considers the prospect that such talk is futile, or that help must be sought elsewhere.” He concludes, “The stubborn resolve of this faith is worth our pondering...Israel’s insistent lament... is finally as much an affirmation of God’s *hesed* (steadfast love,) as is the doxology.”<sup>10</sup> The Psalmist does not doubt God’s steadfast love, nor a claim upon that steadfast love; rather he or she insists that God has a responsibility to help, that God must respond, that order must be restored, healing brought, reconciliation achieved, salvation found. And so, even this bold lament that refuses to look away from the darkness of the moment, that even accuses God of being the reason for problems suffered, this lament is ultimately an act of faith—faith in God’s unending love, no matter what.

Such abiding love that can take even the darkness of Psalm 88 is ultimately our hope. I conclude with the words that conclude Rev. Crafton’s book:

“So it is love that trains us best to withstand the world’s wrongheaded pressures. When someone looks at us in that way, (that is with the steadfast love we know in God,) we begin to know what it is to be surrounded by love, no matter what else happens to us in life. ‘What else’ can encompass a lot: not all of it will be joyful and some of it will be terrible. Some of it will be internal and chemical; some of it will arise from outside us. We cannot prevent all of it...But we can resolve to live together in a way that does not make it worse. We can reach out for help when we need it, and we can tell the truth about those moments. We can understand slick promises of a world in which there is no such thing as defeat as the lies they are. And we can acknowledge that this life is not all there is: we have a context, and it is not just historical and not just physical. It is also eternal.”<sup>11</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Crafton, pp. 155-56.