

OUT OF THE PIT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last week's sermon ended with the King James Version of Psalm 121. I asked you to hear those "old" words (from 1611 A.D. and 550 B.C.) with "new" ears. Today I invite you to listen to the "old" words of Psalm 130 as they are expressed in "new" words from 2014 A.D.

During the Lenten season this past spring, we had a Lenten Bible study called "Praying the Psalms in Lent." We read six of the seven "penitential" psalms in the Bible. Psalm 130 was the next-to-the-last psalm we prayed through on April 6. At some point during the week before we prayed through this psalm, Nancy sent me an e-mail with an attached link to a blog called "Almost Daily Prayer — Passion for God." Our friend and colleague, Chris Denny, who is the minister of the Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church, writes this (almost) daily blog. Last Wednesday I subscribed to Chris' blog and now look forward to getting an almost daily prayer in my e-mail.

On March 31 and April 3, Chris used verses from Psalm 130 to write two prayers about crying out to God from the depths and about waiting on the Lord. I shared the prayers with the folks who gathered on April 6 to pray through Psalm 130. Today I'd like to share them with all of you, so we can hear the "old" words of Psalm 130 with new ears.

Here is the first prayer, based on verses 1-2:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
Cry out!
I join the faithful who have cried out,
Hannah in her childless anguish,
the Israelites enslaved by Pharaoh,
Job out of his deep pain,
Bartimaeus out of his blindness,
Jesus from the cross . . .
My prayer is their prayer;
their prayer is my prayer.*

*“Lord, have mercy upon us!”
You alone know my anguish;
You alone know my need;
You alone know my failures;
You alone know how often
I have sinned against You
in thought, word, or deed
by what I did or by what I left undone.*

*“Lord, have mercy upon us!”
Kyrie Eleison.
“Christ, have mercy upon us!”
Christe Eleison.
Amen.*

The second prayer is called “Waiting . . .”

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

*Waiting, waiting.
Lord,
how much of life is spent waiting.
How many times do I remember my father say,
“Your time’s coming!”*

*But for now I wait and pray,
“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done . . .”
And yet, Lord Jesus, you said,
“The Kingdom of God is at hand!”
And you said that so long ago.
The Kingdom has come,
and yet my life and the life of the world
seems to be the same then as now,
the same now as then.*

*I begin to doubt
your Kingdom’s presence already here.
I trust more that it’s not yet come.*

And so I wait.

And I wonder:

*Do I wait “more than
those who watch for the morning?”*

*Those who search the horizon
for a change in color, a sign of the sun’s rising.*

*Those who long for the darkness to be broken
with the first light of dawn.*

Those who expect the new day, new opportunity, new hope.

*Do I wait actively watching
for your resurrection Son to pierce the darkness
making a day into the Lord’s day
transforming not yet into already
altering life into abundant living?*

*Come, Lord Jesus,
tear open the divide
between my heart and Thine,
that I may see Your kingdom come,
that I may live Your will be done.
Today may I wait not as a sluggard,
but as an expectant mother,
watching for signs of your coming birth
into my life and the life of the world!
Amen.*

When we were in seminary, Nancy worked in the dining hall kitchen at Lingle Hall. She scraped and rinsed dishes, loaded and unloaded “Hobart” the industrial dishwasher, and slung table scraps into the trashcans through the hole in the stainless steel counter. From time to time, she would get to a 2:00 o’clock class just before the bell would ring, after working the lunch shift, and slide into her seat next to me. When I would wrinkle my nose, she’d look at me and say, “Hey, I’ve been in the Pit!”

“In the Pit!” There’s a reason we say “That’s the pits!” when we’re talking about some lousy or very difficult situation. Psalm 130 begins with someone’s honest lament, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!” He’s really saying, “This is the pits, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

An acquaintance and colleague describes leading a study tour in the Middle East a few years ago. The group visited the chapel of the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Many people visit the hospital regularly who are not sick or patients. They come to see

a set of twelve stained-glass windows created by the French-Jewish artist Marc Chagall. The windows were inspired by Jacob's blessings on his twelve sons and Moses' blessings on the twelve tribes of Israel. At the dedication of the chapel windows on February 6, 1962, the artist said, "This is my modest gift to the Jewish people who have always dreamt of biblical love, friendship and of peace among all peoples. This is my gift to that people which lived here thousands of years ago, among the other Semitic people."

The leader of that study group writes about how the windows are set within a domed ceiling so that people who come to see them are naturally directed to look toward heaven. He says, "As we gazed at the windows, however, a member of our group noticed another feature of the chapel. Directly below the windows the floor was sunken, and in the middle of the depressed area was a pulpit. Curious about this design, we asked about this architectural feature. The hospital representative explained, "The floor beneath the windows was made this way because we believe all prayer should be offered 'out of the depths.'"¹

Maybe you're feeling like you're "in the Pit" today. Certainly there have been and will be times when you cry out to God from the depths — from the depths of illness — from the pit of sorrow — from the depths of depression — from the pit of disillusionment — from the depths of worry — from the pit of guilt — from the depths of uncertainty — from the pit of fear.

When we're "in the Pit" and crying out from the depths, it may be hard to hear and take to heart the psalmist's encouragement to "wait for and hope in the Lord!" We're more inclined to want answers right away. We want the problem resolved. We want the pain to go away. We want our hope restored. Psalm 130 honestly acknowledges how we all feel when we're "in the Pit." The psalmist doesn't stick his head in the sand and ignore the dark and difficult times we go through in this life. He doesn't advise us to give up, to throw up our hands, or to depend on ourselves to get out of "the Pit." Instead, he says, "wait for and hope in the Lord."

Why? Why should we wait for and hope in the Lord? An old Scottish preacher once said about the beloved 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to win home at last." In a similar way, Psalm 130 paints a picture of God's three friends who are always with him — forgiveness, steadfast love or grace, and redemption. One person has said, "Wherever [God] goes, whatever way he turns, they accompany him and go with him. To encounter this God is also to meet with grace and forgiveness and abundant redemption."² Our New Testament lesson from Romans 5 this morning says the same thing, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." (Romans 5:1, 8, 10)

We're not alone in feeling like life can be "the pits" sometimes. Then again, we're not alone in calling out to God for his forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

Tradition has it that Saint Augustine wrote the words to the seven Penitential Psalms (including 130) on the walls of his small chamber in the last days of his life, so the words of the psalmist could become his own.

Martin Luther called Psalm 130 one of the "Pauline Psalms." In other words, in these ancient Hebrew words, Luther heard the essence of the gospel which the apostle Paul proclaimed: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

At an afternoon worship service at Saint Paul's Cathedral, John Wesley heard Psalm 130 sung as an anthem. That night in his room at Aldersgate, Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed." Psalm 130 helped him know and receive the grace of God that changed his life and that of many others.³

The newspaper humorist, Erma Bombeck, published a book in 1985 called *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing In the Pits?* When that's how life feels — when your iniquities overwhelm you, you feel like you've been slopping garbage, and you think you're not even worthy to be in God's presence — remember that God doesn't wrinkle his nose at us because we've been in the Pit. God is there, along with his friends forgiveness, grace, and redemption, to draw us out of the Pit.

Let us pray: O God, you come to us in the depths of our darkest despair, in the suffering of Jesus Christ. We praise you that we have been reconciled to you through our Savior's death and, having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life. Amen.

NOTES

¹The description of the tour group is from Jerome Creach, "Commentary on Psalm 130," at www.workingpreacher.org. The description of Chagall's windows is from "The Chagall Windows" at www.hadassah-med.com.

²Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Psalm 130," *Interpretation* (Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, April 1979), p. 180.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.