

***A Summer in the Psalms:
When Hope Despairs and Despair Hopes***

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.

Did you know that, as the pastor who is one of the worship leaders of our congregation, I have certain responsibilities which are not subject to the authority of the session? Actually, they are about the only responsibilities I have which are not subject to the authority of the session.

These worship responsibilities include selecting which Scripture lessons will be read, preparing and preaching the sermon, offering prayers on behalf of the congregation and preparing prayers for you to use, and planning any kind of drama, dance, or other artistic worship expressions.

Last, but not least, I have the responsibility of choosing the hymns we sing in worship. I try not to publicize that responsibility so much, unless you say you really liked the hymns!

Here are some letters ministers received about hymns in worship.

The first letter says, "I am no music scholar, but I feel I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sunday's new hymn — if you can call it that — sounded like a sentimental love song you would expect to hear crooned in a bar. If you insist on exposing us to rubbish like this — in God's house! — don't be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship. The hymns we grew up with are all we need."

The second letter says, "What is wrong with the inspiring hymns with which we grew up? When I go to church, it is to worship God, not to be distracted with learning a new hymn. Last Sunday's was particularly unnerving. The tune was un-singable and the new harmonies were quite distorted."

The first letter was written in 1863, about the hymn "Just As I Am."

The second letter was written in 1890, about the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

What do you think? David, the shepherd boy soothed King Saul with the lyre and, as a king, wrote some of our most beloved psalms. Do you reckon when David introduced some of his new psalms, his fellow Israelite worshipers said something like, "When I go to the temple, it is to worship Yahweh, the Lord Almighty, not to be distracted with learning a new psalm. David, if you insist on exposing us to rubbish like this — in God's house! — don't be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship."

The Book of Psalms is the hymnbook of God's people, then and now. God's people sing, including Presbyterians! As the song says, "My life flows on in endless song;

above earth's lamentation, I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn That hails a new creation;
Thro' all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing; It finds an echo in my soul
— How can I keep from singing?"

For these next eleven Sundays, we will spend "A Summer in the Psalms." As it says on the back of the bulletin, these songs of praise continue to speak to us today. In the psalms, we hear people of faith express their greatest longings, their deepest joys, their bewildered questions, their wonderful praise, and their loyal faith in God.

As we anticipate introducing in the fall the new Presbyterian hymnal in our church called *Glory to God*, Karla and I have begun collecting worship ideas to help us celebrate our old blue *Presbyterian Hymnal* and learn about the new hymnbook *Glory to God*. As I was working on today's sermon, I read over one such responsive "Prayer of Thanksgiving" for the twenty-year-old blue hymnbook. Part of the prayer says, "The worn covers remind us of the journey we have taken together. The familiar pages feel like home. These hymnals have been held by small hands and large hands, by young hands and old hands. These pages have enabled us to sing out for joy, and these pages have caught our tears."

We can certainly say the same thing about the Book of Psalms. The psalms enable God's people to sing out for joy. The psalms catch the tears of God's people. Sometimes, both happen in the same psalm — joy and tears, hope and despair.

Have you ever been told, "You shouldn't question God"? Apparently someone forgot to tell King David he shouldn't question God — or else David ignored the well-intentioned advice.

"How long, O Lord?" David cries out. Not once — not twice — not three times — but four times. "How long, O Lord?"

How long will you forget me?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

How long, O Lord?

This is a brutally honest prayer. Remember the times you have prayed that prayer or something like it. How did you feel? What was going on in your life that made you cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Maybe it was in the middle of the night, when you woke up and your soul was in turmoil. Maybe it was while you were caring for somebody you loved deeply, who was suffering greatly. Maybe it was waiting for a husband or a wife or a son or a daughter to come home safely from an overseas deployment. Maybe it was when you felt all alone, as if nobody else had ever been through what you were going through.

How long, O Lord? Despite the advice that we shouldn't question God, that's not the cry of an unfaithful person. If you have no relationship with God, you don't take the time to talk to God directly — "How long will you . . .?" If you don't have some inkling that God might actually hear you and respond, why waste your breath?

How long, O Lord? is the prayer of someone who, in the midst of troubles and anxieties that threaten to crush his spirit, still finds the strength, the will, the guts (if you will) to address God directly and ask the honest questions about what is going on in his life.

How long, O Lord? Well, what if God boomed out from heaven, “One year, three months, and two days! That’s how long!” Would that satisfy your longing soul? Are you really seeking hard information when you cry out to God in the middle of the night or in the hospital waiting room or in the depths of your loneliness?

The Alternative Sunday School Class has begun a summer study of a book by James C. Howell called *The Will of God: Answering the Hard Questions*. In his introduction, Rev. Howell writes, “When we hear someone question the will of God, we can bet it’s someone who loved and then lost someone, who cannot shake the regret or dodge the shadows any longer.” He says about his book, “This is not a theodicy, that valiant attempt among theologians to defend God’s honor, to settle all questions in God’s favor. Questions are not to be muzzled; God gave us questioning minds. How could any ‘answer’ satisfy the storming questions we harbor after the death of a spouse, child, or friend?”¹

We don’t know what David’s problem was when he cried out, “How long, O Lord?” Maybe it’s just as well that we don’t know a particular reason for his “dark night of the soul.” That way, we can each make the psalm our own. Whatever was going on in David’s life, it was all encompassing. It consumed his whole life — his relationship with his God, his relationship with himself, his relationship with the people around him, including his enemies. Doesn’t that sound familiar? When you have that wrenching anxiety, those haunting questions, those unsettled feelings, it’s like you’re consumed by whatever is going on in your life.

There’s also another way to hear David’s cry — not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” It’s not either faith in God who is there or losing faith in God who doesn’t seem to be there. Instead, this psalm helps us put into words a very real faith that cannot separate God from any and every experience we have in life. This psalm is so short, it’s almost possible to pray “How long, O Lord?” in the same breath as “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” That’s where we find ourselves sometimes, especially in the most trying, most anxious, most fearful, most terrifying times in our lives. We cry out with the words of the desperate father who brought his son to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Surely the apostle Paul must have known David’s psalm. Perhaps he had used it himself when he was shipwrecked or in prison or beaten. What we heard Bill read from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians could almost be Paul’s personal re-writing and commentary on this psalm: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-11)

Someone has written about us as the people of God and people of faith, whose lives are rocked and shaken to their core that “what attacks our existence exposes weakness and makes us wonder about world and God.” In the words of the psalm — and in our own cries to God — “agony and adoration [are] hung together by a cry for life — that is the truth about us as people of faith. We are simultaneously the anxious, fearful, dying, historical person who cannot find God where we want God to be, and the elect with a second history, a salvation history, a life hid with Christ in God.”²

As your pastor, it is my awesome and humble privilege to stand beside you and walk with you when you cry out, “How long, O Lord?” Trust me, I ask God my share of questions, on my behalf and yours. If we think that in a life of hope, we can never despair, we are naive at best. On the other hand, if we think that in the midst of despair, we can never hope again, we forget what God has already done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our hope in Jesus Christ doesn’t deny the reality of life’s sufferings and questions. Our hope in Jesus Christ offers us a way through them, so that, even when we cry out, “How long, O Lord?” we can hope that our hearts will rejoice in God’s salvation and we will be able to sing to the Lord, who has dealt bountifully with us.

Will you please join me in the responsive reading? Let us pray:

Within our personal and shared isolation we ask: “Where are you, God, I can’t feel you near me?”

We come in faith and hope that you will hear our questions and will turn towards us.

Within our personal and shared distress we ask: “How long will you be gone far from me?”

We come, trusting in our past experiences of your goodness, and look ahead in anticipation of your love.

Within our faith and hope we ask: “Wherever you are, God, look on us all with love and come near to us; so that we may grow in trust, that your unfailing love is confirmed for us.”

We come, to sing and celebrate your enduring and patient love, O God, who knows our fears and despair, and who answers our fear-filled questions in ways we can understand. Together we rejoice and sing about your goodness and mercy, our faithful God. Amen.

NOTES

¹James C. Howell, *The Will of God: Answering the Hard Questions* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), pp. xii and viii.

²James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 78, 80.