

Scripture Reading: Psalm 13

I want you to know that I am very excited to be here this morning. And a little nervous, it has been a long time since I have preached in front of a church. But mostly I am excited. And I'm excited because of all of you. I get the privilege of speaking in front of this community today. I am thankful for that chance.

It was only a couple months ago that I first set foot into this church. And it was all because of my brother. When I was here this past summer taking classes at Fuller Theological Seminary, my brother kept pestering me to visit. And so I did. And it has been great. I have enjoyed becoming more active in the life of this faith-community. I've enjoyed taking part in the lazy Susan small group, serving alongside others at the food pantry and helping out with the youth group. Those have all been great experiences. And I'm excited that my position as the intern at this church means that I will get the opportunity to engage even more fully with this congregation, with each of you in the year ahead.

And I would like you all to get to know me. When Randy asked if I would preach this Sunday, he suggested that I use it as an opportunity to share with all of you more about myself and my journey. To summarize my entire life to you now, in this moment, would be an impossible feat. My journey has taken me down many paths. So I offer today the beginnings of my story. My origins if you will. And I

look forward to offering you more of my story in the future. And hope to hear more of your stories in the future as well.

I come from a large family. I am the fifth of six kids which makes me the second youngest. As a young kid, having a lot of siblings meant having a lot of people to play with. And since both my father and mother worked fulltime, it meant a lot of unsupervised time to get into trouble. We climbed huge trees and explored the surrounding neighborhood on our bikes. At home we played games jumping from couch to table to counter to coffee table without touching the “hot lava” of the floor. We even designed a game called “timebomb” that involved tying people to chairs with every towel, bedsheet, and belt we could find in the house. And making each other race the clock trying to escape. Having a large family when I was a young child was a lot of fun. I’ve very thankful for the experience.

And while I was growing up, church was a big part of our family experience as well. I remember the church being a place we could play. Likely to the annoyance of some adults, us kids ran around the church grounds, play hide and go seek in various classrooms and offices. The church was also the place that I began to learn about God. I learned stories of the Bible, I learned songs, I even learned songs about stories of the Bible. Church was a place where my faith was nurtured and a big part of my childhood growing up.

That is not to say that when I was young life was always easy. In fact, in the summer between my fourth and fifth grade years, trauma struck both me and my entire family. My dad is from Minnesota and one of our family traditions growing up was a summer trip to visit our grandparents. Many summers, we would rent a minivan, pile-up the entire family inside and drive across country to Minnesota. They were long trips and there was a lot of driving. But that summer, when I was just 10 years old the trip was cut suddenly short. Outside of Salt Lake City, Utah, we were involved in a terrible car accident. A pick up truck cut us off and our minivan, with everyone in it, and me without my seatbelt on, rolled seven or eight times on its side until it came to a stop. Truth is, I remember little of what happened. I remember the Thursday morning of the accident. I remember the truck cutting us off, I remember the van starting to turn on its side, I even remember how fun that part felt, and then I remember nothing until I woke up in the ICU a day and a half later having been in and out of surgery several times. I was hurt. I was confused. I was angry. The next week as I lay in the hospital recovering I tried to understand what was going on. I remember lying in the bed in the middle of the night, not being able to sleep, and crying to God asking Him, "why me"? No answer came.

I still don't have an answer to this day why that had to happen to me or to my family. While the physical effects are mostly healed, the event had lasting financial impact on our family. We lost our house and were forced to move. Money issues plagued my family for years. But what I have come to learn in life

is that bad things happen. Terrible things happen. Things we can't make sense of. And sometimes in our despair we cry out to God. We cry out that things don't make sense to us. We question God's plans. We question God's faithfulness. We question God's character. The more that I have lived life, the more that I have listened to the stories of others, stories of much greater pain than my own, the more I am convinced that God is ok with our cries and questions. In fact, God wants us to cry out to Him.

And the Bible is full of examples of people crying out to God as well, expressing the emotions of what they feel to God in words, in poetry, in songs. So frequent are these occurrences that we assign them a special name. We call them laments and the book of Psalms are filled with them. Our scripture reading for today is one such lament. Psalm 13. If you brought a Bible turn to Psalm 13 with me right now. Let us listen to what Psalm 13 says.

¹ How long, O LORD ? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

³ Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

⁴ my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This psalm is titled as a Psalm of David and that is not a point that should be glossed over. David was the most beloved King of Israel. He was not a perfect king and yet, attached to his legacy, is the statement that he was “a man after God’s own heart”. The disposition of David to God, the way that David interacted with God, was the model for how the people of Israel saw an ideal relationship with God. By this Psalm carrying the designation of being a psalm of King David, it is right to assume that this Psalm is not only allowable in its form but ideal in its form. One who copies the form of this psalm, copies King David. One who embodies the heart of this psalm, becomes themselves, a person after God’s own heart.

If this psalm is about a particular life circumstance of David, it’s anyone’s guess the specific event he was referring to. Both as King and before, David was no stranger to conflict. He regularly lead soldiers into battle and the enemies that he talks about here could be any of a number. But one possibility is an particularly strong contender. Before he was king, David was a servant of King Saul. When David was still young he entered the service of Saul’s court and rose up to become a favorite. He was great friends with Saul’s son Nathan and became a leader among the armies of Israel. But Saul became fearful of David and tried to have him killed. David was able to escape and we know that he

survived. But for years David lived on the run from Saul. David moved often, hid in caves, and feared daily for his life. This Psalm embodies well, the feelings that he was likely experiencing. David naturally would feel that God had abandoned him, and he would wonder where God was in the midst of the darkness of his life. Enemies were closing around him and he wasn't sure if he was going to make it.

One of the beauties of this psalm lies in its form. The form of this psalm has much in common with other psalms of lament. And it also has the benefit of being short. Thus the movement of themes within this psalm goes quickly. Let's take a look at the movements for a minute. The psalm begins with a series of rhetorical questions. These questions don't expect an answer. They are meant to convey a feeling. And they capture that feeling well.

¹ How long, O LORD ? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

These words are full of emotion. They don't expect an answer. In fact an answer at this point would be unsatisfactory. Because the real power behind these words isn't whether or not the situation will go away, but rather why these things have to happen in the first place. Let's unpack this for a moment. Let's say that in your darkest hour you asked God how long? Let's say you go to God in the midst of your pain and say: "God, this situation is awful! Unbearable! How long will I have to endure?" Let's say that he replies. Five months. Five months and it will be over. Wouldn't your next question be "Why five months!!!" Why not

less? Why did it happen at all? The questions in this psalm are not really about time, they are about necessity. They don't expect an answer. They convey an emotion to God.

Next the Psalmist petitions God for change. He calls on God for help and for deliverance. He says:

³ Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

⁴ my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

It is here that the psalmist identifies himself as under God's covenant. "O Lord my God." As a child of God, God should care what happens to psalmist. An attack on the psalmist is an attack on God. This section of the Psalm serves to remind God that his child is in danger and justice requires a response. From another angle it can also be said that this section serves to illustrate that God is the only agent that can deliver the psalmist from his situation. The trouble that the psalmist is in requires that a higher power intervene to cause change. The psalmist cannot do this on his own.

The final section of the psalm is one of thanksgiving. God has delivered the psalmist from the situation and praise is a right response. The psalmist says:

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me.

The situation has changed from despair to deliverance, and the right response is thanksgiving. God has rescued the psalmist from his situation. God has indeed been good.

It's important to pause here for a minute and recognize that while the length of the psalm is brief, the timing of events it describes is anything but. It might be tempting to reduce this psalm to a simple story of problem, deliverance, thanksgiving. To those of us that have faced great challenges and overcome them it can be easy to look through the lens of our present happiness and dismiss the severity of our crises. I know from my own experiences that I can have this tendency. I have seen how God has used different hardships I have faced in my life to teach me valuable lessons. Looking back on these situations it is possible to see how God was at work in the midst of them. But this statement from hindsight, is different than being able to see God in the moments of the situations themselves. It has always been much, much, much harder to see where God is working while the storms of my life were in full force. While it is important to recognize in this psalm the ultimate provision of God, it is at least equally important to recognize the feeling of isolation and despair that existed before that deliverance was found. The intensity of the emotional turmoil in the first part of part of psalm is neither to be dismissed nor mitigated by the second. The turmoil of the situation is real. It should not be glossed over and can not be ignored.

So what are the implications of this text. What does this Psalm mean for us today. I would like to focus on two aspects. The personal and the corporate.

Above all this psalm states the right for an individual to offer laments to God. These laments are not only permissible but ideal. More than anything else God desires us to be in close relationship with Him. And relationships find their greatest strength in authenticity. God's call for authenticity is not just in some parts of our lives, but them all. God wants us to communicate with Him. And because God's desire for our communion is so great, no thought, no emotion, not anything are off bounds in our conversations with him. God desires us to be real with him. This authenticity requires us to cry out to him and even against him when we feel hurt or lonely or afraid.

A funny thing happens when we grow up. We are born such creatures of honesty. When we were babies and we get hurt, what do we do? We cried out! We wailed that the world was against us. As we get older were taught by our parents and by others that crying is not ok. And there is truth for this. Much of what we cried about as children are realities of everyday life. Crying doesn't change the situation. The problem with this sentiment is it ignores that crying is an expression of feeling and not a feeling itself. As adults we still have times were we feel like crying, only society tells us that its not ok, especially not in public. So we don't. We keep it bottled up inside. We don't let it come out. We don't show it to the world. Instead we pretend like everything is ok. And we wait. And when the situation doesn't resolve itself, when we don't have a release, the

emotions build inside of us, and fester and grow. Our call to lament to God is a call to open ourselves in honest dialogue with Him. And through crying out to him we give words to the problems that are plaguing our hearts. Through authentically expressing what we feel, we take the first step in opening ourselves up to the presence of God. Psalm 13 is a call for our personal authenticity before God.

There is another implication of this psalm, a corporate one which I believe is even more important. It's tempting to look at writings in the Bible, like psalms and to apply them solely to our individual faiths. After all, the psalm was the work of an individual, engaged with God on a personal level. However, once the psalms were gathered together, they become the reflection of not only the values of the individual but the values of Israel, as a nation. As the psalms were gathered together into the Bible, they were given normative value, they were to be a model of the nations living before God and one another. Their value for us today should bear witness to that same principle. They have not only a value for our personal faiths but our corporate faith as well.

Walter Brueggemann, a professor of theology at Columbia Seminary describes the psalms of lament as psalms of disorientation. The psalms serve to invoke in the community that is receiving them a call to wake-up. A call that all is not well in the world. A call that in the reality of the human condition, all people, even those under the covenant of God are subject to times of hardship and injustice. Those who cry out against God, who question his plans, his

faithfulness, his character are not people of little faith but rather people of bold faith. It takes bold faith to question one in power. It takes bold faith to cry out against injustice in any form. It takes bold faith to challenge the status quo.

And there is another side to this corporate call that is to be acknowledged as well. We as a community most learn to be ok with hearing the laments of others. Somewhere along the line, in our western Christian church culture we have developed the habit of non-authenticity in our relationship to one another. The band the Casting Crowns have a song about this where they ask if the church is “happy plastic people, under shiny plastic steeples.” Is the church a place filled with us pretending to be ok, when we are not?

I struggle to know why this is the cause. And my own story is one where I have been incredibly guilty of this myself. Maybe it's because we don't think we have permission to feel the way we do. Maybe it's because we think that our problems are a reflection of a lack of faith on our part. Maybe it's because we don't think anyone else would care. Whatever the reason, we have learned to put on our best faces on Sunday morning as we greet one another. Responding that all is well in our souls, when sometimes all is not.

I have a friend that just returned from nine months spent in intentional Christian community overseas. And she says that what she has been missing most about the place was the realness of relationships. She uses an analogy that I think is apt and so I'm going to borrow it. She describes life in America as waxy. You may not be aware of it, but most fruit that you buy in the supermarket

is covered in a waxy film. This wax was placed on the fruit to protect it, especially during travel. Fruit is viewed as fragile and the wax is there to make sure that the fruit isn't dented or nicked during transit nor subject to the effects of insects. The wax is there to protect the fruit and make it visually appealing on the store shelf. On the surface this is a worthy goal. And yet, the end result of the waxy film, is to compromise its flavor. The wax makes the fruit blander. Less enjoyable. Less satisfying. When we as Christians put wax coats on our own lives, making them look better than they are as we relate to one another, we compromise the flavor of our shared experience. We make the relationships of our church community less satisfying. When we give each other the freedom to lament, we open ourselves to a richer and more satisfying life with one another. But this can only happen if the culture of our church is one that gives opportunities for others to lament and doesn't discount the emotional turmoil of their lives. Our corporate call as a church is to be a place that honors the laments of others and gives them space.

Like all shifts in culture this will be one that requires time. Change doesn't happen overnight. But I hope that our congregation will be one that seeks to live more authenticity in relationship with God and with one another. I would like to leave you all today with some practical implications of what I have been talking about.

The first is to give yourself permission to lament. Some of you are in the midst of incredible pain and questioning and turmoil in the present moment. Give

yourself permission to bring all of your emotions before God. Give yourself permission to cry out against your situations and against Him. God is big enough to handle it. Faith in God is not about pretending like you don't sometimes have doubts. Faith in God is about holding on to him tightly even in those moments that you do. God wants all of you. Even the part that may not like him very much at the moment. Give yourself permission to lament.

The second is to give voice to your laments. Take the time to manifest them in finite form. Don't just let your worries and fears spin around in your head but try to put them down on paper. Maybe in prose. Maybe in poetry or song. Maybe by painting them on canvas. But I encourage you to give form to your laments. Give form to what you are feeling, in doing so you may understand your feelings better. Along the same lines, share your laments with others. Talk about them. Ask other people to listen. I know I, for one, am eager to hear them. And for those who have overcome past trials and tribulations, share your experiences as well. Help others see that situations can have happy resolutions. Your stories of past grief overcome may give someone the courage to make it through their own struggle.

Finally, and most importantly, honor the laments of one another. To hear a lament is to offer space for someone's story. And often it can be the greatest gift that you can give. All too often, for those who are struggling with hardships, and crisis, there is a feeling of isolation that goes along with the struggle itself. There is a tendency to feel alone, even in the midst of a bunch of people. Your

willingness to listen to the story of someone else is to offer them love. It's to extend of love of God to someone else. Listening is not about offering solutions.. It's not about solving problems. Those things are great but not requirements. One doesn't even have to agree with the reasons that one is lamenting. The reasons could not make sense to you. This morning my heart crys out in pain at the brutal destruction of the Golden Bears by the evil USC last night. I cry out at the injustice of the situation. Your acknowledgement of my lament, and your willingness to hear my story, even if you don't share my values is a testament to the love of Christ. Hearing a lament is about honoring the feelings of a person. Hearing laments are about giving people space to share their lives.

So as we leave hear today, may we be willing to offer our laments to God and give them form. And may be willing to both share our own stories with each other and receive those stories with gracious hearts. Please join me in this simple prayer.

Dear Lord, David was a man after your own heart. May our own cries out to you be like Davids. May our personal laments draw us closer to your heart oh Lord. And may we also reflect your heart, Lord, in our relationships with one another. Amen

Now receive this benediction:

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the lord make his face shine upon you and gracious to you.

In your darkest hour. When you cry out in pain and fear and anger and despair, May the lord turn his face toward you and give your soul peace.

And may the spirit of the God fill our hearts today, enabling us to listen, with ears to hear, the laments of one another and reflect the love of Jesus Christ to the community of this church, this neighborhood, and the world.

Amen.