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The National Presbyterian Church

Down But Not Out

Psalm 23; Psalm 42; Matthew 6:25-34

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In our sermons over the summer we are looking together at God's word that comes to us from the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms is a collection of hymns and prayers and poems that come from the worship life of ancient Israel. If you want to find the Psalms you just open your Bible to the middle. There are 150 of them – but there aren't 150 Sundays during the summer or during the year (!) which means I'm going to be selecting Psalms which are representative of other psalms, and which have touched my life. We began a couple of weeks ago looking at Psalm 8 and then last week we followed up with Psalm 19.

Psalm 8 is a good "Presbyterian" Psalm! It begins by turning our thoughts to the majesty of the Sovereign God. Verse 1 reads: "O Lord, my Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!" And then side-by-side with this statement, you have the thought that this majestic God keeps us in his mind (to paraphrase): "Who are we that You should keep us in mind. You have made us a little less than God. You've made us in Your image and You remember us." And this is where our significance comes from. We seek significance in all kinds of ways. But it comes ultimately from knowing that God remembers us. We are dust and ashes but God remembers us, now and eternally and will never, ever forget us.

And then last Sunday we moved on to Psalm 19, a psalm which reminds us that God is not impersonal but personal; that God longs to speak, is desperate to speak, and has not only made the universe through which He speaks to us, but has given us a book, scripture, through which He speaks to us. Verse 1: "The heavens declare the glory of God". And then verse 7: "the Law (the written word of God in a book!) of the Lord is perfect." God reveals Himself through creation, and then through scripture. Not one or the other.

So often Christians, as well as other people, pit nature against scripture.

But Psalm 19 pulls them both together and says that God speaks to us, is desperate to speak to us, is on the edge of His seat, as it were, to speak to

us, through both the book of nature and through the book of scripture.

They are not incompatible, they work hand in hand.

This is who our God is: longing for us to enter into a conversational relationship with Him now and through all eternity, this sovereign majestic God – with you and with me.

We move on today to look at Psalm 42 that we just read just a few minutes ago. It doesn't take much as you read this Psalm to realize it's a different kind of a Psalm altogether from Psalm 8 and from Psalm 19. Psalm 8 and Psalm 19 are songs of praise; psalms that have an obvious trust and relish in faith before God. When we come to Psalm 42, however, what hits us in the first place is not trust and faith (though the Psalm contains that as we shall see). But what hits us immediately is that this is a sad song. A sad song! Indeed it is one of over 50, almost 60 Psalms in the pages of the Bible (that's one third of all the Psalms) which we can call a "lament." It's a lament. A song of sadness. A pouring out before God from the Psalmist of all the things that the Psalmist thinks are wrong with his life and wrong with the world. Things are not right and the Psalmist shares this with us and with God. So he pours out his heart before God. He puts it down, as it were, on paper for himself and for every generation thereafter – and if in fact you don't remember anything else about this sermon, that fact in and of itself is really critical – that in these lament Psalms the Psalmist doesn't hide the disappointment that he experiences with God, *but pours it out and writes it down*. Pours it out and writes it down. This my friends is 'free' therapy: it doesn't cost you anything to "pour it out and write it down," except a little time. And you will find enormous power in this. When life becomes chaotic and our thoughts are going around our head and they have no particular shape, to know that before God we can "pour them out and write them down" is very often to take the first step that will lead us to sort them out and enable us to know what next step we need to take.

The Psalmist writes down his thoughts, though, not merely for therapy, but as one inspired, pushed and pulled by God, for you and me, so that you and I can know, generations later, thousands of years later, that what we may at times experience today is not unique, but has been experienced by God's saints throughout the ages.

As the Psalmist pours out his thoughts about God he draws our attention to four different ways in particular, in which he experiences difficulties and disappointment with God.

- He speaks about a feeling of *separation* from God.
- He speaks about *time* as being an enemy rather than a friend.
- He speaks about *obstacles* that seem to have no end.
- And he speaks about *relationships* which at best are awkward and at worst are simply awful.

And we are going to spend some time just thinking about these. And as we do so I hope that you'll probe into your life, where perhaps you'll find that some of these same thoughts are yours as well.

Separation. To begin with, the Psalmist feels separated from God, and this experience seems to the psalmist to be desperately unfair. After all, this Psalmist like all the others is seeking God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. He's doing the right things and yet still does not feel God's presence. The Psalm begins like this: "*As a deer longs for flowing streams so my soul longs for you oh God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*" This is how the life of faith ought to be. This is the right way to relate to the God who reveals himself, keeps us in mind, speaks to us always: thirsting for more! "My soul thirsts for God" writes the psalmist, and yet, immediately after this he writes a line that stands in complete juxtaposition! "*When shall I come and behold the face of God?*" It doesn't follow at all. All he feels is a barrier. As if to say: "Here's what I do for God, but then I still don't experience God's closeness, in fact, "*My tears have been my food day and night while people say to me continually where is your God?*" – that is, "Lord I'm doing the right things but where are you? When I need you most, where are you?"

This is a cry that so many people, perhaps even you and I, have raised before God. And not us alone by any stretch of the imagination! Surprisingly as we think about such a cry before God we find that even those whom we might otherwise consider to be saints have leveled such cries against God. One of them is Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

Through much of her life Mother Teresa did not feel a sense of God's presence. In 2007 a book about her life was published that created quite a stir. *Come Be My Light* (by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk)¹ is about her private letters, papers, and reports. What many people discovered, as they read, was that for decades, Mother Theresa struggled in her personal life. Not that she doubted the existence of God nor that she doubted the call of God, but for decades she did not feel a sense of closeness to God that others assumed was part and parcel of her every day experience. And so the book frequently spoke not about a closeness to God, but a distance. Here's a passage from the book that comes from around 1958 or '59. She writes,

"Lord my God, who am I that you should forsake me the child of your love and now become as the one most hated, the one you have thrown away as unwanted, unloved? I call, I cling, I want. [DR: She's just like the Psalmist at the beginning of Psalm 42. Her heart is panting for God and yet there is no one to answer]. No one on whom I can cling. No, no one alone. The darkness is so dark and I am alone unwanted forsaken. When I tried to raise my thoughts to Heaven there is such convicting emptiness. For those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my soul. What are you doing my God to one so small."

Such convicting emptiness! There's a real sense of desolation here. This is poignant and painful, as well as powerful to listen to.

The secular press misunderstood what was going on here. As they reviewed the book they made it sound as if she didn't believe at all. They missed the fact that in her troubles, Mother Theresa stands in the great tradition of saints whose lives were highly effective for God but for whom, personally, while they believed in God there was frequently no strong sense of God's presence. Saint John of the Cross in the 17th Century called this "the dark night of the soul." And for some it wasn't just a brief dark one night stand! It was day after day, and year after year – an experience that goes all the way back of course to Jesus crying out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane and then on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As I mentioned last Sunday, in this cry of dereliction Jesus is quoting from the Psalms (Psalm 22), facing an experience, whether we like the idea or not, that many who are faithful to God have had. Which doesn't mean that God is not there. Just that we may not always feel God in the way that we want to . . . and the Psalmist in Psalm 42 complains to God that God is not there in the way that the Psalmist wants. And that's how the complaint, that's how the lament begins.

Time. But the Psalmist didn't just feel separated from God. The Psalmist felt that time was not being used by God as he wanted time to be used by God! The Psalmist was longing for things as they used to be while the present was not as he wanted it to be. At Verse 4 the Psalm goes on:

"These things I remember as I pour out my soul how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

"These things I remember": This is in the past. These things I remember, how I went and led. This is what I used to do. This is who I used to be. This is how I used to lead. This is how happy I was back then. But not now. It's gone now. All I have are memories.

How easily time plays tricks with us. How easily we feel that our sense of how time and timing ought to be is not the same as God's sense of time – and we wish that God's sense of time was the same as ours! For example, when we feel that time is running out when we think we need more time.

Pastor Al Miles observed battles with time frequently when he was a chaplain at Children's Hospital in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He frequently had to deal with families and with couples and with children who were running out of time, working against time. On one occasion for example he writes like this:

Jim's eyes could no longer contain all his pain. Tears raced down his face. A few feet away Anna his wife was dressing their beautiful daughter Carrie in colorful clothes far too big for her tiny body. Within minutes Carrie would be removed from her respirator and in less than an hour she would die. In a soft quiver Jim said to me Pastor, Carrie was our last shot at having another child. [DR: Time's run out!]. After our son Robert was born Anna and I suffered six miscarriages. We hoped that Carrie would

be that healthy second child we always prayed for. This is very hard to understand, both medically and spiritually.

Hard. Time running out. And in this case, not merely time running out, that's part of it, but then there's the experience here too of one tragedy, one setback, one obstacle after another: you think the problem is behind you, but time after time after time your hope rises and then it's gone. And the Psalmist feels like this too: he has a sense of repeated, seemingly never ending, obstacles!

Verse 7: "*Deep calls to deep. At the thunder of your cataracts, all your waves and your billows have gone over me.*"

Repeated Obstacles: This man is on the rocks. He's down below and that water is pouring over the waterfall again and again, and again and again. Or he's on the sand beneath the waves and just as he picks himself up another wave, another breaker comes in and pushes him over. And he sees no end to it. It's endless; it keeps on coming again and again. And some of us have been there. And maybe some of us are there right now. We've picked ourselves up we think we can make it this time but we see something coming down the pike and – and this is hard to watch and bear, even though we know that many people in this world live with this constantly, day after day, year after year.

- Think for a moment about what's going on in the Middle East just now. Hope rises and is crushed in one place after another, again and again.
- Or think to the people of Haiti. Sometimes we have compassion, we see a tragedy and we remember for a while, and then time goes by and we forget that the pain and the suffering keeps on going. Think of the earthquake in 2010. Joe and Linda Markee, former Presbyterian medial missionaries write these words about their experience in Haiti:

The Haitians continue to suffer on many levels. We live in Léogâne, a community of about 10,000 with a surrounding population of about 120,000. Goats, pigs and chickens roam the open gutter streets. The day's news is blasted by megaphones. There are no newspapers and only two telephone lines into the city. At times the needs are overwhelming such as when surgery is postponed indefinitely. Time once again. Not a friend but an enemy. For lack of anesthesia or medication or when the electricity goes out. One Haitian physician quotes the Haitian proverb: "Beyond the mountains, more mountains."

Beyond the mountains, more mountains! The Markees are right. There's always another problem to overcome. Léogâne was the epicenter of the earthquake in 2010. BUT, here's the interesting thing, these words were not written *after* the 2010 earthquake, but at least ten years *before*. Ten years before! Even at *that* time this is how they were describing the situation; at a time when people had no clue that those waves would keep rolling in upon them, and keep on changing their lives. One obstacle after the other, year after year, decade after decade.

“My tears have been my food day and night,” says the Psalmist, *“while people say to me continually where is your God? . . .* These things I no longer experience but can only remember from the past as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the throng, how I used to lead them in procession to the house of the Lord. But now my soul is cast down within me as deep keeps calling to deep at the thunder of your cataracts and all your waves and your billows have gone over me. And as if that’s not enough, the feeling of being separated from God, and sucked under by repeated obstacles.

And then, one more thing to face . . . relationships!

Relationships. On top of everything else, the Psalmist also has to deal with relationships which at the best are awkward and the worst are awful! **Enemies** who oppress him and **friends** who taunt him so that, on many levels, life is really not good.

Down But Not Out. This man is going down, down. He is down, this much is sure. But as you read between the lines in the Psalm, you will find is that he is certainly not out. He is down but he is not out, *and he is not “out” because he believes something about God;* that he has to force himself to remember. This is not an easy spontaneous faith – he has to force himself to be faithful and to remember, but, nevertheless, this is a faith which keeps him from being overwhelmed. Even though it’s a struggle, he can find enough good news when the bad news seems to dominate, to keep him from being overwhelmed, and to live for another day:

- He brings back to his mind that God is like a rock.
- He brings back to his mind that God’s love is steadfast.
- He brings back to his mind that the future is in God’s hand and that therefore hope is not in vain.

We read at verse 6: “My soul is cast down within me. **Therefore I remember you.**”

“My soul is cast down” . . . not . . . “therefore I despise you,” but, I deliberately enter an act of recollection of who you are: “I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon from Mount Mizar.” I go up beyond where I am in the valley to the head waters of the Jordan above the clouds, above the fray, to remember who you are, and that you are not shaken by everything that shakes me.

Yes, it’s true, *“Deep calls to deep with the thunder of your cataracts.”*

Yes, it’s true, *“All the waves in your billows have gone over me.”*

But it’s also true that *“By day the Lord commands His steadfast love and at night His song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God my rock why have you forgotten me?”* (Not to the God I hate, but to the God who is my rock!!) And know in my heart that I have not been forgotten, for God remains a rock . . . though this is how I feel, and I will share how I feel with God, who listens.

*“Why are you cast down on my soul and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God for I shall **again** praise him, my help and my God.*

Again – a word that now focuses not on the past, nor the present, but on the future: “I . . . shall . . . again . . . praise him, my help and my God.” My soul is cast down. Yes, down!! Therefore I remember you . . . as a rock, as one who is steadfast, one in who I can hope, who holds the future in the palm of his hands.

Powerful Images in Our Minds. These are words that are powerful. They are short. This is not a long psalm. But they are filled with all kinds of images which empowered this man’s life so that when he was down he did not stay down. And the question I have for you to ask yourselves today is this: Do you carry in your mind and in your hearts images of God which are simple enough yet profound enough, simple enough yet powerful enough that when you are down you can use your memory to recollect them and they keep your life strong when everything else would push you over? Is God your rock? Is your God’s love steadfast? Does this God hold the future in his palm so that you can have hope?

Or think for a moment about images Jesus uses (and maybe there are other images that will come to your mind). Two images in Jesus’ teaching in particular come to your mind.

- **Shepherd.** One that comes straight from the Psalms. Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd. What does a shepherd do? Always lead the sheep through places which are wonderful? **No!** But leading the sheep faithfully and never letting them go through any place in order to get to the end safely and wonderfully? Yes! He will never let us go along the way. God is a shepherd
- And God is Father. In our second scripture passage, in Matthew 6, Jesus says that God is like a father who does not give us everything we want by any stretch of the imagination. But does give us everything we need: “Do not worry saying what will we eat or what will we drink or what will we wear says Jesus. For it is the gentiles, the unbelievers who strive for all these things. And indeed your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

Is this who God is to you? Even in the pit? Father, Shepherd, Rock, Steadfast, Hope? Find your words and use your memory so that when you are “down,” as the Psalmist was, you will not be “out”!

1. Feeling the absence of God, separation from God! Perhaps that is what you have experienced.
2. Experiencing time, not as your friend or your ally, but as your enemy. Perhaps that is what you’ve experienced.
3. One obstacle after another bowling you over again and again, perhaps that is your experience.

4. Or relationships with others which at the best are awkward and the worst are just awful. We don't know where they're going.

Down but not out, because God is and always will be rock, steadfast, hope, shepherd, Father by faith. Believe these things. And know the power of God to sustain.

Let us bow before God in prayer.

Holy God, look down upon us when things are going well and when things are not going so well. Help us to be honest before You as the Psalmist was, and to know the power of pouring things out before You. Not hiding the truth, not being afraid of it, but pouring them out. Help us to know that what we know and experience, others, like your faithful servants the Psalmists, and our own Lord Jesus, have experienced as well. And even though at times you may seem far away, grant us faith to know who You are and that You do not change. Amen.

1 *Come Be My Light*, by Mother Teresa, ed. by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, Image (October 13, 2009).

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