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The National Presbyterian Church

A Song from the Depths

Psalm 130

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Where do we pray? What place is appropriate for the act of prayer?

If we want to address ourselves to the Lord who made heaven and earth, where in heaven or earth do we stand or sit or kneel to do that? Where is the place for prayer?

Many people these days do not feel a need or a place of prayer. We build homes for our families. People build shopping centers and office buildings and movie complexes. National Presbyterian Church has this house of prayer. For people who know themselves to be living before God, who know that

their story intertwines with the story God has told in the Scriptures, it seems the right thing to do.

Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem. Surrounded by all the grandeur he had built, the Scriptures remember:

> *Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath…. Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house…Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.* [1st Kings 8:22-30]

Surrounded by the glory that was Solomon's, Solomon shakes his head and prays simply that God will hear him, that God would hear us. Where is an appropriate place to pray to God?

God is high and holy, lifted high above the ordinary, exalted above all that has been touched by sin. Perhaps our places of prayer

should be high and holy as well. So Babylonians built ziggurats, stone replicas of mountains, and Aztecs built pyramids rising above the plains of Mexico on which they offered their sacrifices and made their prayers. High in the Himalayas Theravada Buddhists erect shrines and hang out prayers on banners of paper and cloth to fly in the wind until they finally disintegrate and become one with all the ancestors who dwell in that high and holy Himalayan place. To pray to the high and holy One, people go to a high and holy place. I discovered a few weeks ago that the highest place in the District of Columbia is not far from here, right up the street.

We come here. Most of us have come here before, some of us a hundred times, some of us more than a thousand times. We have come here before in the company of others no longer present to us. We remember them as we pray, we seem to pray with them in this particular place of prayer. This place located along busy Nebraska Avenue we name our place of prayer.

Of such a hallowed place of prayer like this, the poet T. S. Eliot wrote:

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an ordering of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire
beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.[i]

Maybe that is where we pray: between "England and nowhere," sometime between "Never and always.

Some people will say that they can pray anywhere. The place does not matter. One can pray on a golf course as well as in a cathedral. The golden sunset seen in clean mountain air evidences the glory of God as much as the golden altar. Every place is holy, which is to say, no place is. This some understand to be a corollary of the doctrine of the omnipresence of God: that God, being present at all time and all

places, may be invoked, called upon, prayed to without regard to our particular and specific location.

The logic is irrefutable but in terms of our actual experience of prayer, I wonder if it is not a bit like peanut butter: God can be spread so finely over the whole, vast landscape that the flavor of holiness no longer has a recognizable tang. I do not doubt that people invoke the name of God on golf courses, but I am not certain that is an expression of prayer. Where is the place of prayer?

Most of us have known a place or even several places where God seemed particularly near. Maybe it is the open air chapel at the church camp where you knelt and surrendered your life to Christ. Maybe it is a small Norman chapel in France, a place you had never known until you entered it, but walking through the door you found yourself home, enveloped in holiness and filled with the most astonishing expectation that God might speak to you out of the ancient stones. Most of us know the kind of place I'm talking about.

Celtic Christians call such locations as these "thin places": where the wall between this world and the other world is as thin as gossamer, where, if we could just set our heads just right, we might hear the angels singing; where the communion of the saints is by no

means merely a doctrine but undeniable fact, so much are we visited by the presence of those who dwell before God on the other side. At these "thin places" like the Isle of Iona, it is not even so much that we sense the presence of God, but that God is the air we breathe, is the wind on our face, is the roar of the waves on the sand, is the singing invitation touching us to respond in love, is the power of justice we feel pounding in our veins.

Those "thin places" are not the sorts of place inhabited by the singer of the 130th psalm. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD," this psalmist sings, "Lord, hear my voice!," and the sound of the psalmists voice echoes, echoes, echoes on and on because it breaks on thickness all around and the howl ricochets in the darkness. The psalmist cries from a place by no means "thin" but rather one encased in thick solidity. Like doors of steel, like walls of stone, like a stockade of concrete, this thickness surrounds the psalmist and there is no getting through it to God, to sunlight, to hope, to anything new.

Some human propensity causes us to build ziggurats and pyramids so we can raise our prayers from on high. The gothic architecture of the cathedral invites us to send prayers soaring on high. This psalmist, however, does not pray from the heights but rather from the depths: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!"

The psalmist prays from the crypt deep under the cathedral surrounded by and en-mired in death. The psalmist prays not from the high Sierras but from Death Valley. The lowest trench in the depths of the ocean is the location of the psalmist's cry, but the physical, spatial location is the least of it. The psalmist prays from the place where God is not, from the place where by definition, God cannot hear. This we know because the psalmist tells us: "Out of the depths I cry to you." "Out of the sewer I cry to you." The location is not merely spatial but spiritual.

To speak of "the depths," therefore, is to say that the psalmist is located at the *terminus ad quem*—the furthest point possible—away from God. You know that place, that familiar place, where you feel so close to God? Not only is that where the psalmist is not, from where the psalmist is, you can't even see a road that leads to your happy place. You can't get there from where the psalmist is.

By definition "the depths" is where God is not, where God does not dwell, where God does not come, where God does not hear. Where God is, life abounds, but the psalmist prays from the depths where death overwhelms. Where God is, creativity throbs, but the psalmist is besieged with devastation and destruction all around. Where God is, blessing abounds but curse surrounds the psalmist. Where God is, new things burst forth, but where the psalmist prays the monotony of the same tired lostness never

ends. Where God is, the day dawns with hope, but the psalmist prays in never-ending night.

Do you get the picture? When the psalmist cries out "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD," the psalmist identifies the utterly hopeless location. You can't get to God from there. You can't raise your voice enough to be heard from there. We have known places where we have felt so close to God we could just reach out our hands and almost sense some One taking them. But some of us have also known this other place where we reach out and reach out and reach out and…nothing. From this place, when the psalmist cries out, "Lord, hear my voice!" we know the psalmist is whistling in the dark.

"Lord, hear my voice?" That is exactly what—by definition—cannot possibly happen in "the depths." That is the logic of the language the psalmist uses. The psalmist locates the place of prayer where God cannot possibly be, where God cannot possibly hear, where God cannot possibly come, where God cannot possibly help. From there the psalmist prays, "Lord, hear my voice."

This place of spiritual desolation from which the psalmist prays may not be literally in the depths, like Death Valley, only in the valley of the shadow of death. It may not be in the depths of the ocean, only in a place where all the waves of destruction beat over us. The place where the psalmist cries from "the depths" need not be physically in a hole, in a trench, in a ditch. It could be higher than that. It could be on

a hill. It could even be on a hill overlooking a city where a man cries out, borrowing the words of yet another psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the depths a man cries out to God who is not there and does not hear and will not come to rescue.

We are acquainted with that hill, the one called Golgotha, "the place of the skull," the place of curse. Doesn't the Bible say, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree?" [Gal 3:13, Deut 21:23] Jesus prays from the cursed place, prays of his God-forsakenness; he howls from the depths of this world to an un-listening sky; he dies alone. The witness of faith tells us that here, in this death, in this abandonment, in this God-forsakenness, God is present.

We wait to understand that. We wait to comprehend that paradox of God's mysterious presence/absence.

The psalmist sings:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in God's 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.

We wait to behold the mystery of Golgotha once more. We wait for the dawn of this next week when we visit the passion of the Lord once more. We

wait because there is more to see, more to know. We wait for more to pray.

We wait for the dawn. We wait for God.

We wait for God to do impossibly what God cannot possibly do. We wait for God to enter our depths, to walk among our devastation; we wait for God to embrace our curse, to join our God-forsakenness; we wait for God to enter into our death.

We wait for what God cannot possibly do, we wait for God to do it impossibly, which is the only way the distance between us and God can be bridged. The only possible way the wound can be healed is impossibly. We wait for that.

We wait for that dawn—"more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning"—we wait for God.

The psalmist of the 130th psalm assures us our wait will not be in vain.

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[i]T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" in "Four Quartets," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930/1950), p.139.