I Wait for the Lord

Psalm 130
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
June 9, 2024/Third Sunday after Pentecost

Earlier this week, I did a quick inspection of the themes and topics and texts of my sermons over the first five months or so of 2024. I discovered that I had only preached from the Old Testament once!

(Interestingly, it was on Easter Sunday!)

This seemed like a bit of a problem to me. The New Testament is, of course, hugely important. It's where we meet Jesus and Jesus is the point of the whole story. But it still seemed like I was guilty of giving you an unbalanced biblical diet.

So, I thought before everyone disperses for the summer, I'd better do something to address this!

For the next three Sundays before we transition to our summer schedule, I'll be using texts from the Old Testament.

Next Sunday and the Sunday after that, we'll be in the book of 1 Samuel, looking at a few stories from the life of David.

This week, it's a Psalm. Perhaps David wrote it, we don't know. It's a short Psalm, but I think in some ways it sums up the entire life of faith.

***

Before we get to Psalm 130, I want to start with an article that I came across this week that asked an interesting question.

The article was by a guy named Sam Bush and was called "Life Is Not a Journey (It's a Train Wreck). It's a provocative title (as titles need to be to get clicks!).

Here's how it begins:

> What is the most effective metaphor for life? Is it a box of chocolates? A highway? A roller coaster? Each of these images captures what it means to be a person and all the surprises, twists and turns that come with it. But these words do more than just *describe* life; they change how we understand it. A person who sees life as a race will live very differently from a person who sees it as a gift.[1]

It was an interesting set of metaphors, I thought, and I spent some time thinking about what each of them conveyed.

A box of chocolates. This one obviously comes from the movie *Forrest Gump*. Most of us know the famous line that Forrest delivers on multiple occasions in the film: "Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

This metaphor conveys a few things. The idea that life is a mixed bag of experiences. The idea that to live is to come to terms with some level of not knowing. The idea that life, in some sense at least, is something that happens *to* us, as opposed to something where we control all the variables.

A highway. Tom Cochrane wrote the famous song—"Life is a Highway, I wanna drive it all night long." Highways take you from one place to another. This metaphor communicates that to live is to be in motion, to be going somewhere, to be on the way to a destination. And, of course, to explore, to make stops along the way.

A rollercoaster. What do rollercoasters do? They go up and they go down. And life, of course, has ups and it has downs. It can be exhilarating, and it can be terrifying. Sometimes the view is spectacular, and the wind is in our hair (if we have hair), and all seems right in the world. Sometimes we just hang on for dear life.

A race. The apostle Paul used this one in 1 Corinthians 9:

> [24] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. [25] Everyone who competes in the games goes into

[1] https://mbird.com/philosophy/life-is-not-a-journey/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=life-is-not-a-journey

> strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

This metaphor sees life as a training ground, a preparation for the life to come. At its best, the image of the race reminds us that we were created for a purpose, a prize, that it matters how we live. At its worst, it can lead to people thinking of life as a competition where others must be defeated so that we can be victorious.

A gift. Gifts are unearned. Gifts are extravagant, unnecessary. They are expressions of love. And of course, a gift implies a giver. You can't have a gift without one.

I think that each of these tells something about the truth of what life is like, what it *feels* like to make our way through this world.

There may be other metaphors you would use to describe what life is like.

The quote I began with prompted me to think about how *I* think about my life. I think the dominant image that I operate with, whether explicitly or implicitly, is one that runs through or hovers over all the other metaphors.

A story.

We are storytelling animals. We are drawn to stories. If I tell a story in a sermon, I know that people pay attention in a different way than if I am waxing eloquent about the semantic range of a Greek word.

Stories cause you to lean forward and pay attention. Greek words cause you to yawn or inspect the back of your bulletins. We love stories.

Why? In an article called "The Science of Storytelling, author Carl Alviani argues that we are biologically hardwired for storytelling.[2] Storytelling served an evolutionary benefit, he says. It helped to create and maintain cohesive communities that cooperated better and thus survived.

Maybe.

[2] https://medium.com/the-protagonist/the-science-behind-storytelling-51169758b22c

But more importantly, I would say that we are wired for storytelling because we were brought into being by the Divine Storyteller.

The idea that the universe and our tiny parts in it are just a bunch of random events with no meaning or direction or narrative arc is intolerable to us.

Even those who profess no belief in God, who would say that the universe *is*, in fact, just a bunch of random events with no meaning, can't help but think of their own lives in terms of a narrative that contains meaning (even if the meaning is to say that there is no meaning!).

We can't help ourselves. We are storied creatures.

***

Well, what does any of this have to do with our text this morning?

Psalms are not stories. They are songs, prayers, poems. They are bursts of praise or howls of pain. They are protests and confessions, expressions of adoration and reverence.

But I think in its own way Psalm 130 also tells a story. It is the profoundly human story of the movement *from* despair *through* a truthful encounter with God and ultimately *to* hope.

Psalm 130 begins in a dark place. "The depths."

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

We don't know the specifics dark place the writer of this psalm is in. We don't really need to. The Bible gives us enough examples of human beings in "the depths," whether their suffering is of their own making (think of the story of David and Bathsheba) or it's undeserved (think of Job).

And of course, we know from personal experience, too. Maybe we're struggling at work. Maybe our marriage is in trouble. Maybe there is a fractured relationship that we don't know how to mend.

Maybe it is the challenges that come with aging. Maybe it's the state of the church. Maybe someone close to us is in trouble and we feel powerless to help. Maybe the news of the day has us struggling to find a hopeful future.

Maybe it's our own sin. Maybe we have dug ourselves a hole that we can't seem to climb out of. Maybe we are wracked with guilt for the things we have done that we know we ought not to have done.

This is certainly the case with the psalmist, as we'll see.

Whatever "the depths" might be, Psalm 130 begins with a cry.

The psalms of lament give us permission to express the shadow side of human experience. They bring into worship the full range of human experience. They give us permission to be sad or ashamed or angry, even if for a moment. Or more than a moment.

We are all caught up in this mixed-up world where bad things happen to us, where bad things sometimes happen *because* of us, where it's not always easy to tell the difference. From the depths, the psalmist cries out to God.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. The expectation is that God will indeed attend to his pain. And that God will indeed have mercy.

This is a rather astonishing set of assumptions. That the God of heaven and earth would actually *attend* to us! That he would notice our particular circumstances. That he would listen. That he would care. That God would be personally invested in our story in any way.

And that God would have mercy. That God would forgive.

I've been thinking a lot about forgiveness a lot over the last few years.

Maybe it's just an inevitable feature of getting older, of seeing more hard stories, of accumulating more failures.

Maybe it's seeing people I care about get locked into patterns of unforgiveness and the bitterness and hard edges this produces.

Maybe it's seeing our culture increasingly grow into one where mercy seems almost entirely absent.

Maybe it's just a deepening awareness of my own sin, the ways in which I fall short of what God has created me to be.

> If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

The implied answer is obvious. No one.

We all need to be forgiven. I think we know this in the deepest parts of who we are. Nick Cave puts it well in his book *Faith, Hope, and Carnage*:

> Can we be forgiven? I think that question is fundamental to all our lives. In fact, it may be the question that our lives pivot around or, indeed, the whole world revolves around. Can we be forgiven? And it is, of course, a religious question, not least because the secular world has failed to find a way of adequately asking it… I think this need is at the very center of our lives—a need for forgiveness.

I couldn't agree more. Both that this need for forgiveness is the question the whole world revolves around *and* that it is a religious question. It is, fundamentally, a God question.

> But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

Increasingly, I do indeed revere God for his forgiveness. Yes, God is exalted and high and lofty and holy and powerful and creative. All of these things are true, and they call forth our awe and praise.

But I am increasingly blown away by the forgiveness of God. The parable of the prodigal son. The woman caught in adultery. Jesus, hanging on the cross, saying, "forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

So we begin in the depths, we cry out to God for healing, for restoration, for forgiveness.

This encounter with the truth of who God is puts us in a posture where we can wait hopefully.

> 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 (Ps. 130:5-6).

I think many of us come to a point in our lives—sometimes relatively early in our story, sometimes only at the very end—where we realize that we cannot save ourselves.

We cannot be pure enough, diligent enough, moral enough, committed enough. We cannot do enough. Our only hope is God.

I'm not sure how many of you read the most recent issue of the *Canadian Mennonite*. There's an interesting article in there about a professor at AMBS named Allan Rudy-Froese (some of you might know him personally).

It's called "Recovering humanist - Seminary prof calls for transcendent pause" (another provocative title!).[3]

In it, he talks about the unsettling experience of hearing the following comment from someone who had listened to his sermons at the church he pastored for eight years:

She thanked him for all those great sermons. But it was her follow-up comment that hit him hard:

> "I don't really believe in God," she said, "but I really want to follow Jesus."

How, he wondered, could his sermons resonate with a person who didn't believe in God? What was he preaching?

He thought about it and concluded that his sermons were actually "pretty humanist" and far too light on God's grace.

> Rudy-Froese uses a simple example to illustrate the distinction between a focus on ethics and divine grace. The story of the Good Samaritan can be read as a practical example to follow, or it can be read as a beautiful account of the grace God extends to all of us who, in various ways, lie wounded beside the road.
>
> It can be morally instructive, or it can fill us with gratitude and awareness of God's work in the world.

[3] https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/recovering-humanist-seminary-prof-calls-transcendent-pause

> Or both, but Rudy-Froese says Mennonites tend to be too quick to move past the grace to the moral imperative.

I think he's right.

And I think the psalmist would agree. He starts with the self and its failures, its sins, its pain.

But he ends with God. With undeserved mercy. With grace, with love, with hope.

There is a reason that the proverb says, "Without hope, the people perish." I have claimed that we humans are hardwired for storytelling. We are also hard-wired for hope.

We always moving toward some vision of wholeness and flourishing, goodness and peace, truth and beauty, even when we're barely aware of it, often when we're failing miserably at it.

To hope is to be alive. To hope is to keep moving. To hope is to believe that God is beckoning onward, toward our better selves and toward the better world that we were created for.

To hope is to wait. Not passively. It's not like we have no role in the story. But at some point, we must all realize that God is the hero of the story. Not us.

And so, we wait, expectantly, with our whole beings. With gratitude and with praise.

Psalm 130 tells the story of the movement of the self to God.

From the depths, *through* a recognition of our sin and our limitation, *to* an encounter with the God who loves and forgives, and ultimately to hope.

This is not a story that we move through once and then we're done with it. It is a story that we repeat over and over and over again throughout our lives.

I want to end as our Psalm ends:

> O Israel [O church], hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Amen.