

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, June 6, 2021

“Out of the Depths”
Psalm 130

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Many psalms are known by their number, but our Psalm today, Psalm 130, is perhaps best known by its opening verse. This psalm begins with the words: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD” (v. 1). In Latin, that first phrase, “out of the depths,” was translated as “de profundis,” and—in the Christian tradition—that’s how this psalm has been known for centuries: this is a song *de profundis*, from the depths.

Or at least, this psalm *begins* in the depths—but that’s *not* where this psalm ends. This psalm comprises four parts—or maybe better, four movements. As we explore this psalm together, we’ll see how it moves from the depths toward a hard-won hope.

The first movement:

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

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!” (vv. 1-2).

The song begins in the depths: “the depths” of what? This is shorthand for “the depths of the sea” (Mays). It’s a frightful image, really, of being completely, utterly, terribly overwhelmed and in over one’s head. The late James Mays, a wonderfully insightful commentator on the Psalms, writes this about “the depths”: “[i]t represents drowning in distress, being overwhelmed and sucked down by the bottomless waters of troubles [...]. To be in the depths is to be where death prevails instead of life as prospect and power [...]. In this song, being in the depths is clearly connected with iniquities [...],” Mays adds: “It is not just guilt; it is the flood of wrong and its consequences that sweeps life along and from which there is no escape apart from a liberating, rescuing redemption.”

The psalmist, crying out from “the depths,” is—one could say—in a broken place amid a broken world. The ground has given way from under the psalmist, who has fallen all the way down. This psalm has a long and powerful spiritual legacy in the church, and I wonder if that’s partly because we can all understand what it means to call out from the “the depths.” I don’t know anyone who hasn’t, at one time or another, found themselves falling all the way down. I’m reminded of the lyrics of James Taylor: “Every now and then the things I lean on lose their meaning/And I find myself careening.”

So let us attend to how the psalmist responds to falling down—all the way down—into “the depths.” What does the psalmist do? What is psalmist’s first act from “the depths”? Think about that... (It might even be so obvious that it’s hard to recognize.) The psalmist prays to God! The psalmist’s first act is to pray:

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

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!” (vv. 1-2).

The psalmist recognizes that no matter far down into the depths one falls, one is never out of God's reach. As the psalmist prays elsewhere in the Psalter:

"Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (139:7-8).

Recognizing that the depths—no matter how deep—can never drag the psalmist beyond the reach of God's love and faithfulness, the psalmist prays to God, who seems to be the only one who can or will listen.

The second movement:

"If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered" (vv. 3-4).

In this second movement, praying from "the depths," the psalmist affirms what is the character of God—and also what is *not* the character of God. "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities," the psalmist asks, "Lord, who could stand?" The implied answer is: no one! If God were merciless—rather than merciful—then life would really be hopeless. James Mays, that same scholar, puts it like this: if God's "principal way with human beings [were] to watch for iniquities [...], there would be no hope for anyone. [...] None could survive if such were God's way. The 'depths' would be the only possibility."

Yet, thanks be to God, mercilessness is not the character of God. After acknowledging that—if God were merciless—human life would be hopeless, the psalmist affirms the Good News that God is full of mercy (indeed the very source of forgiveness), and that this merciful God is worthy of adoration: "But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered." In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this psalm, we hear the message directly:

"If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?

As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that's why you're worshiped" (MSG).

The third movement:

"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" (vv. 5-6).

First, the psalmist prayed, recognizing that even "the depths" are not beyond the reach of God; second, as the psalmist continued to pray, the psalmist affirmed that the God who can reach down into "the depths" is merciful and forgiving. And now, where does that leave the psalmist? What more can the psalmist do? Now the psalmist waits and hopes: even down in "the depths," the psalmist waits and hopes, knowing that "the depths" are not beyond God's reach; the psalmist waits and hopes, knowing that God is a forgiving God—that this awaited God is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Psalm 86:15).

Do you see how the first two movements make possible the third? One cannot wait hopefully for someone, unless one is confident that the one awaited will truly come: there's no hope in waiting if one thinks one waits

in vain. And so, with confidence that God listens to these prayers, and with confidence that the God who listens is the God who forgives, the psalmist waits for God with a kind of active hopefulness. James Mays, that scholar I quoted before, he writes that waiting and hoping here describes “a stance of enduring the present in anticipation of vindication in the future,” and that “‘Waiting for the LORD’ [...] is trust that finds strength and courage from the certainty of what is yet to be.”

And notice how the psalmist gives voice to this “certainty” through that comparison to watching for morning:
“my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.”

The psalmist waits more patiently, more hopefully, and more confidently than those waiting and watching for sunrise. This is remarkable: the psalmist has more confidence in God’s redeeming rescue than the night watch has confidence that the sun will rise.

The fourth movement:

“O Israel, 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” (vv. 7-8).

There’s a sudden change in the psalm, as the psalmist begins speaking to the community, addressing God’s people Israel. At first, we heard the psalmist praying: “I cry to you, O LORD,” and “there is forgiveness with you”; then the psalmist affirmed this expectant, trusting “stance” (Mays) of waiting and hoping; and now, the psalmist speaks words of hope to the community, announcing that there is “steadfast love” and “great power to redeem” in the God of Israel. And indeed, the psalmist’s message offers such unalloyed hope that we might assume the psalmist has already been rescued from “the depths”...yet there’s no mention here of rescue or redemption. It seems that the psalmist may still be struggling in the depths of distress, even as the psalmist now offers this message of hope.

Steve Parrish, an Old Testament scholar, explains: “It may well be that the psalmist, who has cried out to a listening God, still struggles with threatening depths and battles to discern what lies ahead through the murky shadows of the night. Day is yet to dawn.” Yet, nevertheless, as the psalmist waits and hopes amid “the depths,” the psalmist has learned the trustworthiness of God, and can now announce to all—and to anyone likewise in “the depths”—that they may “hope in the LORD” of steadfast love and redemption.

The psalmist has journeyed from “the depths” of distress to a stance of hope, and the psalmist has shown for us the way that we may follow in that same life-giving journey: could we, when we find ourselves in “the depths,” trace that same path to hope? May we, in “the depths,” recognize that we are not beyond God’s reach, and so call out to God in prayer. May we, in “the depths,” recognize that God is merciful and forgiving. May we, in “the depths,” wait and hope confidently for God’s help. And may we, in “the depths,” announce to one another in community that we may find hope in the God who loves and redeems. Amen.