

Trusting God's Presence
CCUM - 25 June 2017

Psalm 13

13 How long will you [ignore] me, Lord? Forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long will I be left to my own wits,

[to bear this pain in my soul with]

agony [and sorrow] filling my heart? Daily?

How long will my enemy [continue to] defeat me?

3 [Notice] me!

Answer me, O God!

Restore sight to my eyes! [Shine light on my path.]

Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death,

4 and my enemy will say, "I won!"

My foes will rejoice [because I am shaken to the core].

5 [Nevertheless] I have trusted in your faithful, unfailing love.

My heart rejoices [in your liberating presence].

6 Yes, I will sing to the Lord

because God has [offered me abundance.]

O God, help me out here. Where are you? I'm crying out to you in pain. I hate this feeling of powerlessness. My family members are struggling and there is nothing I can do. I can't fix it. Please hear me.... please make it all better.

Often when I'm most anxious.... worried... and overwhelmed, these are the times I am most likely to pray, to cry out to God as I seek some peace and resolution. These are times of lamentation and weeping times when I am feeling hopeless and confused and unclear. Times when I am at a loss and don't know what to do.

I get comfort from Anne Lamott who reminds us

There's freedom in hitting bottom, in seeing that you won't be able to save or rescue your [children, your parents], or your career. There

is relief in admitting you've reached the place of great unknowing. This is where restoration can begin, because when you're still in the state of trying to fix the unfixable, everything bad is engaged: the chatter of your mind, the tension in your [body], all the trunks and carry-ons you [continue to bring] from your past. It's exhausting and crazy-making.

I know even as I pray for help that there will be tremendous compassion, mercy, generosity, companionship, and laughter from other people, from friends.... I can picture God saying: "Okay, hon, I'll be here when you're done with your list." Then God goes back to knitting new forests or helping less pissy people until I hit rock bottom. And when I finally do, there may be hope.

... In prayer, [she says] I see the suffering bathed in light. In God, there is no darkness. I see God's light permeate them, soak into them, guide their feet. I want to tell God what to do: "Look, Pal, this is a catastrophe. You have got to [fix this]." But it wouldn't work. So I pray for people who are hurting, that they be filled with air and light. Air and light heal; they somehow get into those dark, musty places, like spiritual antibiotics.

As always, thank you Anne. I would like to be able to say that I have a consistent prayer practice that includes regular gratitude and listening for guidance, but I do not. Too often, after the fact, I may think to myself, "Why didn't I remember to reach out to God when I needed comfort or assistance most?" Because, when I do reach out, a window of fresh air is opened in my soul. I find comfort and I don't feel so alone. And I'm often reminded of the next right action when a decision is needed. [Breathe.....and pause] "God, grant me the serenity...." And I feel peace enter my heart as I breathe and feel a relief from my anxiety.

So when I cry out and lament my current predicament, I may be thinking,

“where are you in the midst of all this, God?” It may feel like God has forgotten me... or us... but I think it’s kind of like how we often misunderstand listening... we don’t feel people are listening to us if they don’t take our “suggestions” and actually do it our way. Is this how we are about prayer, too? If we aren’t immediately getting the answer or the response we want, we feel God has forgotten and ignored us.

As I was prepping for this message, and doing what I do, which includes reading lots... I found a phrase which was new to me, but may not be new to you... Spiritual Puberty. And it resonated and made lots of sense....

Puberty is a time of resistance and significant change. Our bodies are growing more quickly than we can keep up. It is often very confusing and overwhelming. We want our own way. We want to call the shots. We don’t want others to interfere in our lives. And sometimes we hurt a lot! Physical growing pains and emotional and spiritual questioning. We are running as fast as we can to just keep up with what’s going on inside us. Our identity and comfort with who we are is on shifting sand. We ask many questions.

Thinking about puberty like this, we can see how sometimes, even though we are grown ups, we are going through spiritual growing pains. We don’t get to adulthood fully evolved. Things continue to happen along the way.... sometimes daily, that shake up our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Though it is often far from good news, or reason for rejoicing, we have continuing opportunities for learning. Spiritual puberty can be felt as a time of confusion and overwhelm, a time of questioning. Where is God in the midst of all of this pain and suffering and loss and anxiety and hopelessness? Where can I possibly find hope?

Joan Stott has responded to our Psalm 13 scripture and the reference to “the enemy” by saying,

Whilst “enemy” may be a strong word in my personal experiences, active negativity can wear away patience, and even any hope for a

better outcome! So, I need to learn the secret of faithful waiting, of trusting, [opening to] the opportunity for growth of new insights and discernment, as I wait on God for guidance and blessing.

I realize many in this world struggle with far more than I, wondering where they will get their next meal, or a place to lay their head at night, or health concerns. I am speaking as someone with a mostly comfortable life. I do not live in constant fear for my life. I do not struggle with the very real possibility that someone will hurt me or someone I love. I know that folks in the midst of a very real sense of hopelessness can justifiably believe that God is missing. That there is nothing that is going to save them from their pit of despair and fear. How can we believe in a God that appears to answer some prayers and avoid others?

Bishop John Shelby Spong speaks to this -

In 1981, my wife, Joan, received a cancer diagnosis that was determined in all probability to be fatal. Because we were well known, the news became public almost immediately. Prayer groups added my wife to their lists. Concern, caring, and love were communicated. We received the caring with deep appreciation. As she moved into remission... some who prayed most intensely began to take credit, "our prayers are working."

Despite my gratitude for their embracing love, I could not help also being troubled. Suppose instead a quiet sanitation worker in Newark had a wife with the same diagnosis?

Suppose he did not have a wide circle of friends, or he was not religiously oriented. And there weren't so many prayers lifted on his wife's behalf. Would that affect the course of her illness? Or suppose Dr Spong's wife had died almost immediately. Would this mean people's prayers weren't delivered from a place of enough faith?

Bishop Spong asked, "Would I be interested in worshiping a God who would treat my wife differently because we had opportunities in life that the sanitation worker had not? The answer is no." He describes prayer in this way -

Prayer is the active recognition that there is a sacred core in every person. Prayer [helps us] face life's varying demands. We all live subject to a wide array of circumstances over which we have no control. Prayer is being willing to meet these circumstances with courage. Prayer is the ability to embrace the fragility of life and to transform it. Prayer involves shedding the idea that we are the center of the universe or that our lives are more important. Prayer calls us out of childish dependency into spiritual maturity. So praying and living deeply, we live as if everything we say and do is a prayer. Prayer is being present, sharing love, and opening to life .

Yes, there is great power and comfort in prayer. Even though sometimes we are in the midst of a time of Spiritual Puberty, struggling to figure out who we are and what we really need, we can also strive for Spiritual Maturity. We can recognize that we are often not going to get our way. We are powerless over the choices of others. It is actually not our business to tell others what to do.

So admitting our own struggles, we can come to a place of understanding even as we lament like the psalmist.

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When we trust in God's unfailing, faithful love, we are liberated, freed, and drawn into the light and hope that can sustain us no matter what circumstances may befall.

Mary Oliver shares her faith journey with us in
"Coming to God: First Days"

Lord, what shall I do that I
can't quiet myself?
Here is the bread, and
here is the cup, and
I can't quiet myself.

To enter the language of transformation!
To learn the importance of stillness,
with one's hands folded!

When will my eyes of rejoicing turn peaceful?
When will my joyful feet grow still?
When will my heart stop its prancing
as over the summer grass?
Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake.
I would climb the highest tree
to be that much closer.

Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
the inscrutable and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
on a day of no wind,

bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary thing;
every motion; even words.

Through inspirational words, we feel God's presence.

In the beauty and wonder around us... in the kindness and generosity of others,
we feel God's presence.

Even in the quiet that envelops us during our darkest times, Spirit joins us.

When we remember to pause even in the midst of our deep pain and anguish
and anxiety...

When we quiet our fears long enough to sink into God's presence and breathe
in God's comfort...

And when we allow ourselves to open to the gratitude we also feel for our many
blessings...

In all these moments and more, when we trust God's constant love, we are
freed from our fears and suffering. We are given strength and courage to go on.