

## **ON ASCENDING**

### **PSALM 130**

If this Psalm seems familiar, that is because it is. Psalm 130 appears among the Revised Common Lectionary readings for the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Sundays in Ordinary Time this year. Meaning: I preached this text on Sunday, June 28, and now I am preaching it again on Sunday, August 9. The question that you may be tempted to ask is, “Will he preach the same sermon?”

The answer to this question is, “Yes...and no.” Yes, I will quote liberally from Psalm 130, because it is difficult for me to imagine preaching a sermon without citing the Scripture on which it is based. Since Scripture is---well, Scripture---why not step aside from time to time and trust Scripture to speak for itself. What is written there does not change, and yet we do. Thoughts and feelings change. Circumstances change, and God is with us always, even to the end of the age.

Yes, I was tempted to preach the same sermon to find out if anybody was listening the first time, but I was afraid. I was afraid that nobody would notice, that every other person coming out of church would say things like “good sermon” or “how original.” O, I know---deep down, I know---that you would have caught me. You would have told me that I preached that one before; and maybe if you were grumpy, you would say something about it not being all that exciting the first time.

I know a preacher who is notorious for preaching the same sermons over and over again (you know it is bad when even the Christmas and Easter only crew notice the pattern). One Sunday, after a repeat sermon, a tough, justice-minded woman in the congregation accused the preacher of relying on the dementia of an aging congregation. He defended the practice by arguing that some sermons bear repeating, and his critic responded by saying that his did not and confessed that it was all she could do to sit through them the first time. As I sat there listening to this, I thought, “Why was it I thought that I should become a Minister of Word and Sacrament?”

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19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, August 9, 2009*

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.” This is a prayer that bears repeating, because it is thick and rich and pure. Where is the psalmist crying? Out of the depths: plural. Observation: it is rarely one thing that brings a person to tears. It is usually a collection of them. Even when the problem is clear---the end of a relationship, a bleak diagnosis or the end of summer vacation---there is a collection of problems just beneath the surface. One relationship involves others. One person’s suffering causes those whom he or she holds dear to grieve. The end of summer vacation is the end of summer vacation, but, at least around here, there is some consolation, because, rumor has it, the University of Alabama will be fielding a football team again this year.

Revisiting this Psalm at the end of the summer seems appropriate given that so much happens between Memorial Day and Labor Day. This is when Presbyterians in university towns are most likely to travel, relax and self-reflect, and in so doing they---we---learn something about ourselves and something about God (and not necessarily in that order).

Since we have prayed this Psalm, Sarah Palin resigned as Governor of Alaska. Sonia Sotomayor was confirmed as a Supreme Court justice. Michael Jackson was memorialized. There has been rioting in China. Pope Benedict XVI called for a new world order guided by ethics, dignity and the search for a common good. The Episcopal Church of the United States overturned a ban on the appointment of gay bishops. The Chicago White Sox’s Mark Buehrle pitched a perfect game, and James Crowley and Henry Louis Gates were invited to the White House to drink beer (all in the name of racial harmony, of course).

Maybe Michael Jackson and Major League baseball do not belong in this list. The point is that it feels like the world has shifted again and again in a very short time and that it will continue to do so unless God intervenes.

With change comes anxiety, anxiety that presents itself as enthusiasm, expectation and fear, anxiety that helps us to laugh and to grumble and causes us to guess and to second-guess one another

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and ourselves. It is also the place from which we pray deeply and boldly, “If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?” If the prayer were to stop there, it would be self-defeating, because it would be self-centered. It would emphasize God’s judgment and not God’s grace. In Jesus Christ, God’s final word to any of us (and to those we cannot stand) is grace not judgment: “For there is forgiveness with you; therefore you shall not be feared.” At last, the psalmist recognizes that God gives us permission to relax from time to time. Relaxing, in fact, begets patience, patience that forms us spiritually and teaches us to pray, “I wait for you, O Lord, my soul waits for you; in your word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than sentries for the morning.”

For what have you been waiting this summer? How many times has your world changed since June? How did God speak to you through this Psalm then? How is God speaking to you through this Psalm now? Out of which depths do you cry? How confident are you that God listens when you cry? God not only listens. God runs ahead of us and just before we crash into one of the giant walls that human beings are capable of erecting, God scales the height and reaches into the depth so that, in the language of the Scots Confession, we may “cleave...serve...worship...and trust” the God of grace in whom we live and move and have our being.

The language of “living” and “moving” reminds us that there is a difference between life and motion, and yet both are marks of our life together in Jesus Christ. Living without moving feels like running a marathon inside of a hamster wheel, to be alive and well, sometimes exhilarated, but unsure if any difference is being made. Moving without living is being able to say, “I” or “we” have “accomplished” this, this and this and still feeling empty inside.

The Reformed faith calls on us to recognize that God generates all life and movement but not at the expense of agency. It disturbs me deeply what I find the notion of God’s sovereignty reduced to fatalism. Sure, sometimes, life just happens to us, but often, we happen to life, because we are willing

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to take God's promises seriously, to be creative and to work accordingly. Scripture calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly, and yet this mandate calls for interpretation. It calls for discernment. It calls us to look at the text and to look at the world and to respond accordingly.

I am grateful for this calling, and I was reminded of just how grateful I am for this calling on the annual pilgrimage to Chautauqua. Lydia and I have participated in the religion, arts and recreation program at Chautauqua for the past six years, and this year was different, because we did not fly, and we added trips to Major League ballparks, Niagara Falls and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to the agenda (and guess which one of us suggested the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame).

One of the advantages of driving is that it helps the traveler to disengage slowly from the stresses of everyday life while climbing to a height that helps him or her to relax. Chautauqua is definitely one of these places for me. It is a place that I have visited and revisited, a place where I have celebrated triumph and mourned loss. It is place that knew me before I was ordained. It has known me as an associate and now as a pastor.

And, of course, one of the subjects that I was asked to discuss again and again was you: University Presbyterian Church. And as I listened to myself talk about the events of the past year, I was amazed. It was and is encouraging to celebrate that is happening in our midst. The church is assuming more and more responsibility for that which has been given to us whether that is game-day parking, the Winter-Vallery Student Center or the quality of life at the Presbyterian House. More and more people seem to be involved in the leadership of the church. We have a new organist and intern, both of whom will enrich our life together. The relationships that exist among the people whom God has gathered here are beautiful and enduring, and through it all, worship and service are the pillars of this community of faith.

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The question for me, then, is, “How to be an effective pastor of this flock?” My initial response to this question is that I should say things like I just said more often. I should spend at least as much time on the “Let’s give thanks for” list as I do on the “to do” list. I also feel like I should do a better job of looking at you in the eyes and saying “relax” (well, at least from time to time) and that I should lead by example by being less uptight when plumbing explodes or strange things happen at UPC.

Even deeper than that, I feel like I have to ask big, bold and probing questions like: How are we glorifying God? Are we participating in the whole body of Christ or just the parts we like? How is God calling us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God? Are we serving the Almighty, all-loving God with every ounce of energy, intelligence, imagination and love that God has given to us?

And when one or more of us stutters, when one or more of us fall, I will call on us to be patient. I will call on us to be forgiving. I will encourage you to pray this Psalm: “O Israel, wait, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy; there is plenteous redemption with the Lord, who shall redeem Israel from all their sins.” To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God’s eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.

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