

Sermon by Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 1, 2001

“Through the Mighty Waters”
Psalm 77; Colossians 2:13; 3:1-4

Psalm 77 is a prayer with a dramatic conclusion.
It ends with a powerful affirmation that the God of the Exodus
the God who leads the people of God through the mighty waters
and delivers them from danger, distress, and certain death
is alive and at work in the world.

The Psalm ends on this very confident note, but by no means does it begin there.
The one who prays this prayer begins in a place of complete self-absorption.
The speaker is so completely turned inward
and preoccupied with the worries of his or her own life
that everything this person prays is about him or her self.

Listen again to how the Psalm begins...
I cry aloud to God
I seek the Lord
 my hand is stretched out
 my soul refuses to be comforted
I think of God, and
I moan...
I meditate, and
 my spirit faints
You keep *my* eyelids from closing.
I am so troubled that *I* cannot speak.
I commune with *my* heart...
I meditate and search *my* spirit...

I...I...My...My...Me...Me...Me...

Now I don't know about you (you may have yourself more spiritually focussed than I do)
but *I* have, at times, found *myself* praying about *my life* in this way.

I...I...My...My...Me...Me...Me.
God, what are you going to do for *me*, about *my situation*,
so that *I* don't have to suffer so much,
so that *I* can be blessed and happy and fulfilled in my being?

Now it is true that we are not entirely off-base when we pray in this way.
The first question of the Heidleberg Catechism, in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions,
asks “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”
The answer given is “That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself
but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...
And it goes on to affirm that God is so deeply concerned for us in Christ

“that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation...”
It is true that a central affirmation of biblical faith is that God, who created us in love, now sustains us in love, and is concerned, deeply and constantly, about our well-being.

One might argue that the one who is praying Psalm 77 is only doing what a faithful person ought to do. At least the psalmist is praying. But still, something is missing here in these first verses. Something is skewed in this prayer, that makes it less than we might hope for.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, in a deeply insightful study of this Psalm, suggests that the effect of these first verses “is to draw [God] completely into the orbit of self-concern.” The questions may “ask about the very character of God. “But they are questions that emerge out of an overriding self-concern. They appear to ask about God’s faithfulness. But they really ask, What about me?”¹

So that as the psalmist comes to the end of this litany – this “inventory” of self-pity – he has sunk into a severe crisis of faith. Listen to what the psalmist is asking:
Has God’s steadfast love ceased?
Are God’s promises at an end for all time?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
(Did you hear that? This prayer is actually questioning God’s memory!)
Has God in anger shut up his compassion?

And then the psalmist sinks into crisis so severe, that in verse 10 he’s at a point of spiritual exhaustion, and says,
“It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

The psalmist can no longer think of God in the way she always has, she can no longer understand God according to the old familiar categories. From the psalmist’s point of view, “the Most High has changed.”

In the Chinese language, you may know that the character which stands for our English word “crisis” is a combination of two characters:
the one which means danger, and the one which means opportunity.
A crisis is a “dangerous opportunity”.
The psalmist, in verse 10 of this prayer, has reached a dangerous opportunity in the life of faith.

Brueggemann describes the crisis of this verse as
“a very risky and dangerous place where evangelical faith often stands, and indeed must stand.
And as we stand there, we never know in advance if we face loss of faith

or an opening for new faith.”ⁱⁱ
However, we must not rush past this dramatic moment
in this prayer or in our own prayers,
when faith is at a point of crisis.

When we stand, in our own lives, at rock bottom
and we are searching for a way beyond the crisis –
beyond the devastating illness
beyond the family fight that keeps our stomachs in a knot
beyond the economic uncertainty haunts us –

When we stand in a place of misery and we wonder if God has forgotten to be gracious,
then, like the psalmist, we have a number of options.

1) We can keep believing that God is there, but decide that God just doesn't care anymore.
God's promises are at an end. God's anger has gotten the better of God's compassion.
This is an option that is entertained in the early verses of this Psalm.

2) Or we can go the way of Psalm 14 and decide in our hearts that “There is no God”.
There are many who choose this way in the modern world.
And there are times in life that their arguments may sound pretty convincing to us.

Either of these options will lead us right back to verse 1 again,
right back to self-absorption, self-pity, and a life turned inward upon itself.

And it would be easy to take one of these two options,
since we live in a culture that teaches us to be turned in upon ourselves.

Our society stands at the pool of Narcissus, gazing at its own reflection.

We've gone from being a land of opportunity to a land of entitlement.

We've replaced responsible concern for the common good
with the narrow consideration of protecting MY rights.

We live in a culture precisely aimed at not relinquishing the self,
but at satisfying the self, exalting the self, helping the self.

And the popular religion of our culture has followed suit,
becoming less a mystery of grace
and more a mechanism to help *me* get what *I* want out of life and out of God.

But the Psalmist, who may have been practicing this kind of religion,
is beginning to suspect that God doesn't work this way.

And by verse 10 the Psalmist is quite sure that God doesn't work this way.

God will not be locked into a *quid pro quo*.

God's power to bless is not a commodity to be purchased or bartered for.

And so a crisis ensues, and the psalmist is struck with grief deep in the soul,
and decides that the right hand of the Most High has changed.

But there is another option for moving beyond verse 10.

Somewhat unexplainably, somewhat desperately,

this third option is exercised in by the psalmist in the next verse.

Somehow, a turn is made, from the self to God.

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, has described the religious life
as a life lived in an “I-Thou” relationship.

This kind of life is finally chosen by the psalmist.

Listen to the change of focus...

I will call to mind *the deeds of the Lord.*

I will remember *your wonders of old.*

I will meditate on *all your work.*

Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as *our God?*

You are the God who works wonders

You...You...You...Thou hast been...Thou art...Thou wilt be...

The focus of this prayer is no longer the self, but God.

It is not spelled out just how the psalmist manages to make this move.

It certainly was not an easy move,

but somehow the turn is made.

Perhaps you can remember a time in your life when things were falling apart,
and you realized that God was not operating according to your rules;
a time when you fell into spiritual crisis.

But then you made this unexplainable move,

this leap of faith, this miraculous rebound from the rock bottom of life,
when somehow, by some kind of amazing grace,
you found yourself believing again, confessing again,
praying once again to the God who alone can save you.

It's like "standing at the edge of a cold swimming pool, testing it with a toe,
putting off the dive, and then the quantum leap into the new icy world
of imaginative faith."ⁱⁱⁱ

The leap is the turning loose of the old self of self-pity, self-absorption.

It is the move envisioned by Jesus when he says,

"those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,
will save it" (Mark 8:35)

It is the move described by Paul in our passage from Colossians today,

"when you were buried with Christ in baptism,
you were also raised with Christ through faith in the power of God,
who raised him from the dead..."

...So...seek the things that are above, where Christ is..."

From this point forward, the psalmist is seeking something different in this Psalm..

Everything is now viewed in a new light.

The "I" of the first half of the Psalm is now overwhelmed

by the divine "You" of the second half.

There is a new story within which the psalmists dreadful circumstances are understood.

It is not the story of a culture turned in upon itself,

insisting that God of the Universe respect my rights to a good life.

Instead, it is the story of the Exodus,

the story of the God who delivers God's people
carrying them safely out of bondage and away from the pursuing armies
unleashing all the power of heaven on their behalf
until they are carried through the mighty waters of the Sea

and up onto the dry ground of freedom on the other side.
The narrow religion of self-concern is shattered
shattered by the act of remembering the wonderful deeds of the Lord
shattered by the turn from anxious pre-occupation with the self
that asks if God has forgotten to be gracious
to the prayerful utterance of “Thou”
that asks “What God is so great as our God?”

When you pray –
and I hope you do pray, because the absence of a prayer life
is a sure sign of the absence of faith.
Even a self absorbed prayer is better than no prayer at all –
when you pray,
and when you find yourself getting stuck in the I, and the Me, and the My,
of prayer.
Remember the God of the Exodus. Call to mind the deeds of the Lord.

I hesitate even to suggest that you should do this,
because it is an almost unthinkable thing to do,
to go from the despair and crisis of verse 10
to the faithful affirmation of verse 11.
Even to be able to make that “quantum leap” is sheer gift, it is the amazing grace of God.

But whenever life overwhelms us,
we in the Church have a way of talking about the experience.
We who have passed through the mighty waters with Christ,
who have been buried with Christ in baptism,
We trust in the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead.
The same God who raised Jesus
also led the people of Israel through the waters of the Sea,
and the same God will lead us, today,
because that is what the God of the Exodus does.

It is as the “I” of our prayers is overwhelmed by the “Thou” of God’s powerful presence
that we will begin to imagine what God may yet do
in our lives, and in our world.
Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and The Life of Faith*, pp. 258-267.

ⁱⁱ Brueggemann, p. 262

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, p. 264