

Psalms of Disorientation
Psalms 130 and 137
June 6, 2010
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"Out of the Depths I Cry to You"-- (#515) verse 1 solo

"Out of the depths I cry to you. O Lord, now hear me calling." You may have cried out to God "out of the depths" at some time in your life. It may have been when you were abandoned by a parent or a left by a spouse, or when your partner died or your child, or when you found yourself in the depths of a depression or chronic illness or sense of total failure. You may even have considered suicide; you may have felt as if you were in a pit with no way out.

The Psalms give voice to this despair.

One contemporary voice of lament is the voice of a parent whose child is in the grips of drug addiction. This is a kind of despair that is close to home here in Sonoma County. 110 tons of methamphetamine are sold in the United States every year—much of it brought across the borders. The Press Democrat spoke this week of the "Americans' unquenching thirst for illegal drugs" (June 4). Meth use increased in Sonoma County in the 1990s significantly and the rate has held, a higher rate here than in the rest of our country. 4,800 Sonoma County residents aged 12 or older are likely to have used methamphetamine in the past year, according to a Board of Supervisors Report in 2006 (http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/aods/pdf/meth_report_final.pdf). One of you in the congregation loaned me a book called *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction* by David Sheff, probably so that I would have some understanding of the despair that descends upon parents when a child is tormented by drug addiction.

In this autobiographical account, you read about how this beautiful boy descends into the pit of methamphetamine addiction. The book is written by the father who loves his son, Nic, desperately, but finds himself completely helpless to save him. The father keeps tracking down his son to find out where he is, he bails him out, and keeps hoping that *this time* his son will stay drug-free and clean up his life. They go from one rehab program to another. But meth destroys his son. This "beautiful boy" succumbs to lying to his loved ones and stealing from his own family, the very people who are bending over backwards to try to save him. Gradually the father's expectations lower—at first he wanted his son to go to college; then he just wanted him to get a job; then he just wanted him to stay in a recovery program; and finally he just wants him to stay alive. This father says,

" When I was [once] in the hospital, many people told me they prayed for me, and I am enormously grateful to them. I never prayed. Perhaps I cannot pray because I never have, I do not know how, and I cannot conceive of a god to pray to. But as John Lennon said: 'God is a concept by which we measure our pain.' Here I am with Nic using again and I know that there is nothing I can do and I cannot believe that we are here again and that the next telephone call could be the one I have feared for the past half-dozen years, and I am praying. Please God heal Nic. Please God heal

Nic. It's my plea to whatever higher power there is, the only one they—they in the endless rehabs, the endless meetings—the one they promise is out there listening. I repeat it inside my head sometimes even without knowing I am saying it: Please God heal Nic" (256).

This father is desperate—he calls out to God: "Out of the depths I cry to you. O Lord, now hear me calling."

In Eugene Peterson's paraphrased version of the Bible, *The Message*, the psalmist says: "Help, God—the bottom has fallen out of my life!" and then: "My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning."

This aspect of waiting is part of the isolation of despair. If you knew things would work out soon, you could stand the waiting, but when you are in the pit, you can't see the end—it's not in sight. You are perpetually waiting, waiting and watching and feeling miserable. You can't really tell a person that his son is cured of addiction after finishing a rehab program—he could so easily begin to use again. You can't really tell a person who's just been left alone in divorce that he or she will likely meet someone else and remarry. You can't tell parents who give birth to a stillborn child, "Oh, you'll have other children."

We need to be able to cry. We need to be able to sit with our grief and call out our despair. And who better to call out to than God. Job said, "I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. I loathe my life; I would not live for ever. Let me alone, for my days are a breath" (7:11,16). Job had lost everything; his friends tried to console him, but they could not. He needed to cry out in despair!

The writer of Ecclesiastes was wise when he said, there is a "time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (3:4). Job had to cry out to God, so that later he could also utter the words, "I know that my redeemer lives!" (Job 19:25).

Three of our S Groups have been looking at Harold Kushner's writing. Kushner maintains that we can cry out to God because we are in relationship with God—we can express our frustration and our anger about the way our lives have disappointed us. And after the crying, after the rage, God is still there. And that's when we know that our redeemer lives.

Today's Psalms are Psalms of Disorientation. Life is out of equilibrium. Life is in crisis! Life is in shambles.

This picture of despair can be personal—very personal, such that one can only weep and pray that God is weeping too. Or perhaps one can listen to sad music or recite a psalm of lament.

Or the picture of despair can be communal. The Israelite people understood their lives to be in community with God. They attributed the flood, the plagues, and the exile to God's intervention in the life of the community. The people of Israel attempted to understand the

work of God over generations and recorded their stories in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament.

Now, today in the secular world, when we say "the people of Israel," we mean the Israelis, the people of the modern-day country called Israel. This country has been in the news this week. The Psalms of Disorientation sadly seem to fit well with the despair we read about in the news from this part of the world. The Jewish people have experienced generation after generation of dispersion and persecution, and the Holocaust that killed 6 million Jews has been one of the greatest tragedies of all times. This tragedy led to the formation of the nation of Israel, a homeland for the Jews. However, today the Israeli government has participated in the displacement of another people, the Palestinian people. The latest event has been the Israeli attack on a ship bringing supplies and Palestinian activists to Gaza. On both sides of this controversy— Hamas in Gaza and the Israeli Government and its blockade on Gaza—there are perpetrators of violence, and on both sides there are victims of violence. In my lifetime, there has been nothing but violence in Israel-Palestine.

Psalm 137 gives voice to the despair of the community. In the psalm's original context, the ancient Israelite people were crying out after they had been displaced and sent into exile in Babylon: "There we sat down and wept...on the willows there we hung up our harps." When the captors said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" They answered, "How could we sing the Lords' song in a foreign land?" They had lost their homeland, their freedom, and their hope—Like the Jews of the 20th century living in ghettos and sent to concentration camps; like the Palestinians of the 21st century sent from the West Bank to live in poverty in Gaza. I can imagine that if asked to sing, these people would refuse to sing. They might cry out to God in resignation: How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

Or they might turn to anger and call out to their enemies in revenge: "Happy shall they be who pay back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Can you imagine? In a psalm! People so angry they want to dash the little babies of their enemies against the rocks!

Here is a psalm that says it like it is with human beings. Here is an example of how the Bible is the voice of people. Where is the harmony and calm we talked about last week in the Psalms of Orientation? Instead of harmony and calm, in the Psalms of Disorientation we have deep sadness of individuals crying from the pit of despair and deep anger of the community crying in outrage in the grips of injustice.

We say that the Bible is the Word of God, but in these Psalms it seems more like the cry of the people. But here's the thing: the cry is heard. It does not fall on deaf ears. God hears the cry of the people. The people *can* cry out to God because they are in relationship with God.

Crying may be all we can do. But at least we believe in a God to whom we can cry. Like Job, we can say, through it all—all the sadness, the unfairness, the tragic losses—"I know that my redeemer lives."

"Out of the Depths I Cry to You"-- (#515) verse 2 solo