

Psalms for Life

Psalm 130

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 30th July 2006

For the last couple of weeks Paul Haidostian has been on my mind and in my prayers a lot. I first met Paul almost seventeen years ago. He was a student from Beirut, Lebanon, studying for his Master of Theology degree in preparation for entering the doctoral program in pastoral care at Princeton Seminary. He lived two doors down from me in Alexander Hall, until he got married and moved into an apartment. Our floor, fourth floor Alex, was known for having a very tight community, one of the first places I encountered what New Testament calls *koinonia*, that is, “the fellowship creating reality of Jesus Christ,” the deeps bonds of fellowship that come through Christ.¹ We had weekly floor meetings on Tuesday evenings at 10 p.m. and attendance was almost mandatory. For us, fellowship, life in community, took priority over our studies. True Christian fellowship, of sharing, of witnessing to one another what God is doing in our lives, sharing our struggles and our joys, laughing, crying, and playing together, praying with and for one another, together these form powerful, rich memories for me.

I remember one evening, at the end of the semester, Paul was leading our devotions and he commented on all the anxiety around campus as we approached final exams. There was a special chapel service for the students nervous about their final exam, as if we were about to confront the most difficult challenge of our lives. In the service, the students were drawing strength and support from the reading of the psalms. But what struck Paul, and this is what stayed with me, is that he remembered reciting those same psalms as a teenager, in a bomb shelter in Beirut, as shells burst all around him. He told gripping stories of living in Beirut during their civil war, of life on the edge, of one day spending hours trapped between the crosshairs of several snipers. My guess is he felt the

¹ As defined by Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

students were being a little self-indulgent in their exam anxiety and using scripture in such a way that doesn't quite connect with the intentions of the psalmist who composed the psalms from the depths, from the deep places of human existence, on the edge between life and death, in the struggles, in the trenches of life, in the bomb shelters of life. Although, this chapel experience did suggest the versatility, the flexible adaptability of the psalms, speaking to us in different settings and occasions.

Today, Rev. Dr. Haidostian is president of Haigazian University, a Christian university located in the city of Beirut. That's why he's been on my mind a lot these weeks. I've received three letters from him so far with detailed accounts of what life is like in Beirut and Lebanon at the moment. He shares that the Christian section of Beirut has been left relatively unscathed. Muslim refugees are pouring into the Christian sectors and the Christians are opening their home and facilities to thousands of displaced persons. There was a wonderful story about this in yesterday's *Washington Post*.² Families have pitched tents on the rooftops of the university and living in every available space. Close to 800,000 people are displaced in a country of four million, thousands will have no home to return to. There's billions of dollars of damage to the infrastructure and economy and to the environment. 15,000 tons of oil poured into the Mediterranean when a power plant was hit in Southern Lebanon. So much distrust, so many wounded, emotionally damaged people. And perhaps one of the most overlooked concerns is that the Christian presence in the region is a mediating one between Muslims and Jews. After this war, more Christians could leave the area. The war is also causing moderate Muslims to become more radical, moving further away from being a democratic nation, which is unsettling for the entire region.

Paul said many are asking, "Who is to blame?" "We have learnt in politics," he says, "that blaming is part of a strategic game. Who started this? Who reacted and how? These questions seem so insignificant if

² 29th July 2006

compared to questions of justice and peace and love. I would rather ask: Who is being just to whom? What is hurting in each society? What truths are the media hiding? What misleading interpretations are being spread?" Yet, Paul being Paul, and rooted in scripture, has considerable hope – hope in God, in God's presence in this situation, a "God who leads, inspires and empowers us." The psalmist declares, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope (130:5)." Our hope is in the LORD and only in God. Hope is a distinctively Christian approach to reality. William Sloane Coffin (1924-2006) was once asked what he thought the future of the world would be like. He said he wasn't pessimistic, but he couldn't be optimistic either, given humanity's history of inhumanity, violence, and destruction that could make a stone weep, but as a Christian he was *hopeful*. To be hopeful means to act from the faith placed in the power of God to act; hope is not a conclusion drawn after looking at the evidence or the facts or analyzing the situation in the present. Hope is God's *Nevertheless*, after you've assessed all the facts and analyzed the situation. That's what we find in the psalms, especially psalm 130.

Thinking of Paul and hearing Dorothy Boulton's reflections on the psalms last week prompted me to set aside a service dedicated to the psalms. In such a time as this, in an increasingly complex and conflicted world, I think we need to turn more toward the psalms. Primarily because in such a world, where our lives and the life of the world are being pummeled on all sides, it seems it's sometimes difficult to pray. I know it is for me. Sometimes I don't know how to pray or what to pray for or how to approach prayer, because everything is just so complex and difficult. In such times words fail me. But what I have found in my journey is that the psalms, these songs of Israel, are so profound, that when I can't pray, they can become my prayer book. The psalms cover every aspect of the life of faith, from profound heartfelt confession to expansive, doxological praise, they cover every emotion, every feeling. They provide comfort and assurance, hope, affirmation. But what speaks to me, perhaps more than anything, is the way the psalms give voice to what I find difficult to say. They allow me to pray and connect with God at a depth I could never do

on my own. They come from a deep place in Israel's encounter with the living God and when we read them slowly, prayerfully, we find ourselves going deep, and feeling deep, and crying out from the deep, and praising God from the deepest places of the soul. Psalm 130 is one of my favorites, sometimes entitled, *De profundis*, "out of the depths," out of the depths, I cry unto thee, O LORD."

It speaks to all of us. "The psalm speaks out of the paradoxical but very real experience of encounter with God that is the source of the despair in the depths and at the same time the only way out." Patrick Miller, in his commentary on the psalms, reflecting upon 130 writes, "Because there is a transcendent One whose righteous way has not been heeded and whose just order calls to account those who do not heed that way, the psalmist finds himself in an anguish of mind and heart that is nigh unto death. But that same righteous and transcendent God is the only hope or source or rescue from the depths, so that the response of the one who is mired in the depths is not a turning from the God who knows his or her iniquities, but a cry to deliverance. The human being who speaks in and through and with this psalm is a *lamerter*...: he or she is in the depths but also is one who prays. Those in the Bible who live their lives in relation to God are persons who move back and forth between petition and praise, between supplication for God's help and thanksgiving for the hope that comes." The way "out of the depths" begins with the experience of prayer, for the One who hears our prayers is the one who can draw us out of the depths.³ Here is the foundation of our hope. *Hope in the midst of the depths, in the midst of despair, in the midst of alienation.*

Out of the depths of human experience, that's where we encounter the redeeming God. These psalms allow us to be more human; they open up our humanity to ourselves and allow us to see it in others. They're authentic, honest and real – which is how we should be in our prayers and in our life with Christ. They have so much to teach us about ourselves.

³ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1986), 138-139. Emphasis mine.

St. Augustine (354-430) liked to think of the psalms as a “school.” St. Ambrose (340-397) said the psalms are like a “gymnasium” where we go for daily workouts to keep ourselves healthy and in shape for the life of God, that we might be fully alive as human beings. Eugene Peterson says the psalms are the “school for people learning to pray” – and that means all of us, we’re all beginners when it comes to praying.⁴ It’s the norm in convents and monasteries throughout the world, for centuries, to pray through the psalms in sequence each month. I think this can be a good starting place for us.

Just read the psalms daily, three a day – slowly, meditatively. Allow the words to become *your* words to God and when you do, you just might find your ability and eagerness to pray strengthened and encouraged, you might just discover depths of yourself you didn’t know were there or were afraid to venture into. You just might find words, a voice, *your voice*, your true voice that seeks to cry out from the depths for the God our hearts long for in hope.

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⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 104-105. Augustine and Ambrose quotations cited by Peterson.