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Psalms 13 and 23

## FAITHFUL CONTRASTS

Our scripture reading, contrasting the voices of Psalm 13 and Psalm, 23 offers us two different concepts of how we experience God. Psalm 23 is filled with hope and confidence in God's abiding presence. While, Psalm 13 expresses the anguish and despair of the writer and the feeling of God's abandonment. Both are found in our sacred book, the Bible, and yet it is typically only the voice of confidence and trust in God, as found in Psalm 23, that has found a strong foothold within most Christian churches. Our faith communities are typically less comfortable giving much attention or time to the lament of abandonment and despair as found in Psalm 13.

I want to spend some time looking at both of these psalms because both of them--even the one filled with anguish and despair--both are expressions of faithfulness.

We may love the 23rd Psalm for its beautiful poetry and its words of faith in God's loving care, but Psalm 13 should also be cherished by all of us people of faith for its honesty. The writer of Psalm 13 cries to God in pain, "How long will you forget me? Forever? . . . How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?" Psalm 13 is cry of brutal honesty. Something painful and distressing has happened to this writer. And the writer vents to God, not only for the hardship he or she is enduring but the writer also blames God for doing nothing and for failing to act. The writer cries, "How long will you look the other way?"

Now, when was the last time you heard a church leader tell you that it was faithful to blame God or to yell at God? But according to the Book of Psalms which contains many other

psalms similar to Psalm 13, that is exactly what faithful followers of God have done for a long, long time. The Book of Psalms is a book filled with honest feelings about people's real life struggles and pain and how they respond to God in light of these hardships. These poems of painful disarray are referred to as *laments*. And in some of these laments, God is blamed for looking the other way, for failing to act, for being absent.

Can we not relate to such feelings? Have we not felt a feeling of lament within our own hearts for our personal pain, for our loved ones, for our world, when we cry, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

How long before I am free from this pain?

How long before I can find a job?

How long do I have to endure this chemotherapy, or another surgery?

How long until this grief no longer incapacitates me?

How long will children be abused and exploited or girls are forced to be sex slaves or until women are no longer treated as sexual objects?

How long until leaders no longer seek to enrich themselves at the expense of their citizenry or be allowed to drop poisonous chemicals on their people?

How long will tigers and elephants and polar bears suffer from human exploitation and disregard?

How long will teenagers abuse drugs, or commit suicide, or be killed in drive-by shootings?

How long will desperate people die trying to migrate across oceans or deserts?

How long will torture be permitted?

How long will young men of color wind up shot or in jail?

How long will my family be torn apart by strife?

How long will my friend have to suffer?

How long, O God, how long will you look the other way?

We've all had these feelings. The psalms tell us it's ok to have them and to voice them. They tell us we can get real with God and with ourselves and with one another. Psalm 13 takes the platitude we sometimes hear, "well, everything happens for a reason," and chucks it out the window. Everything does *not* happen for a reason. Horrible, awful things happen in life that are not part of God's will. That is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," because God's will is not done on earth all the time. That's what "sin" is about.

These laments, our personal laments along with the biblical ones we read like Psalm 13, these laments are part of a faithful life because they will not abide the happy clappy kind of faith based on pretending that things are right and just and pleasant. Things are *not* right and just and pleasant. Rather, these laments are an acknowledgement that we cannot abide the present arrangement. We cannot abide our own personal brokenness or pain; we cannot abide the suffering of our neighbor; we cannot abide the predicament of the world. The system as it is presently constructed is not right. And so we vent.

You know, a good venting can be quite therapeutic. So at a minimum, a lament like Psalm 13 has therapeutic value. We've released a lot of pent-up feelings. But it also has spiritual value. Our honest acknowledgement that things are not ok, that the situation is wrong, aligns us with the God of justice, compassion, and love. *That's* the God we believe in, we trust in, we turn to: a God of justice, compassion, and love. And so we turn to this God, in anger and despair, to voice our cry to set things right. In other words, our honest cry to God is indeed a

bold act of faith because it refuses to pretend that this world's injustice or our personal pain are acceptable to God. And so we turn to God to voice our distress and to cry for help. We turn to God to get us out of this pit of darkness.

Psalms of lament like Psalm 13 are also important because they force us to hear the voices of those in our world who are living or have lived a time of great distress and pain. And by hearing their pain we may not only respond with compassion but may also be faced with our own culpability--either because of intentional behaviors or policies that cause the distress of others or through inadvertent participation in attitudes or systems that lead to the suffering of others. In our first hymn today, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, we can hear the echoes of lament, the voices of African slaves and their descendents in this country of ours. We hear this lament and are forced to recall that the economic strength of this nation came at the expense of millions of human beings. We hear this lament and know that similar laments were voiced by others in our land whose freedoms and rights were also disregarded: Native Americans, Japanese Americans, immigrants from all lands, women, gay and lesbian and transgendered. And on this holiday weekend as we celebrate our nation's independence, these laments are essential in helping us understand the difference between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is a love of one's country but rooted in an awareness of its flaws, both present and past, and a determination to keep working toward freedom and justice. Nationalism is blind, unquestioning, support of one's country, rooted in a willingness to re-write history or to disregard difficult truths. Listening to the voices of lament keeps us honest about ourselves, our country, and our calling.

In contrast to Psalm 13, we have the beautiful poetry of Psalm 23. This much beloved psalm is a poem of confidence in God's abiding presence. It is a peace-filled psalm of deep trust and love. But do not mistake it for a naive psalm. For in fact, when we look closely at the words

of the 23rd Psalm, we will clearly see a person who has endured hardship and suffering. The writer knows first-hand that evil exists in this world. There in this beautiful poem we can find reference to enemies and deathly valleys. This is a poem written by someone who has endured pain and danger and suffering. In fact, some of these same difficulties seem to continue, for the writer speaks of dark valleys and enemies in the present tense: "even when I walk through the dark valley of death" and "you prepare a feast for me in front of my enemies." Enemies and dark valleys seem to be a present reality. But something has changed. The writer has come through the hardship with a new orientation on life. This transformation seems to be less about a change in circumstances and more rooted in the writer's relationship with God. It is the relationship with God that seems to provide the transformation, the new orientation on life.

The transformation in the writer of Psalm 23 might be something like how a person who has faced cancer and subsequent chemotherapy might feel, or how a person having gone through the agony of a divorce might feel. They may feel battered and wounded by the experience. They have endured a hard ordeal. But maybe they have come through the other side with greater awareness of God's presence and forgiving love, with greater gentleness and grace toward other people and their pain, with a greater sense of their own vulnerabilities and the preciousness of life. There may still indeed be many great hardships such a person may face, maybe even death itself, but they have been transformed by the steadfast love of God. Evil exists, but they know that this evil cannot defeat God's love in their lives. They face life with a new orientation based on confidence in God's steadfast grace and love.

You know, these two psalms, Psalm 13 with its disorientation of suffering and pain, and Psalm 23 with its new orientation of trust growing out of a time of trial, these together reflect the story of our Christian faith. The Christian story as revealed in Jesus' life is one of dying and

rising. Our experiences of suffering, alienation, and death are reflected in the dying of Christ to the sin and brokenness of this world. And our times of deliverance and healing and liberation reflect the rising of Christ to new life. These are the season of our lives, often intertwined: descent and rising, descent and rising. Both these expressions--the pain and disarray of life, and the abiding confidence in God's healing, saving presence,--both are part of telling the story of faith.

I invite us all to read again these two psalms, but this time, you are invited to read whichever psalm best represents your current experience of God's presence today. I will lead those reading the light print of Psalm 13 while Elaine will lead those reading the bold print of Psalm 23.

O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever?  
How long will you look the other way?

**The Lord is my shepherd;  
I have everything I need.  
He lets me rest in green meadows;  
he leads me beside peaceful streams.**

How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,  
with sorrow in my heart every day?

**He restores my soul.  
he guides me along paths of righteousness  
for the sake of his good name.**

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Turn and answer me, O Lord, my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will die.

**Even when I walk through the dark valley of death,  
I will not be afraid,  
for you are close beside me.**

**Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.**

Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.

**You prepare a feast for me right in front of my enemies.  
You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil.  
My cup overflows with blessings.**

But I trust in your unfailing love.  
I will rejoice because you have rescued me.  
I will sing to the Lord  
because he has been so good to me.

**Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.**