

“Out of the Depths” GPPC 4-2-17
Romans 8:6-11, Psalm 130

This sermon is not for everybody. At least not today.

You may remember the movie, “Titanic,” and the character played by the absurdly handsome Leonardo DiCaprio and the character played by the ridiculously beautiful Kate Winslet. Those two fall madly in love with each other and it’s exciting, romantic, and wonderful, for about an hour or so. At one point in the movie, DiCaprio stands with a friend at the front of the ship, (the bow) arms extended skyward, like he’s made a touchdown, and he yells, “I’m the king of the world!” Later in the movie, he gets Winslet to come with him to the same place, close her eyes, stand on the railing at the bow, extend her arms outward, and then open her eyes, as he holds her around the waist. Scanning the never-ending horizon, “I’m flying,” she says.

Today if you feel like Leonardo DiCaprio or Kate Winslet during the happy parts of Titanic, if you feel like “the king of the world,” or like you’re “flying,” then this sermon is not for you. The rest of us are glad life is so great for you right now. Good for you, try not to gloat. But this

Jeff Paschal

sermon is not for you today. If your life is fantastic today; save this sermon for a time when you are not feeling quite so kingly or so aeronautical. Keep this sermon for the time when, instead, the unsinkable ship has sunk and you're clinging to a lifeboat in icy water.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” Haven't we all prayed that prayer at one time or another? “Lord, I'm in trouble so deep, in pain so intense, in worry so overwhelming, out of the depths I'm crying out to you.” And the truth is some of us are praying that very prayer today.

A Christian contemplative says, “Lament is a form of truth telling. When we cry out we say something is not as it should be. This is a powerful act.” (Christine Valters Painter in *Weavings*, Aug/Sep/Oct 2016, 9.)

What's going on in the Psalmist's life? We don't know all the details. We just know that he's up to his neck, drowning in trouble. He's in pain, maybe scared. So he keeps crying out, truth telling to God. Just as you and I sometimes cry out to God, do some truth telling with God.

And the Psalmist says, “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!”

Jeff Paschal

Now maybe an image tightens into focus. We see the Psalmist looking up toward heaven and yelling at God. “Aren’t you listening? I’m in trouble! Hear my voice!” And maybe we see ourselves doing the same thing, calling out to God, but God’s not answering. So we yell louder. “Lord, hear my voice!” We say, “Why aren’t you listening God? Pay attention to what’s happening to me and to the people I love!” And then maybe we imagine God like a parent bending down, offering an ear to listen to us, God’s children, crying out in pain and in need.

And then the Psalmist gives us a hint of where at least part of his pain is coming from. There’s a telltale sign that part of the Psalmist’s pain flows from something he has done wrong, some unnamed sin he has committed. So he says, “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there’s forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.”

Have you ever cried to God “out of the depths,” and the depths were deeper, because you also knew you had done something wrong? How terrible it is when we know we’re guilty and we cannot even blame somebody else. And though we like to kid ourselves, deep down we

Jeff Paschal

know that God knows us completely, even better than we know ourselves.

The Psalmist knows that God knows. The Psalmist knows that God has a record of our lives, but God chooses not to “mark” our iniquities. God chooses not to preserve and keep reviewing our sins. How awful would that be? “Ah, there’s Jeff’s file. Some bad stuff here. Ah, let’s roll that video again.” God chooses not to dwell upon our evil thoughts, words, and deeds. The sins are there, but God chooses not to keep looking at them. God chooses not to hold our sins against us like a debt we can never pay. As the Psalmist says, “But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.” There’s forgiveness with God, so that God may be respected and treated with the reverence due the One who knows us through and through, and miracle of miracles, still loves us.

Presbyterian writer Anne Lamott says, “‘Help’ is a prayer that is always answered.” (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 37.)

That’s true. Help is a prayer that is always answered. But sometimes doesn’t it seem like the answer takes a long time? And then the Psalmist acknowledges as much.

Jeff Paschal

He says, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”

Imagine the scene the Psalmist paints. A walled city of the time. And it's the dead of night. A watchman sits up in a watchtower built into the wall and he stares out into the pitch dark. The darkness surrounds him and he strains his eyes for any glimpse of the enemy. He tunes his ears to hear even a whisper or a footfall or a branch break. His breath is quiet. His stomach tenses. He waits and watches for the first glimmer of light in the distance. He waits for the morning. He waits for the morning.

Now imagine other scenes.

The bully at school who always has something nasty to say or even does something mean, again and again. It never seems to change.

My soul waits...more than those who wait for the morning.

A trip to the doctor followed by a phone call and a second visit and then a second opinion. “It's malignant, but we think we can treat it. We think...”

My soul waits...more than those who wait for the morning.

Jeff Paschal

The court date is set. But she's such a kind person. She never meant to hurt anybody. She's just a kid really. But she was going a little too fast and sent that text. Lots of people do that. Lots of people. Why did he have to be standing so close to the road just then?

My soul waits...more than those who wait for the morning.

So they'll be deciding who to keep and who to let go after all the company downsizing is settled. And he wakes in the middle of the night tossing and turning. There's a mortgage and other bills to pay. And children. So at 4:00 a.m. he gets up and so does she and they sit on the couch and wonder what's coming. They look out into the darkness.

My soul waits...more than those who wait for the morning.

And so she sits beside the hospital bed holding his hand in the night. Sometimes talking to him. Sometimes just sitting holding his hand as she has for sixty-something years. His breathing is shallow. Again and again it stops then starts again. He will not be speaking again in this life.

Each one of us in this room has a story. We know about waiting for the Lord, don't we? It's not easy.

Jeff Paschal

But each of us also has a hope, an unshakeable hope. The Psalmist says, “O Israel, hope in the Lord!” And we say, “O Bob, O Sally, fill in your own name, O Church hope in the Lord!” Hope in the Lord. Because with God there is steadfast love, love that will not abandon us. And with God is great power to redeem, great power to free us from whatever fear or trouble or loss or self-made mess that threatens to destroy us or enslave us.

How do we know this is true? Well, we have these ancient words of scripture that promise so much. And, as the Apostle Paul says, we have this Lord, this Jesus Christ, whose Spirit “dwells” in us to give us life. But it still requires faith, doesn’t it? It’s easy to believe in God when life is going well, and you feel like the “king of the world,” and like you’re “flying.” It’s easy to believe then. But it’s harder to believe when we’re up to our neck in suffering, loss, pain, and fear. What then?

I don’t have any simple, easy suggestions but I commend these small steps.

When you’re in trouble, follow the Psalmist’s lead and tell God the truth, no holding back. “I’m in a terrible place right now, Lord. And I’m

Jeff Paschal

crying out to you. Listen to me. Help me. If it's my fault, forgive me.

But whatever you do, help!"

Tell God you're waiting, really waiting. "God, I'm waiting for your help, waiting and waiting. And I'm waiting with hope. And I'm counting on you to be who you are: Israel's God, the Church's God, the world's God, and my God, the God of steadfast, unshakeable love and the God who has great power to redeem, to get me out of this mess. God, I'm waiting for you to be yourself. Don't let me down."

And finally all this waiting is an act of memory and trust. The Psalmist keeps talking about how God will "redeem Israel," how God will get Israel out the jam she's in, because God has done it before. Remember?

And that's our strategy too. Remember. "Lord, you've helped me before. I need you again. I really need you now." And here is what God does. Sometimes God changes the situation we're facing. Things get better. People change. Healing comes. Sometimes that happens.

Other times things don't get better as we wish, but God gives us the ability to endure. God sends people to help us—friends, family,

Jeff Paschal

church, strangers. God may provide a word that comes from beyond mere self-help, a word beyond wishful thinking, a word we had not expected. Sometimes when we are at the end of our resources, God sends us new strength, new insights, new hope. As Hemmingway wrote, “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are stronger at the broken places.” And as Carly Simon sang, “Don’t mind if I fall apart, there’s more room in a broken heart.”

We wish every day were blissful and that we felt like we were flying. Maybe that’s what heaven is like. But now when we are in the depths, we can cry out to God whose love is unstoppable, and whose power to free is beyond our comprehension. We can cry out and God will bend down to listen. God will be with us in our waiting. God will help us with broken, bigger hearts, making us stronger in the broken places, so that one day we can be strong for someone else.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” We wait and we hope and we trust in the Lord whose love is steadfast and whose power to free knows no bounds. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal