

“How Long, O Lord?”

Text: Psalm 13:1b

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“How long will you hide your face from me?”

I am glad to be back in worship with you after several Sundays away. Last week, I worshipped with four or five thousand other Presbyterians as we gathered in San Jose, CA for the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA. Last Sunday morning, the music was stirring, the sermon inspiring. What was especially inspiring during the worship service was a ceremony honoring our church's many mission personnel around the world: the Rev. Joanne Brown, for example, who has taught theology for 18 years in a Seminary in Madagascar or the Rev. William Yoder, who for 42 years has served in Thailand, Dr. Ingrid Reneau, who is currently serving as an Education Officer in the war torn nation of Sudan. Our Morningside congregation contributed \$25,000 to her support as a part of our Time of Promise Capital Campaign. The most sustained applause during the recognition portion of the morning went to the 17 military and Veterans Administration chaplains who serve in this country and in Iraq and in other places of danger and conflict. By the time we had come to the Lord's Table, I doubt there was a one of us who had not come to the point of humble gratitude that we were members of the body of Christ and therefore, as the Apostle Paul puts it in I Corinthians, members of one another. As we took bread, we were reminded of the great generosity of our Lord, in that those who want to serve him are first so graciously served and nourished by him.

At the table, we remembered that the cross stands at the center of the Christian story and that those who follow Christ will inevitably come to know something of the suffering and loss he knew, even as we claim the redemption Christ won for us by way of the cross.

Sunday worship was grand. The Assembly's committees met on Monday. By Wednesday the Assembly as a whole had convened to hear reports and make decisions. In some instances, there was agreement or compromise. In other cases there were winners and losers. As it had been before The Peace, Unity and Purity Report was adopted at the 217th General Assembly, the most contentious issue was the matter of sexuality and ordination standards. For over thirty years, our church has been battling over these things. One has to ask, “How long, O Lord, how long?”

I am well aware of the seriousness of the controversy, but I can't help thinking of a story a pastor friend of mine tells about the summer day he and his family, which included three little girls, set off for a vacation at the beach. About 15 minutes into the trip, the youngest asked her dad how much longer it would be before they got there. “I don't know,” he said, “It will be a while.”

Soon, another of the sisters started up, “How much farther, Daddy? How much longer?” the third one piped in.

After a while, the dad had just one nerve left and the kids were standing on it. “Be quiet!” he said. Actually, he thundered from the front seat. “I do not want to hear another word from any of you.”

Time passed; then, a pitiful little voice could be heard coming from the back seat: “Daddy, how old will I be when we get to the beach?”

In the matters over which Presbyterians so deeply disagree, one wonders how old we will be before we can come together in a way that pleases God. The Assembly voted 380 to 350 to delete Amendment B from the 6th chapter of our constitution. That amendment, which had been in place for a number of years now, limits ordination for elder, deacon, or minister to those who either practice chastity in singleness or fidelity within the covenant of marriage, marriage being between a man and a woman. The Assembly voted to delete that and to replace that amendment with one that is more closely tied to ordination vows and does not single out a sexual conduct standard. As some of you know, I have been an advocate for full inclusion for many years now. I rejoice over the action of the Assembly, but I also realize that as the new amendment goes out to the 73 Presbyteries around the country, and if ratified, returned to the 219th Assembly for a final vote, dissension will once again grab the throat of the Presbyterian Church. Just this morning at nine o'clock, my e-mail at home was filled with e-mails from friends of mine on the other side of the debate, who are outraged and in a terrible state. I will continue to join others in working for the day when the Presbyterian Church will be as generous and just as God's grace. I hope that in the days ahead, we can maintain our unity in Christ. I pray that none of us on either side will lose sight of our common mission and our common membership in Christ's body. “Not one of us,” Paul said, “can ever say to the other of us, I have no need of you.” We can not give up on one another, and we certainly can not give up on God, “who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself through Christ, who has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” It sounds wonderful and easy, but it took the cross to get it done. The way has been made clear and Christ calls all of us, regardless of our opinions, to come to him, to look to him for salvation.

Our Old Testament reading addresses one of the most basic aspects of the human condition, which is its cruciform nature. There really is a cross in the midst of just about everything. We will be sailing along, doing all right, and then, out of the blue comes something that changes our world, alters our outlook. Perhaps it comes in the form of a frightening medical diagnosis, perhaps in the serving of divorce papers, perhaps it is the boss calling you in and saying, “You're great, but I am afraid we can't afford to pay you anymore.” Bad things happen, and we find our selves in the midst of one of those dark seasons of life. The 13th Psalm is a straight forward expression of what it feels like to be in the midst of a dark season. There are many other places one could turn and find exactly the same kind of lament. A surprisingly large number of the Psalms do not make a joyful noise to the Lord. There are instead laments, protests, clamorous complaints. What Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann has called “psalms of darkness.” Contrary to what you might think, these psalms are not expressions of faithlessness but

bold acts of faith. They insist that the world be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. Of course, most people like to play pretend rather than face reality. (1)

Remember when Jimmy Carter was President? (Well some of us do and some of us don't.) Remember, those of you who can, how he wore his sweater and spoke to the nation and told us that we were going to have to sacrifice in various ways. This was during the last energy crisis. He said that we needed to turn our thermostats down. Remember how he was ridiculed for it? Some would even say he lost the confidence of the American people because he told the truth.

People prefer to play pretend. I am, by nature, a positive person rather than a gloomy one, hopeful, rather than despairing, but I don't want to be a part anymore of any intellectual dishonesty that pretends that everything is fine and dandy when it is not. There are those who are still saying that global warming is a figment of the imagination, but I do not believe it. I believe that unless we change our ways, the planet God has entrusted to our care is at risk of being uninhabitable by all creatures that need oxygen to survive. I read in the paper this morning that there is a 50-50 chance that there will be no ice at all in the North Pole this summer for the first time since history has been recorded.

If we fail to name our problems, to address reality, then we are in the kind of denial that leads to death.

One of the headlines in the paper in San Jose, CA last week read, "Hunger Increasing; Food Bank Requests up 20%." San Jose is right in the heart of Silicon Valley, one of the most prosperous areas on earth! Hunger is up 20% in Silicon Valley. It is not true that everything is all right. The poor are suffering in our nation. We cannot pretend that everybody is okay when everybody is not.

When Jesus healed people who were wrestling with demons, the first thing he did was to name the demon. Then, he had the power over it. It is the same with everything that breaks our hearts or scares us to death or brings hurt to ourselves, our families, our neighbors.

At Vacation Bible School this week, the children learned one of my favorite songs: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." It is one of my favorites, though I like this one even better, "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam to shine for him each day." I sang that first when I was three years old, and that may be the basic, core reason that I have been a minister for the last 30 years. I really believed that Jesus wanted me to shine for him each day.

I like light but sometimes the darkness of life is more resilient than the light. Denying the darkness is to find oneself in a room with truly no exit. Jesus said that the truth is the only thing that will set us free." It takes courage to say how things really are, but if you want release, then you have to name it. The Psalmist named it. He was at the end of his rope. I once saw a needlepoint pillow that read, "Lord, I want patience, and I want it now!" Our lamenter had no patience left. He cried out, "O Lord, O Lord, how long?"

We do not know how long he had waited to be remembered and responded to by God in his distress. In our day of instant messaging, it might have been an hour and a half, but I suspect it was a very long time. I remember how I wanted to be grown up when I was 11 years old, but I had to wait a long time. I think it is going to happen pretty soon now. I think about how the Israelites waited for their Messiah, how the Christian church has waited for Christ to return. I think about how the slaves in America waited for freedom. I think about how long it took women to get the vote and how long Roman Catholics have waited for women to be ordained, and how long Nelson Mandela languished in prison. I think about how long the war in Iraq has lasted. Is there any end in sight?

In our daily lives, does it not seem that something is amiss and is going to be amiss for a long time? Only yesterday, we were buying our SUVs and spending as if we were drunken sailors, and now we are thinking, "Oh, shall I not brew my own coffee and skip the trip to Caribou?" Today, it takes a day's wage to fill the tank. Our houses are worth less than we paid for them. Things in general seem to be out of joint. I went to my usual grocery store on Wednesday. I hadn't been in 10 days, and in that time they had moved the milk. I walked all over Publix trying to find the milk!

Things are not right, and they do not seem as if they are going to get right anytime soon. Four times in quick succession, the Psalmist cries out, complaining that the Lord has been gone, that things have gotten into a mess, that the enemy has gotten the upper hand. He asks, "Will you forget me forever?" I like the bold way he addresses God. Where are you? Are you busy? Do you just no longer give a hoot? Hello, Yahweh!!! Are you out there anywhere?

Notice he doesn't wrestle with the question of whether or not there is a God. The reality of God is presupposed. The question is whether God is hard of hearing or hard of heart. For four verses, the Psalmist protests vociferously against his situation.

And then in verse 5, there is an abrupt shift in tone. All of a sudden, desperation has turned into celebration. Acute distress has become audacious praise: "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me."

What happened to transform lamentation into laud and praise?

There is a big silence between verse 4 and verse 5. We don't know how long, but I think it was a long time. In that period, a process of transformation took place, and it took place because the Psalmist was honest in naming what the deal was. It wasn't as if God had to be told about it. We can assume that God knew the whole situation. What was important was that the Psalmist said it. He named his despair and acknowledged that he was overwhelmed by the circumstances of his life. He said it out loud, and he said it to Almighty God. If you have ever been in therapy, you know the miracle of saying something that you have never told anybody and then realizing that just in saying it; you have begun the process of being released from the darkness that shadows your soul. We don't know whether the Psalmist said what he had to say in the

presence of the congregation or whether he said it in private to the priest; but in saying it, he began the journey into a new world of trust and joy. His heart could not contain itself anymore, because the new life within him demanded to be expressed, and he broke out in praise and singing.

I believe that if such a thing could happen to the Psalmist, it could happen for us. We can move from blaming God, which is ultimately unhelpful, to an attitude of trust in God regardless of whether or not the circumstances themselves have changed. How do we make the move? We name the pain. We claim the chaos. We do what we can and trust that God is doing only what only God can do, but always working on God's timetable. Everything happens in God's own time, rather than our own.

Here's what I know. I know that God's will for us and our world is not chaos but alignment with God's good and gracious purposes. I know that when the time was right, God's own son came to live with us face-to-face, sorrow-to-sorrow, joy-to-joy. He died for us and was raised from the dead that we might have life. That is what God wants for us. Life! Life!

With every reason in the world to be impatient with us, God nevertheless is "merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Vacation Bible School reminded me of the parable Jesus told about the wrong-headed sheep. You know, that one out of the 99 who got lost in the wilderness and didn't believe anybody was coming. He bleated half the night away, but all the time, what was the shepherd doing? He was on the move, through the sharp brambles, and across the high ridges. The shepherd would not give up until at last, he had found the sheep. He laid the sheep on his shoulders and rejoiced. Friends in Christ never give up on yourselves and, for heaven's sake, never give up on God. God "yearns to be gracious to you, to have pity on you."

Blessed are those who wait on the Lord.

In the name of the Creator, the Sustainer and the Redeemer. Amen.

(1) Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg, 1984. Many of the ideas and insights in this sermon come directly from Dr. Bruggemann's brilliant book.