

I.

For a psalm that begins and ends in praise, there sure is a lot going on in between. Drawn up from the land of the dead, down to the pits and brought out again. From crying for help to rejoicing, anger to favor, weeping to joy, death to life, sackcloth to garments of praise. Condensed here in this little psalm is a reflection of the pattern of our very lives. Also here is a reflection of what God is like on that journey. In case there's any doubt, the psalmist is telling us God is worthy of praise and thanks from beginning to end – pits and sackcloth and all.

The gist of psalm 30 is the psalmist reflecting back on a time, maybe not so long ago, when things were great, stable, *comfortable*. Looking back on those days now, she felt like God had made her as solid, as sturdy, as lofty as a mountain. She used to think to herself, “I shall never be moved. I’m set.”

II.

It seems like things have kind balanced out for Glen Pizzolorusso of Watertown, Connecticut. I think he's made it out of the pit and onto solid ground. The past few years have been a bit of a rollercoaster for he and his family, full of mountaintops and pits.

I don't know Glen Pizzolorusso personally but I heard his story when I was in college, in an episode of *This American Life* called, “The Giant Pool of Money.” Glen describes his glory days as a mortgage sales manager in upstate New York. Glen wasn't too much older than me at the time. The life he was describing, however, was hard for me to imagine. Yet, there was a thread of commonality, a deeply human element to his story that I connected with. Glen explained that at the height of his mortgage sales he was

making between seventy-five and one hundred grand a month selling those really risky mortgage backed loans to folks who definitely couldn't afford them. The guidelines were really loose and so Glen, and lots of other folks, took advantage of that – not maliciously – and sold lots and lots of these loans to lots and lots of folks. Glen had just graduated from college when he got this job as a mortgage manager and he was making over a million dollars a year. As Dickens wrote, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” As the author of Psalm 30 put it, “in my prosperity I said, ‘I’ll never be moved. God’s made me a mountain.’”

As the housing market bubble grew in the early 2000's, Glen described the high life he was living in nightclubs among such esteemed Hollywood personalities as Tara Reid and Christina Aguilera. There were \$1000 bottles of Cristal, multiple homes and luxury cars mostly from money he made selling very expensive loans to very poor people with bad credit.

Reflecting back, Glen thought he was living the American dream. He was like the psalmist, reflecting back on the days she thought God had just made her a mountain. The thing about that though, for Glen and for the psalmist, is it's a myth; it's a lie. The gospel isn't about striving for the American Dream, it's about freedom from sin and a life spent in gracious response: serving God and one another, striving for the Kingdom of God. In the Bible God doesn't make people mountains, God is the mountain. But this psalm is about a revelation, about healing; about discovering the lie and proclaiming the truth.

I think you can guess how the rest of Glen Pizzolorusso's story goes. Not too much later our nation and eventually the rest of the world was submerged in the depths of the pit of the financial crisis brought on mostly by the bursting of that housing market bubble. Some might have called it Sheol.

### III.

We all have stories of how the crisis affected us or people we know. Glen, who was making \$100,000 a month, by 2009 had lost all his houses in foreclosures, couldn't afford to pay rent and had moved with his wife and three kids into his dad's house.

After spending time with psalm 30 I realized the deeply human element in Glen's story is the same deeply human element that beats through that psalm; it's the pattern of human life: confidence, comfort, and prosperity which gives way to weakness, confusion, and chaos and then back to some kind of normal again. The rhythm that beats in psalm 30 echoes the irregular rhythm of our lives. Dancing, mourning, joy, and sorrow, like waves arriving on the shore of our lives giving way to more waves.

I have been in a state of comfort, ease, and relative calm only to have the rug ripped out from underneath me and things come crashing down. For me it's often come in the unexpected phone call informing me of the death of a loved one. Reflecting back on that moment before the call, it will forever bear a chilling irony. I don't hang up the phone and say, "Now, back to my point about 'Rubber Soul' being the most underrated Beatles album." No, things are forever changed. We are changed by those moments. And so the psalmist looks back on this time in her life when her whole world was turned upside down. When the mountain was ground down to a deep pit of despair. "I cried out to you for help," she says.

Is anyone else thinking of a moment in life when, looking back, you felt like things were solid as a rock and then it all changed in a moment? Like suddenly God looked away and it all fell apart? That's how the psalmist says she felt, like God just looked away and suddenly it crumbles. "I was dismayed," she says. This is a safe space to remember those moments. We all have them. This psalmist walks us to those moments

and beckons us to reflect with her as she remembers calling out for help and God drawing her up from the depths of her despair like a one might draw up a struggling butterfly that got her delicate wings drenched and can't make it up out of the water. A single finger reaches down to draw her damp, limp body out of the water and places her on a branch to dry in the sun. When everything was going wrong the psalmist felt like God must have looked away, hid God's face, but no. Living in the illusion that we are self-made people, as secure as a mountain, immovable is wrong and so is the thought that our suffering is the fault of God turning from us. The truth of God in this psalm, from beginning to end, from the times of comfort to the times of suffering is that God is always present, always available, always there.

This is such a human experience, to feel like God surely must have stepped away or else this wouldn't be happening. I felt that way a lot when I was working as a chaplain at Grady hospital. I remember one July afternoon I got a call to come across the street to Hugh-Spalding, the children's hospital where I was also on-call for the weekend. A toddler, a little boy, was being life-flighted in from the airport. He was with his young parents – about my age. They had been visiting family at the beach and were returning home when the baby started having seizures in the airport. I sat with the parents and watched as doctors worked to stabilize him. We were helpless. I was helpless, as a chaplain, there was nothing I could say to make them feel better. They didn't want to feel better; they wanted their baby to be OK. We sat, we prayed, I called out to God silently at the top of my lungs, "Look over here! Do something about this! We need you to be our helper here! NOW!" We were dismayed.

In those times it feels like God isn't paying close enough attention. We were weeping. After about an hour he was stable enough to be transferred to Egeleston. I don't know what ended up happening.

#### IV.

The psalmist writes a hard, bitter, reality right in the heart of the psalm. It is the truth that rises to the top of this psalm. The truth that takes the place of the lie that God has made us immovable mountains or the lie that God has turned away God's face. Those lies are supplanted by the sobering, very real truth that "Weeping may linger for the night." In the Hebrew you can read it to say weeping may lodge there for the night, weeping may stick around like a houseguest that overstays his welcome but stay he will for the dark night of the soul. Weeping, mourning it has its place. Weeping and mourning even have a uniform of sackcloth to let the community know that what's going on for me right now is grief. For that moment, in that emergency room with those parents the unexpected houseguest of weeping showed up and there was nothing any of us could do about that but all lodge there together and welcome in the weeping spirit of God to linger there with us.

Here is the gospel truth at the center of this psalm and at the center of our lives. We will suffer, and not just once, and not just a little. Pain will come in waves. You know this. Being a child of God isn't a promise of a life free from pain. Christ's willingness to come and walk in this life with us and suffer this life for us is a testimony to that fact. Being a child of God is a promise that we are never, ever outside of God's loving embrace, and *joy comes with the morning*. Sit with that. Let the illusions of secure comfort and prosperity, fade for a moment, and let the thought that God's not looking when we are hurting dissipate and notice the message of this psalm. It's only ever us who

turn away or forget God. God in this psalm, draws up, heals, restores life, turns us to dancers, rips open the sackcloth and wraps us up in joy. While weeping may linger for the night joy will come in the morning. That's what we declare here every Sunday as Easter people. From the time of the cross weeping lingers for more than just one night. Weeping lodges there with Jesus' friends and family, but God did not turn from Jesus, God did not forsake him and joy came on Easter morning!

V.

This is the pattern of our lives together. We gather and confess our sins and then we boldly affirm, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." This is the pattern of our lives together seen when we weep together at a funeral while boldly celebrating new life in the resurrection. When we sit by a hospital bed with nothing to say, or bring some chicken broth to the door of a sick friend or hold the hand of a loved one as they transition from life to life everlasting, or make a promise to raise up children in the faith and bring them to sit in this space or come to this table and break bread together and declare our humanity. Psalm 30 urges us to reflect on God's presence in all parts of our lives. The psalmist then talks directly to us, the gathered community of faithful ones saying: Sing praises to the Lord! Give thanks to God! Dance! Be clothed with joy! Don't be silent. Praise God forever!