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Psalm 13
3rd in a series on "Take It to God in Prayer"

"A Psalm of Lament"

Dear God, there come times in all of our lives when we wonder where have you gone? Why are you hiding? How long will I have to endure this torment? These are dark periods of the soul, dear Lord, and we don't like them. And sometimes, we don't know what to do with them. Do we pray our way out of them? Do we run for cover and wait for dawn to come? Most of us don't boldly confront you for fear that we're being unfaithful. And yet, sometimes it's during these periods that we grow the most. So today, we ask for your help during our growing pains. Help us, Lord. Help us. Amen.

So this is our third week with our series titled "Take It to God in Prayer". As I mentioned last week and the week before, I have enough people ask me about prayer and how to pray that I figured it was time for a gentle reminder on how to pray. That was one of the reasons I'm doing this series. But the other reason I'm doing this series is that I suspect for many of us our prayer life has taken a backseat. We're pressed for time, we're stressed out and too busy. So we ditch the prayer life, and sometimes church altogether because, let's face it, sometimes Sunday morning is the only free time we have and we'd rather spend it doing nothing than coming to church. I know this happens to people. I get it. But that doesn't mean it saddens me, because I believe that when life gets too busy for God, that's the time we need God the most and the support of our church community. So if you find yourself in that spot, I hope you'll learn something about prayer during these weeks, I hope you'll take up the practice of prayer or re-ignite your prayer life, and I hope by doing that you'll start to feel closer to God again. Because after all, if the church isn't helping you to grow closer to God, well we aren't really doing our job.

So today, it's Psalm 13. Psalm 13 is a prayer for help, or what Biblical scholars like to call "a psalm of lament". I didn't know this until recently, but 1/3 of the psalms are prayers for help. These psalms are as real and as gutsy as one can get; they are cried "out of the depths" (to use the words of psalm 130:1) or when "the waters have come up to my neck" (to use the words of psalm 69:1). In other words, we pray these psalms when we feel like we're drowning; when we've gotten in over our heads. When the water starts to come over you and you're starting to sink, and you have no where else to go, turn to Psalm 13. Pray it over and over. Let the psalmist's words become your words.

Psalm 22 is the most famous Psalm of Lament. We usually hear it on Good Friday. It begins with the familiar words, "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" If those words sound familiar they should, because Jesus prayed this Psalm on the cross. It goes on, "Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; I cry by night, but find no rest."

It goes on for another 29 verses in a similar fashion. Psalm 22 is another good psalm to pray when you're at the lowest of the low, if for no other reason than you'll know you're not alone. And sometimes when we've hit rock bottom there's a lot of comfort in that. It's sort of like trading war stories with your friend.

One thing all psalms of lament have in common is that they are brutally honest: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", or to use the words of Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

How long, how long, how long, how long the psalmist demands to know.

You know, people are often surprised when I tell them that it is perfectly OK to rail at God. They're shocked to learn that the psalms are full of people raging at God, demanding to know why things are like they are when they know darn well that things can and should be better. When I've told people diagnosed with cancer or going through a really bad period of life, "You know, it's perfectly OK to yell at God in your prayers." That, indeed, it may be the healthiest thing you can do, people are pretty shocked. Really, they ask? I can do that? That's not blasphemous or anything? No, I say, it's not. The psalms are full of people shaking their fists at God.

How long, how long, how long, how long the psalmist demands to know.

This is more than the cry of someone having a bad day. This person is seething with exasperation and is at the depths of despair. This isn't someone trying to make nice with God. This person isn't covering up his or her real feelings. And, as an aside, there is no hiding from God or covering up your true feelings from God, at least I don't believe that there is. If you're mad at God, chances are good God knows it. So you might as well be honest with God. God can take it.

Plus, it frees you up. And there's a lot of freedom in being honest; in not beating around the bush. In telling it like it is. There is a lot to be said for being utterly open with God, because that is a sign of a deep, strong faith . . . not a sign of being disrespectful. What is disrespectful is being dishonest with God. If you learn nothing else today, please remember that God is big enough to handle your doubts, questions, pain and anger. And that is not a sign of being unfaithful, it is a sign of someone who takes God very seriously and is willing to wrestle with God. If you don't take God seriously, you're not going to waste time wrestling with God. But if you do take God seriously, you are going to take God to the mat, just like Jacob did in the story we heard Erica read.

Jacob wrestled with God all night long (it's such a raw, honest, gutsy story), wouldn't let go of God. Jacob had hit rock bottom; he thought his brother was coming to kill him.

And trust me, if there was anyone who had reason to be dishonest with God it was Jacob. Jacob is one of the biggest cheats and liars there is in the Bible . . .and that's saying something because there are a lot of them.

Jacob had hit rock bottom. Like the psalmist, he had met the enemy. Now in Jacob's case, he was his own worst enemy. But with psalmist, we don't know who his or her enemy is. It could be a real person-an opponent in war or business or love; but the enemy could also be despair, depression, hopelessness, grief. In many ways not knowing who the enemy is allows us to go deeper into the psalm, because all of us have had our enemies, whether they are a person or a dark night of the soul. We've had our enemies.

When it comes to enemies, most of us don't do well at confronting them. In fact, we usually do everything we can to avoid them. But what Jacob and the psalmist show us is that sometimes one of the healthiest things we can do is confront them. Jacob confronted his enemy in a very physical way when he wrestled with God. The psalmist confronts hers in a prayerful way when she laments to God.

They don't run the other way. Instead they take their doubts, questions, pain and fears directly to God.

And that, my friends, is instructive for us. Instead of allowing their feelings, their anger, and their raw emotions get the best of them and well up inside of them, they took them to God, and unloaded them to God.

Think of all those times you've carried burdens and resentments and past grudges and pain and fear around with you. Like the exercise we did earlier they make us tense up. Carrying them around is like carrying a boulder on our back; they weigh us down.

Now, we can either carry these boulders around with us and hope that time will take care of them; or we can pray and take our laments to God.

I'm a big believer that every time we take our lament to God, we release a part of the boulder, a rock if you will, and every time we do that we stand a little straighter and grow closer to God, so that eventually we are face to face with God. But if we never take our laments to God, we're going to walk around like this all the time, and instead of growing closer to God, we're going to grow distant from God, because we can't see God. Plus it's really hard to hear when you're bent over.

This is why praying a psalm of lament, of raging at God, is a faithful thing to do. If you don't rage, if you pretend to feel something you don't feel; you may never get that boulder off your back. You may always stay in the rock bottom place. And God doesn't want that for you. God wants you to stand tall; God wants to see you face to face. After all, you are made in the very image of God. What could be better than that? We aren't made to stay in a place of lament. God doesn't want that for us. But sometimes the only way out of lament, is to wade through the muck.

But when you do, know that God is with you. Always.

Fans of the show the West Wing may remember a parable first told my Leo to Josh. Josh had recovered from a serious gunshot wound, and a therapist treated him for trauma. Leo, a recovering alcoholic, met Josh in his turnaround moment. The story Leo tells goes something like this:

You're in a hole, see. A doctor walks by. You cry for help. The doctor throws a prescription down into the hole. A priest walks by. You cry for help. The priest mumbles a prayer into the darkness. A friend walks by. You cry, "Help me!" The friend jumps into the hole. "Now we're both stuck!" you cry. "Yes, but I've been here before and I know the way out," the friend says.

God is that friend, waiting for us at when we hit rock bottom. God can help us out of the hole.

Which isn't to say getting out of the hole will be easy or is easy. We may step on a rock and fall down again. We may grasp for something to hold on to that isn't there. We may get battered and bruised on our way out of the hole. And we may walk away limping, just like Jacob did.

But we will also walk away blessed, just like Jacob did. We will walk away having seen God face to face.

And it is then that we can proclaim with the psalmist:

*My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
Because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Amen.