



Would you agree that this was a stressful week for many? In a year of challenging times and tribulations, pandemic, isolation, loss, loss of connection, loss of normal, loss of the folly that humanity is in control of ... anything, or at least much control. This week's psalm resonates with me so deeply. I invite you to read it out loud. Say it with feeling. Psalm 130. Hear the Word of the Lord.

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;*
2 Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
3 If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.
5 I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.
7 Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
8 He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

The Word of Life!

Thanks be to God!

Like I said this psalm resonates with me so strongly, especially this particular week. I feel like I have been rung like a tuning fork.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice ... I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope."

In this election season, we cannot put our hopes, pin them on a particular person, no matter how great that person might be - no matter how ideal they may seem for a particular point in history. Why? Because they are a human being, no matter how they appear, they are filled with the brokenness of the human condition, under the best of circumstances. No person can withstand it, live up to it. The danger is that we start worshiping that person instead of the Lord. 1) We are bound for disappointment; 2) When we do that, we are giving to a human what must only be given to God.

Over the last several days, many people waited for election results "more than watchmen wait for the morning." When we do that, we place our hope in the wrong place.

One of my colleges posted a vintage clip of Billy Graham this week that spoke exactly to this. By the look of him, I would say that this was in the late 70s, early 80s. He said,

If God today told us what God was doing in the world, we wouldn't believe it. Don't think God's given up, God's abdicated and given up the throne. He hasn't. He's still on the throne, and those of us that know him put our trust in him and him alone. I don't put my trust in Washington. I don't put my trust in the United Nations. I don't put my trust in myself. I don't put trust in my money. I put my trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. When the rest of it fails and crumbles and shatters, he'll be there.

Because God is the only one that has the strength. As the psalmist says, "If you kept a record of sins, who could stand?" The answer to that question is no one. No one could stand. Why? As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 3:10, "Not one of us is righteous, not one." Incidentally, he was paraphrasing Psalm 14:1-3 there. The wonder of it all is that, yes, it applies to all humans. None of us could stand, but ... what a blessing this is. God forgives us, and then there is no record held against us.

But, let's go back to the beginning. "Out of the depths I cry to you." It is such a deep cry. How many of us have cried from this place? What can it mean. Out of the depths I cry to you, from the deepest part of my soul. From the most authentic, completely vulnerable part of ourselves. The part that is most afraid, most regretful, most honest. No face saving or excuse mentality here. The one who knows the numbers of hairs on our head, knew us before we were born. Nothing about us can be hidden from God. (That's kind of a scary thought.)

Yet, we still make excuses, rationalizations, try to look strong, like we have it all together, even for God. We might feel like we have to look strong for others. There is no need for that with

God. "Out of the depths I cry to you." The deepest part of my sin, my brokenness, realizing how far and how badly I miss the mark. I have in the past, and I will in the future. It is a Christian teaching called total depravity, meaning that left to our natural state, we do terrible things. We may not see the wrong in it, or we may see it and want to anyway. We may even revel in it.

Once God starts working on us, even before we realize it, we start to recognize that these things aren't good. We start learning what the standard is and see how far we are from meeting it. Paul calls himself the chief of all sinners. When the Holy Spirit has changed us enough, we can realize what we have done, who we are, and how much we need God's help to be better. It would be any of a number of things from a casual sex life, gossiping and lying, being prideful and looking down on people, making sure they know how low you think they are. Addiction, stealing. You know, the Ten Commandments is a good place to start. Coveting - envy, an unhealthy desire to possess something that belongs to someone else. When you come to the realization, you may say:

Oh God, I have been a terrible, hateful person! Out of the depths I cry to you ... If you kept a record of sins, who could stand. But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can with reverence serve you.

"Out of the depths I cry to you." It could be the depths of hopelessness. This call from the deepest part of my soul. Whether it is because of the guilt of the wrong I have done, or merely (I say "merely") the acknowledgement that I am a broken person, and I am thankful for God's love and forgiveness despite that -- But know that I **do** have a God that I can go to in my deepest despair, full of pain, and when I feel hopeless. When I hurt for whatever reason. Whether that is physical pain, something that is my own doing, or was inflicted upon me.

It can also be for a people, for a country. For the psalmist it was Israel, the people of the Babylonian Exile. The exile itself was a punishment for the innumerable sins or disobedience to God they had done. The psalmist starts this as an individual prayer, but it ends as a prayer for the nation. Even after they returned to their homeland, except for the briefest of times, they remained ruled over by others, Persians, Greeks, Romans.

We, as Christians, live in exile as people living in a foreign land. This is because we are citizens/subjects of the Kingdom of God. We pray for the land we are living in as exiles, much as Jeremiah wrote to the people as they were going into the Babylonian Exile.

"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city [in this case Babylon] to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer 29:7)

But, we also pray for the end of exile, when we get to go home. We pray for God's favor and repent for our sins as a people. And we watch, more than watchmen watch for the morning.

When you think of watchmen in the ancient world, they would be up all night scanning the horizon and everything in-between for enemies. The thing they would watch for the most is that hint of color on the horizon, the hope that daylight was coming, and they could complete another shift without incident. Their whole village, their whole city was depending on them. They would see that light at the edge of the horizon and know that they were safe.

The psalmist isn't watching for morning. He is watching for the one who *owns* the morning. There is the expectation that God is with us in the middle of our circumstances, whatever they are. We can move into the morning with the God who is dependable, just like the sunrise.

How do we survive our journey and move into the future with God? One way is to keep the church strong, as a place or refuge both for ourselves and for others. By the church I don't necessarily mean our buildings, but we as a group of Christ followers who have the mission of reflecting God's light into the world. We do this by strengthening our relationships with each other and with God. These things help us to remember the timeless truths of God's love and God's faithfulness.

Soon, we will be in the Advent/Christmas season. That's a scary thought, but it's also an opportunity for great joy. Yes, it will be different than in past years, but we are working hard to keep familiar elements, observe our traditions in the ways that we can. We might even create some new ones that we will want to keep. Though the **way** we do things will change, what we are called to do does not.

You are invited to be a part of it. We need your support to continue our ministries. Sharing our resources has been a part of the church from the beginning. (cf. Acts 2:42-47)

As Jesus said in Matthew 6:21, "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." We want your heart here. We want you to be invested not only with your money but with your whole being. But, somehow, when we are invested with our money, we care more about what happens within this group of Christ followers.

Next week, you will have an opportunity during worship to give an estimate of your financial support for 2021. If we have your address, you will also receive something in the mail. Either way will work. I ask you to prayerfully consider what level of support you can give in 2021. We invite you to be a part of the vital ministries of Joseph UMC. Help us on our journey as we move into the future.

Amen!