

## Psalm 69:1-16 - A Prayer for Help - August 13, 2023

This is our second week of five that we are devoting to the Book of Psalms. Last week we learned that psalms imitate life by moving from "orientation" through "disorientation" and then to "new orientation". The psalms of "orientation" sing the faith of Israel. The orientation psalm says that this world is the loving creation of the Creator. It sings that we walk daily through a creation that God loves, and that God loves us. God's character is marked by "steadfast love" and "faithfulness".

Today we will look at a Psalm of "disorientation" or lament, a time when our world has crumbled under our feet. It expresses anguish, betrayal, confusion, and self-pity. It asks whether or not God is as good as we believed, whether the world is as fair and orderly as we imagined. There is still faith, but there are also many deep and troubling questions. These psalms come from the long, dark nights of the soul, when God seems absent and our world makes no sense.

*"Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck."* No image better captured for the ancient Israelites what it feels like when the bottom drops out, than the image of flooding waters. That image is prevalent in the Psalter's prayers of disorientation - also called "prayers for help". One such psalm begins with the famous cry: *"Out of the depths, I cry to you."* Today's psalm is a prayer offered up by David in a time of hopelessness. There were many events in David's life that could have inspired this cry for help. After all, David led a life full of trouble.

These psalms or laments are cried "out of the depths" or when "the waters have come up to my neck." As such, they give expression to the deepest moments of human pain. But, they do so in a way which claims

the promise of God's presence in the midst of our suffering and also the promise that God-who-is-with-us will preserve us from evil and bring us to a new day when the sun will rise and light will dawn.

An important part of these psalms are the expressions of anger, confusion, questioning and despair. Yet, they also express trust: *"I trusted in your steadfast love"*, and they promise to praise God once the crisis has passed: *"I will sing to the Lord."* These psalms of disorientation admit that life is not as well-ordered as a simple Sunday School faith may pretend. They acknowledge that life is really messy, and they protest to heaven that things should not be as they are.

And these psalms, through prayer, evoke action from God – they help move the sufferer to a new place, giving us words for the deepest, darkest nights of our lives, when the bottom drops out, when the pain seems too much to bear. It tells us that God is big enough for everything we've got: our pain, our anger, our questions, our doubts and suggests that genuine biblical faith is really quite comfortable challenging God, and that God is present with us precisely when it feels like God isn't there at all.

In corporate worship, we tend to focus on the positive emotions. After all, praise and thanksgiving are key elements of worship and they are definitely happy. However, it is important to acknowledge the dark times in our lives as well. God is not only present in our "highs", but also our "lows".

Jesus faced a similar situation. While on the cross, the weight of the world's sins was placed on Him, an impossible burden for anyone to

bear! Like David in his hopeless situation, Jesus cried out to His Father in Heaven. In the book of Hebrews we read: *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”*

Jesus’ “loud cries and tears” are typified by David, as he cries to God for help, fervently and unceasingly: *“I am exhausted from crying for help; my throat is parched. My eyes are swollen with weeping, waiting for my God to help me.”* This strong image makes it easy to imagine “drowning” in the stress of crisis.

Sadly, everyone encounters some sort of trouble in their lives. It’s important to teach and remind each other that these times can be opportunities for faith formation. God guided the forebears of our faith to the faith practice of lament when they experienced loss, suffering, and sadness.

We practice lament when we complain to God about all that has upset us. We bring all of the injustice, suffering, and pain in the larger world or our own world before God in tears and angry shouts. We dump the wreckage of life, hope, and love at God’s feet and cry or wail or scream or sit in stunned silence.

Most of us did not grow up thinking it was appropriate to yell, complain, or despair before God. We could ask for God’s help, but leave the negative emotions buried inside. So, how is lament a faith formation practice? Lament is a biblical practice. Besides today’s Psalm, there are many other passages, psalms, and an entire book of Lament in the

Bible. When our last hymnal, the ELW came out, it was the first time a “Lament” section was included. The new supplement, “All Creation Sings”, also has a “Lament” section. These hymns well describe our losses, grief, and sadness.

But, simply knowing that God is with us when in the depths of despair is not always enough so we ask - Where is God? A couple of ten-year-old boys known for getting in trouble at school were accused of stealing the teacher’s cell phone from her desk. The principal called the boys to his office. Wanting to question them separately he brought them in one at a time. Without coming right out and telling them why he called them to the office, he only asked: “Tell me what happened?”

The first little boy said, “I don’t know”. The principle repeated the question again: “Tell me what happened and I want the truth.” Again the boy repeated the same answer. The principle growing frustrated said in disgust, “Where is God?” Feeling defeated he sent the first boy out and called for the second boy hoping to get some information out of him. As the first boy passed the second boy coming in he told him, “We’re in big trouble.” The second boy said, “Yeah, why?” The first boy said, “God is missing and they think we took him.”

That may be a funny story, but a serious question - have you ever gone through a time in your life when you asked yourself “Where is God?” A time in your life in which God seemed distant? When God seemed far away? When you felt dry and empty spiritually?

You pray, but God doesn’t seem to answer. You read the Bible, but it does not speak to you. You seek God, but it seems as if God is hiding.

You may be going through a time like this right now or have just come out of a time like this. You've searched your heart and know that it is not because of lack of faith. If or when this happens, know that this has happened to many faithful people.

David, the man after God's own heart, had the same experience. In another psalm, he asks, "*Where are you God? Why are you hiding your face from me?*" and in today's psalm, "*Answer my prayers, O Lord, for your unfailing love is wonderful. Take care of me, for your mercy is so plentiful.*" There is no indication here that David has sinned. He hasn't bailed on God. He's kept the faith. Yet to David, God seems distant, too far away.

For some reason there's this odd belief that Christians are never depressed; we never get down because we've got the joy of the Lord. But here we see David, a man after God's own heart, and he's in deep sorrow. King Saul is trying to kill him as David hides in caves. He feels that God has abandoned him, that God is never coming back. But then he prays and he's upheld by his faith in God's mercy.

While admitting he is no saint, whatever his sins may be, he does not deserve the treatment he is subjected to. It is all out of proportion. David isn't merely bearing the just consequences for his sins. God's enemies are having a field day with David's infidelity and have amplified his sin even further. David is now isolated, devastated, the laughing stock of his people.

Since David cannot appeal to his own righteousness, he appeals to God's love and mercy, pleading for deliverance. He appeals to God not

on the basis of his own worthiness, but on the basis of God's grace. Our pleas to God are always based on God's graciousness and never on our own merit. This is one of the basic lessons of faith. And since we can rest on the unchanging character of God's love we are secure in that love.

In the final verses, the psalmist uses the same descriptive flood language as at the start of the psalm, to describe the cause for his need of God's rescue from his enemies. He asks for help, confident he will receive it because of God's generous, loyal love and abundant mercy.

In today's short gospel selection, Matthew wrote: "Ask ... seek ... knock ..." this implies practice with developing a relationship with God. Practice in making yourself open for God's grace and direction. The psalmist is asking ... seeking ... knocking ... for a long time. He trusts God will hear and respond in time. This is not the lament of one who is a casual acquaintance with God but one who has a long and deep relationship.

This is a person who has cultivated this relationship over time, so that when they feel overwhelmed, they can pour themselves out to God, describe how they are feeling, wishing God felt closer and would strengthen them in their distress. *"Answer my prayers, O Lord, for your unfailing love is wonderful. Take care of me, for your mercy is so plentiful."* This verse is at the heart of the psalm.

Trust and hope are never more threatened or never more needed than when we are suffering – innocently or deservedly. This psalm offers hope and strengthens trust, as it moves from complaint about an almost intolerable, if not actually intolerable, situation to prayer for deliverance.

The psalmist does not really know the details of what deliverance would involve. He just knows it will happen, but it will happen in God's good time, the acceptable time, when God sees fit.

Much of human suffering is self-inflicted or self-imposed. It arises from unrealistic, unrealizable and or unjustifiable expectations. The cure for this is simply to revise our expectations. So much of life's pains, disappointments, stresses and distresses come from our own expectations – expectations of riches, power, love, fame, adoration. Revising or reforming our expectations is the simple treatment to reduce unnecessary pain.

*Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing make you afraid,*

*All things are passing, God never changes.*

*Patience obtains all things.*

*Nothing is lacking to the one who has God –*

*God alone is enough.*

These words, written by St. Teresa, are a fitting summary of today's psalm. They speak to us about the gift of patience. We are taught that patience is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but it often feels like a heavy burden. People in today's society mistake patience for submission in the same way they mistake kindness for weakness – and they walk all over others.

Many great people in the history of Christianity have been "walked on" in this way. St. Teresa, known as Teresa of Avila, is well-known as a theologian, reformer of the Carmelite Order, and spiritual advisor to the great medieval Spanish mystic, John of the Cross. But Teresa's ministry was not well received in the community that she loved. Her sisters had

grown lax in faith and practice. She called for reform, and their response was to throw her out of convents that she herself had established.

On one occasion, she was turned out at night in the middle of a rainstorm. Dressed from head to toe in her coarse wool habit, she got into her donkey cart and was riding along when the wheel of the cart hit a ditch and the cart turned over, dumping Teresa into the mud. She sat there, in mud-soaked wool, looked up to heaven, and said, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder that you don't have many."

But despite her frustration, Teresa clung to God, who heard her as she sat in that muddy ditch. In one of her meditations, she talks about how we must not be deceived by the appearance that evil triumphs over good, for sometimes, she wrote, "God uses the Devil as a sharpening-stone for Christians." St. Teresa did not give up on God, even when her Carmelite sisters fought her every step of the way, going to priests and bishops to make trouble for her. She kept right on teaching what she knew to be the truth. Eventually, she won out. Her desire was not to be right but to be faithful, and God prospered her efforts.

Jesus endured persecution wordlessly and embodied the triumph of God over evil while waiting upon God. This is not an example of passive submission, it is active waiting that is grounded in ultimate faith in the righteousness of God. Ask ... seek ... knock ... wait. God of grace and mercy will always answer.

Lament, although an unusual type of prayer, is still keeping the lines of communication open to God. God knows everything about us, so we are



not going to surprise or offend God. God's love is big enough to encompass the whole of our human experience. When we cannot handle our suffering, God can handle it all for us. Lament, along with praise and thanksgiving is an act of faith. So do not be afraid to lament, to even yell at God. Just remember that God feels your anguish, God knows your circumstance, and God will always be at your side. God will always be with you.

**Amen.**

## Prayers for August 13, 2023

Gracious God, you invite all to come to you. You have invited all to your home, to your table, and to your arms. May all hear and receive this good news. Help us to remember that no one is better than anyone else in your Kingdom. Help us to treat each other the way you treat us.

Generous God, as you treat us with your tender love, we take time to pray for our friends, family members and others who need you more than ever. Pour out your healing on all who need it.

Be generous with your transforming love for those who need it in their lives; the lonely and isolated, the homeless, those fighting addictions, those living with mental illnesses, those treated unjustly. Bring reconciliation to families, and to places where it is needed.

Gifting God, You give us the gifts of the spirit to use to further your Kingdom and to be the Body of Christ in the world. Empower us to continue to be your hands and feet to continue the work that needs to be done in so many places: in our neighbourhoods, our communities, our outreach missions.

Forgiving God, forgive us for the years of mistreatment of our Indigenous siblings, for abuse of their land, and for not loving our siblings of different colour, culture, language, and gender orientation. Help us to always remember to invite them to your banquet with love.

Creating God, forgive us for the devastation to your creation, its forests, its land, its birds and animals, its sea and its marine life. Guide us as we work to reverse the damage, and work collaboratively with all nations to address climate change.

We pray for our planet as wildfires and heat rage across the globe: in Iraq it is 120 degrees Fahrenheit, Texas and Phoenix are over 100 degrees, and in the Iberian Peninsula temperatures are over 111 degrees. Due to the heightened risk of wildfires in southern Portugal over 1,400 people have been evacuated. In Maui, Hawaii, to date at

least 95 are reported dead and over 1700 buildings were destroyed as blazes swept through the area.

We take time to remember all your children, our siblings, caught up in wars, conflicts, and violence, especially the people of Ukraine, Sudan, and Niger. Support all refugees and help them find new places to call home and give them new hope. Open all hearts to reach out to them.

Caring God, graciously protect those who courageously work to protect precious natural resources. This week, leaders from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela—the eight countries who make up the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO)—met in Brazil to discuss how to protect the Amazon Rainforest. We pray that their actions will guard Amazon cities, knowledge and entrepreneurship in the Amazon, monitoring and cooperation in water resources management, climate change, protection of forests, Amazon coastal zones, vulnerable ecosystems and biodiversity, and a sustainable infrastructure.

Gracious God, may your love be a healing arc for everything plagued with the damages from typhoons, tropical storms, and flooding. Bring comfort where there is loss of life and home and livelihood. On August 10, tropical storm Khanun caused floods and evacuations of more than 14,000 people in South Korea. Southern Japan was also hit hard. North Korea is preparing flood mitigation procedures in hope of saving crops as it recovers from last month's monsoons.

Benevolent God, teach humanity to be humble and kind, to care, to treat all lives well because all lives matter. There is none like you God; in your love, your generosity, your gifting and your hospitality. And we thank you that you are in our lives, working in us and through us to let people know your kingdom is open to all. In the name of your Son, who opened the doors for all and broke down barriers that kept people from you. **Amen.**