

How Long? (Psalm 130)

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There are 150 psalms in our bibles. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has proposed that one way of seeing how they relate to one another and to the human condition is to classify them according to three general types.¹ The first type are psalms that articulate and celebrate the experience of well-being. These are what Brueggemann calls 'psalms of orientation'; they express joy, delight, coherence, a sense of the reliability of God, of God's creation and God's governing law.² Take Psalm 92, as an example: 'It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night ... For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work' (Ps.92.1-2,4). Psalms of orientation express confidence, equilibrium, the sunny sense that all is and will remain well.

Which is fine, until we undergo the anguished shattering of that sunny confidence by illness or injustice; until we suffer exile or persecution, malevolence or the threat of death. The second psalm type, psalms of disorientation, name and vehemently protest these experiences of threat and loss. They express resentment, despair, penitence, terror, rage, self-pity, and sometimes hatred. 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Ps.137.1) 'How long, O Lord? ... How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?' (Ps.13.1-2). On and on the protest runs. Until finally, something yields or is given. Brueggemann's third psalm type, which he calls psalms of new orientation, celebrate the surprising eruption of new life and a profound sense that this newness is truly a gift of God, for only God could have done it. New orientation is not simply 'a return to the old stable

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p.8.

² Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, p.8.

orientation', Brueggemann says, 'for there is no such going back'.³ Which is why these psalms are characterised by a profound sense of awe, wonder and gratitude. 'Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried ... you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place' (Ps.66.8-10, 12). Orientation, disorientation, and surprising, transformative new orientation. Perhaps you can recall seasons in your own life, where each of these psalm types has resonated.

So far in our series reflecting on the pandemic, it's psalms of disorientation that have spoken to us; psalms naming the truth of chaos and suffering, psalms of lament. Tonight's Psalm 130 begins in the same way – 'Out of the depths I called You, Lord ... May Your ears listen close to the voice of my plea'. Yet even as this psalm expresses continuing disorientation, it seems to communicate the stubborn, persistent hope that if the psalmist just waits long enough, if she hangs in patiently through the darkness and the depths, something will be given. 'Wait, O Israel, for the Lord, for with the Lord is steadfast kindness, and great redemption is with Him'. If we're looking to mine the wisdom of the psalms to apply to our contemporary experience, we might take this as a word – like the psalmist, we too continue to undergo a season of disorientation; we can't yet see the end of it. Nevertheless, trust in God, for all will be made well in time.

But at this point I think we need to ask some serious questions. Because (as Brueggemann himself is aware) the danger of applying this pattern of orientation, disorientation and new orientation to our lived experience is that it's far too neat and far too certain. I do believe there's something profoundly true in it – I've experienced it in my own life, as I know have many of you. Our growth does tend to unfold in this kind of way. We're called or driven by circumstances out of a settled

³ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, p.47.

orientation into a season of disorientation, ‘a dismantling of the old, known world’.⁴ There follows often a time of protest, lament, wilderness and lostness, which then issues – if we remain faithful to the process – in the gift of new life, ‘a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost’. It is a true pattern and it’s what many of us hope is unfolding in and through the world’s current ‘dismantling’, as we long for the emergence of a new relationship with the natural world, a new future for those who are oppressed and dispossessed by the status quo.

And yet, it’s a pattern that doesn’t always seem to hold true. There are lives that persist in chaos, lives in which this hope of renewal and transformation is not realised – at least not in any obvious sense. People are afflicted by chronic illness or incapacity and they don’t get better; whole populations are subject to unspeakable and systemic injustice, and many will live and die without anything more becoming possible for them. There is such a thing as tragedy – seemingly pointless, unremitting and unredeemed suffering.

Our faith tradition persistently hopes ... for the morning, for light from darkness, for life from death. This is what the gospel is about – resurrection from the grave, the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil. But what if, in the circumstances of our lives, and even in the life of the earth as we now know it, this promise of renewal isn’t realised? Does faith require us to believe that if we give it long enough, wait faithfully enough, it will? Or is it just not true in every case? And if it isn’t, then what are we on about? Or – to put the question in terms of our psalm – what are we waiting for? If we acknowledge the possibility that there may be no vaccine, no ecological conversion, no end to systemic injustice, then what does waiting mean?

Here, I’ve found Cynthia Bourgeault’s reflections on the nature of hope to be significant. ‘In our usual way of looking at things’, she writes, ‘hope is tied to outcome. We would normally think of it as an optimistic feeling – or at least a willingness to go on – because we sense that things will get better in the future’.⁵ It

⁴ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, p.10.

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Lanham, MY: Cowley Publications, 2001), p.3.

seems to me that when we hope for an outcome in this way, our 'waiting' is primarily about the time it takes. It calls for endurance, patience – we wait until we have to wait no longer because our situation has resolved. As Bourgeault notes, the bible 'knows plenty about this usual kind of hope',⁶ this usual understanding of waiting, and there's nothing wrong with wanting things to get better! The psalms are steeped in it: 'Wait, O Israel, for the Lord ... He will redeem Israel from all its wrongs'.

But Bourgeault goes on to say that the bible also knows of another kind of hope, and this hope is not tied directly to the prospect of a good outcome. In fact, an energised sense of the goodness of things and even of a future can sometimes erupt without reason in the face of what looks like intractable wrong. This is the hope expressed by the prophet Habbakuk: 'Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord ... The ... Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights'. This is no stoic or resigned endurance. 'Instead', says Bourgeault, 'the prophet speaks from a lightness that seems to come flooding in upon him despite all the hopelessness of his situation'.⁷

It's the same hope that eventually breaks forth from Job. He has suffered loss after loss and yet, 'as the agony of his ordeal settles into simply the way things are, and even the need to apportion blame and find coherence subsides', a mysteriously radical confidence arises in him. 'Job sits destitute amid the wreckage of what was once his life, and sings: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God"' (Job 19.25-26).⁸

If the waiting connected to hoping for an outcome is about hanging in till God makes things better, here the 'waiting' has a different feel. It's more like the French word, '*attendre*', waiting *on* rather than waiting *for* God. It involves attending and

⁶ Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.4.

⁷ Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.6.

⁸ Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.8.

being available in such a way that, mysteriously, against all reason, God's own peace and joy come to animate your life in the very midst of trouble. The circumstances may not have changed, but there's an influx of energy and of possibility, a sense of being held, sourced in a gracious Other. This might be what St Paul refers to as 'hoping against hope'. Here our waiting bears fruit as renewed strength and gladness, but rather than these gifts following 'from expectations being met, they seem to be produced from within'.⁹ And they make possible a whole new relationship to what is so.

Many of us are longing for things to return to normal. We wonder how long we have to endure the uncertainty and restrictions on our lives; how long we have to wait for action on climate change, for justice for indigenous Australians, for the alleviation of suffering in our own lives and the lives of those we love. The question is, how are we to wait? Do we wait more or less (im)patiently for the outcome we long to see, the resolution of all that ails us and our world? Or do we wait purely and without fixed agenda on God? 'I hoped for the Lord', says the psalmist; 'my being hoped, and for His word I waited. My being for the Master – more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn'.

It's not wrong to hope for certain outcomes, to give ourselves as best we can to the mitigation of suffering, the healing of wrong. But I wonder if the deeper hope to which we are also called is more like a disposition of the self? Holding ourselves open before God, attending to, waiting on God not because of what God can do for us but simply because God is and God is Love. I wonder if in our openness to this love, we might discover that whatever our circumstances, and whatever befalls, in God there is already redemption and fullness of life.

⁹ Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.10.