

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Psalm 130

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Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

Psalm 130 *adapted by Barbara Gibson*

Out of the depths we cry to you, source of all!

Beloved, hear our voices!

Let your ears be open

to the sound of our prayers!

We wait for your presence; our souls wait,

and we hope for a comforting word.

Our souls wait for the beloved one

more than those who watch all night for the morning

more than those who wait for the sun to rise.

O people let us put our hope in the source!

For there we will find wisdom and compassion
and the power of renewal and change.

From the course of all, the people will find
the help we need in these terrible times.

SERMON: *OUT OF THE DEPTHS*

It is reported that some of the last words ever spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were to a saxophone player named Ben Branch. Dr. King leaned over the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and said: “Ben, be sure you play my favorite song tonight, ‘Precious Lord.’ Play it real pretty.”

Just days later, Mahalia Jackson was singing “Precious Lord” at Dr. King’s funeral.

You may already know the back story of “Precious Lord” – that, on a hot summer day in 1932, Thomas Dorsey said goodbye to his pregnant wife in Chicago and left for a gig in St. Louis. While he was there, he received word that his wife and their infant son had died. Dorsey was thrown into despair and vowed he would never “sing or write another note of gospel music.”

But there was a friend who stood by him and, one day, that friend “led him to a piano in a college classroom.” Dorsey began to play and to cry and to sing and, at some point, the words came to him: “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.”

Pam McAllister writes:

In the depth of his despair, the words and music of this hymn came to him, as if dictated by a great and compassionate force in the universe. Its composition healed him. Days later it was sung by the choir at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. was pastor.

And so it was that, out of the depths, “Precious Lord” came into the life of Dr. King, Jr. and, ultimately, became part of Dr. King’s legacy.

So when Psalm 130 begins with “out of the depths,” you might imagine that there is a story there. The psalm has been linked to the story of the death of Saul and Jonathan in II Samuel 1. David hears the news and he cries out in his grief:

How the mighty have fallen ...

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;

greatly beloved were you to me;

your love to me was wonderful,

passing [even] the love of women.

Like “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” Psalm 130 has a back story.

I have been suggesting that the back story of Psalm 23 could be I Samuel 15 and 16 where Samuel anoints David’s head with oil – anointing David king when Israel already has one. Out of the depths of Samuel’s disappointment with the powers that be, comes this promise of comfort and confidence for those who are called to the difficult and dangerous work of resistance – for those who are led in the paths of justice.

The back story for Psalm 51 might be II Samuel 11 and 12 and David’s infidelity with Bathsheba. It is a story, not only about individual moral failure but also an indictment of the systemic way the culture had come to treat women as possessions and playthings. Out of the depths of that individual and institutional sin, the psalmist cries out for something beyond more guilt and more shame: “Create in me a clean heart ... restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Frankly, I don’t know what more guilt and shame will get us. But I can imagine that joy – celebrating the things that really matter - might have a chance at changing the world.

If the back story of Psalm 130 is the death of Saul, and David's beloved Jonathan, it is a story that comes out of the depths of loss.

It's like Thomas Dorsey writing "Precious Lord" out of the depths of that shocking loss of his wife and child. It's like us singing "Precious Lord" out of the depths of the loss of a leader like Dr. King.

But Stephen Breck Reid says that the Hebrew word for "depths [in this psalm] is a reference to chaotic forces that challenge human life." It comes from the mythologies of surrounding cultures where the sea with its unfathomable depths and its capacity for destruction was identified with evil. That's where we get sea monsters like Leviathan.

And I've noticed something. There is a connection between loss and chaos. I lose my phone and there is chaos. I lose my keys and the world is turned upside down. If you lose a job or a home or a relationship, there can be chaos. You get disoriented. Things don't make sense any more. Maybe you even start to wonder who you are.

The deaths of Saul and Jonathan were not simply a personal loss for David. That loss launched the whole nation into political chaos. David did not immediately come to power. There was confusion and competing claims and struggle and ... chaos.

And I have discovered that sometimes chaos creates loss. In this time of our own national chaos it seems like we have lost any sense of who it is we at least thought we were. As Pastor Anita talked about a couple weeks ago, the chaos makes us cynical. We don't even trust good news. And we lose all hope of ever being the nation we imagine.

"Out of the depths" in Psalm 130 taps into all those stories we have to tell about the connection between loss and chaos.

If our ancestors saw the depths of the sea as a metaphor for the evil of chaos, it was the job of the divine to control it.

So we have this creation story in Genesis that says: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void and the Spirit moved on the face of the deep.”

In other words, out of the depths of this chaos, the Spirit creates something new.

Now I’ve been around long enough to know that when someone is in the depths, the last thing they want to hear is that everything will be okay. Because it won’t. If being “okay” means that everything will go back to the way it was, it won’t. Loss and chaos make going back to the way things were, impossible. It is in the nature of loss and chaos to give birth to something new -- whether we like it or not.

Thomas Dorsey knew that the loss of his wife and child and the chaos that made of his life, meant that things could never be the same. Someday something new would show up on the horizon: “Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.”

What is that old creation story? “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was in chaos and the Spirit moved on the face of the deep – on that chaos - and God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’”

I think the people who want to “make America great again” want to go back to an America that not only never was but never should be. And those of us with progressive values may want to go back to the glory days of the 60s and the civil rights movement or maybe just as far back as the Obama administration.

But, beloved ones, the truth is, we are in the depths. We are living in loss and chaos and there is no going back again.

In my own life, when I am in the depths of loss and chaos all I want to do is to go back to the way things were whether they really were the good old days or not.

But there is no going back.

Saul and Jonathan aren't coming back. Thomas Dorsey's wife and child weren't coming back. Dr. King isn't coming back. The America of the past isn't coming back. The Seattle First Baptist Church of the glory days isn't coming back.

There is only one possibility - something new. "Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light," Thomas Dorsey says.

Or as Psalm 130 says:

Out of the depths we cry to you ...

Our souls ... are like those who watch all night for the morning

More than those who wait for the sun to rise.

I remember my dad saying once that, when people are in those deep places of loss and chaos, ask them to name one thing that they know. And even if it is just that the sun will come up in the morning that might be enough.

"Out of the depths we cry to you; our souls are like those who watch all night for the morning; like those who wait for the sun to rise."

I remind you of a story I have told you on a number of occasions. It's the story of Horatio Spafford. In the mid-1800s, Horatio was a wealthy businessman in Chicago and a dedicated evangelical Christian.

Horatio and his wife Anna lost their only son to scarlet fever at age 4. And year later they lost their wealth in the great Chicago fire.

Trying to recover from all this, Horatio sent his wife and four daughters off to England for a break from it all. They were to take part in one of those great revivals by Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey. And, on the crossing, the ship carrying Horatio's wife and daughters was struck by another ship and in 12 minutes their ship went down. All four daughters died. Only his wife Anna survived.

Crossing the Atlantic to meet Anna, the ship captain called Horatio to the deck near the place where his daughters had gone down in the sea. And the story is that, out of those depths, he went back to his cabin and began to write: "When peace, like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like *sea billows* roll."

Out of the depths of that loss and its chaos, Horatio and Anna returned to their church community in Chicago where members of that community tried to be helpful by figuring out what great sin it must be the Spaffords had committed that would deserve such tragic punishment from God. So Horatio wrote: "My sin – my *sin?* – O the bliss of this glorious thought; my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more!" Whether I agree with the theology or not, I get it that Horatio was saying: This is not about sin; this is not about my sin or anyone else's; you are not going to pin this on me because "my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more!"

You would probably not be surprised to know that the Spaffords had just about enough of American Christianity. So, Horatio and Anna gathered a group of friends and they moved to Jerusalem where they would wait together for a whole new day. Horatio wrote: "O Lord, haste the day, when my faith shall be sight; the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend."

And while they waited, the Spaffords and their friends started moving toward that new day. They built a children's center and a gathering place for Jews and Christians and Muslims to deal together with the trauma of loss and conflict in their lives and in their city.

Out of the depths, the Spafford Children's Center in Jerusalem was created. And it continues to this day facing toward that new day of peace and understanding.

Horatio and Anna's children were not coming back. The evangelical Christianity that they held on to was not working for them anymore. Whatever vision they had for their lives and their future in Chicago was not coming back.

The only thing to do was to wait for the sun to rise and to move in the direction of that new day.

Beloved ones, I don't know what depths you might be living in right now. And I wouldn't presume to tell you that it will be okay if that means hoping you can just go back to the way things are.

I know something of the depths – the loss and chaos – we are all living in right now in this country and I will not claim that we have any hope of going back to another America.

What I do know – and what David and Dorsey and Dr. King and Horatio and Anna Spafford and my dad would tell you – is that, out of the depths, comes a new day.

And today, in whatever depths you find yourself, if you hear that voice whispering in your soul – “it is well; it is well” – then please, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The article by Pam McAllister about Dr. King, Thomas Dorsey, and “Precious Lord” can be found online at www.askherabouthymn.com/what-hymn-beloved-of-martin-luther-king-jr. Stephen Breck Reid, “Psalm 130,” *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp.334-337. The story of “When Peace, Like a River (It is Well)” is compiled from Robert J. Morgan's *Then Sings My Soul* (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2003), p. 185 and an interview with one of the Spafford Children's Center staff members in Jerusalem, Dr. Jantien Dajani, on August 14, 2009, online at the Religion & Ethics Newsletter.