

Promises, Promises

A Sermon Preached for Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, UCC
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Psalm 13 (NRSV)

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 long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a trial he witnessed in the concentration camp. In the introduction to his play, "The Trial of God," he writes "Inside the kingdom of night, I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis—all erudite and pious men—decided one winter evening to indict God for allowing his children to be massacred. I remember: I was there, and I felt like crying. But nobody cried."

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown summarized the plot this way, "The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found *guilty* of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an "infinity of silence," the [Talmudic](#) scholar looked at the sky and said "It's time for evening prayers," and the members of the tribunal recited [Maariv](#), the evening service."

This could be a modern retelling of Psalm 13. The psalm begins with lament, telling God via a series of questions, how the psalmist feels – rejected, cast out, invisible. In the next stanza the psalmist makes demands of God. Pay attention to me! Listen to what I have to say! Show yourself to me, or I will die!

Do these stanzas surprise you? Questioning God? Expressing anger, disappointment, and judgment of God? Making demands of God? Can you do this yourself with your God? Whether you do or do not, I think it's likely that you feel like it now and then. I know I do. These last few months have been a trial for me. There have been many times when I can't seem to catch a break. Times when I do everything right and I still run into trouble. I am in a period of discernment trying to figure out, am I called to ordained ministry? What kind? Did I get the message wrong? Sometimes I can feel the presence of

God so strongly it is almost a physical feeling, a pulling toward whatever God is calling me to. Sometimes I feel like I am utterly alone. That God has gotten me into this frankly terrifying way of life and then left me here to find my own way.

Do you ever feel that way? Left out on your own? Do you ever wonder where God is?

And when this happens, I want to demand attention. I want to tell God what I need. I mean perhaps God doesn't know right? I was in Target yesterday with one of my children, one who thrives on time alone with Mommy. One who would rather spend Mommy time riding bikes to the lake or playing basketball, but he was stuck in Target first returning items and then buying a few things. As we walked through the store he grabbed my hand, turned toward me and started jumping and saying I need attention. I need attention. Now I know that he was partly doing this to be silly, but he was also telling me what he needed, and there is nothing wrong with that. That is what I do – demand God's attention, sometimes in appropriate ways and sometimes in less than appropriate ways. I say to God Help me! Guide me! Walk with me on the journey you have asked me to take!

The rabbis in Wiesel's story do the same thing. They put God on trial in the concentration camp. They find God guilty. They are not alone in this. In Russia during the pogroms a starving, brutally beaten Jewish community convicted God of breaking the sacred covenant by abandoning the people.

Is this difficult for you to comprehend? Difficult for you to do? When we pray, we tend to want to put our best foot forward with God. Bring the good stuff. Thank God for our blessings. Praise God for being God, great and wonderful and amazing. Maybe tender a gentle request. I'm here to tell you, Elie Wiesel is here to tell you, and the psalmist is here to tell you, that lament and demands are part of a full relationship with God. Like my child needing attention and knowing that our relationship based in love and (mostly) mutual respect allows him to demand it, we have a God with whom we can have a relationship based on love and respect. We have a covenant with God under which we have obligations and God has obligations. Part of the covenantal relationship is that we are allowed, encouraged really, to say "I feel alone. I need you. Pay attention to me."

The psalmist, recorded in our sacred text, complains to God about abandonment and demands God's attention. We don't hear about the psalms all that much in our tradition, but many, many of them take this form. This is how the psalmists related to God, and that is the central point. Elie Wiesel is credited with a very wise saying. A Jew can love God or hate God, but a Jew cannot ignore God. I would say that that is true for us also. Christians are also in sacred covenant with God. That covenant means relating, communicating. The important thing is not always being positive, but rather always being real, authentic. We need not set aside anger at God. The real loss only comes if we set aside God.

After expressing lament, after requiring attention, the psalmist expresses praise.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (vv. 4-6)

The psalmist is not rejecting God in his despair, but reaching out to God. Trusting in God's love, rejoicing in salvation, singing God's praise for the bounty in his life. The psalmist knows that God has made promises in the covenant, which he restates, reminding himself, reminding us, and reminding God. God promises love, salvation, and dealing bountifully with us. Note what neither God nor the psalmist promises. There is no promise of easy life. There is no promise of a life free of pain and sorrow. The story of the three rabbis ends with the rabbis convicting God and then turning immediately to prayer. Their faith and their commitment is not reduced by their beef with God. Perhaps their faith and commitment are even strengthened. They do not see God's guilt as a reason to reject God or a justification for shirking their own obligations. They have been honest with themselves and honest with God. Despite what they must feel, they turn to their practice of faith.

When I am in a difficult spot, feeling abandoned by God, feeling all alone, I too try, with mixed success to turn to the practice of faith. In saying to God, "I don't know where you are. I don't know what you want" I am reaching out to God. I am maintaining a relationship with God. Once I can say that, I can take it that little bit further. "I don't know where you are, but I know you have promised to be with me." I don't know what you want, but I trust that you are with me while we figure it out." Suddenly my feelings of loss, of abandonment, have turned toward trust, toward praise. I remember what God has promised.

Psalm 13 is, at least for me, the full realization of a full relationship with God. It isn't all easy. We don't always feel that happy joyous grateful feeling of being a child of God. Sometimes it's a struggle. If you have any doubt still that it's okay to cry out to God, remember Jesus on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus, the one whose teaching we follow, quotes the Psalms (in this case Psalm 22), crying out, wondering where God is.

So do you sometimes wonder where God is? Do you make demands of God? You are in good company with people of faith who have full and rich dealings with God. So trust that the promises of God are kept, that we are loved, that we are saved, that we are bountifully blessed and sing the praises of God.
Amen