

081416 sermon

Psalms of Disorientation: Why, God? Why? - Rev Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Psalms 22, 44, 69

Luke 24 road to emmaus

Three days after Jesus dies on the Cross, two of his disciples are walking along a road to the town of Emmaus. If you turn to Luke 24, verse 13, on page 90 in the New Testament, you will see the story. While they walk along the road talking back and forth about what had happened to their beloved teacher, Jesus, the teacher himself shows up, but they do not recognize him. Look at the question Jesus asks the disciples:

And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad (vs 17).

The Greek word for sad here means 'sullen', 'deeply upset'. My New Testament teacher taught that the word *skuthropoi* shows up in other Greek texts to mean 'thoroughly devastated' or 'destroyed'. The disciples on the road to Emmaus have clearly suffered a traumatic event in the crucifixion of Jesus. The foundation Jesus provided in his teachings and presence during their 3 or so years with him oriented the disciples and Jesus' followers to the power of God and God's work in the midst of our lives.

Discuss disorientation

We have explored to this point how the Psalms orient us to God through teaching, wisdom and Creation. The foundation seems solid and the ground of our being seems unquestionable with all of Creation and everything we learn in Scripture testifying to God's presence with us.

No one would understand this better than the Israelites, who have borne witness to God's saving acts throughout their history. What is more profound and unquestionable than the Promised Land, which distant relatives stepped upon when Joshua parted the waters for them to cross into so many years ago?

This is why it is so disorienting and so profoundly disturbing when the solid foundation we thought was there begins to slip away. It is like being in an earthquake. The ground upon which we have walked for so long, upon which we built our homes and our markets and our gardens, upon which we built roads to travel and trade, upon which we built our temples and places of worship, turns to water. From a distance, we hear a deep sound, so deep that it is more than a sound, so deep we can't tell where it is coming from. Just when we think we have pinpointed its source, the sound is now underneath our very feet and the ground turns into dry waves. All those structures we depended upon surge and lift and crumble.

I think it is of the utmost importance that we, as Christians, understand how powerful and displacing such an experience is when that earthquake happens in a person's faith life. You may not have experienced the disorienting earthquake of your

foundation disappearing, but the more we can put ourselves into the experience of another, the easier it is to become a calming, Christ-like presence for them. If you have experienced that earthquake of the soul, then you have walked the road to Emmaus with the disciples.

The disciples on that road would have been more than familiar with the Psalms of lament.

Psalm 69

It may be that, in their disoriented state, those disciples on the road to Emmaus remembered Psalm 69, which is on page 530 in the Old Testament. Look at the first verses of Psalm 69:

*¹ Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
² I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.*

This, I am sure, is familiar to most of you. Remember, the Psalms are the prayer book for the Jewish faith. When we are wondering about how to pray or if there is a 'right' way to pray, open the Books of the Psalms, because there we will find the entire spectrum of human experience.

*³ I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.*

Let me get personal with you for a moment. While I have never been diagnosed with depression, I have had several deep dark moments in my life. Some of those times lasted for months and months. Where the world went dim and dark, with no light at the end of the tunnel, and any light I thought was hopeful, turned out to just be the train speeding down the track to run me over. I am fortunate because I was able to ride these times out without medication or intervention. I was surrounded by friends and was engaged in activities that allowed my mind and soul to focus on something else. I learned the value of waiting through the darkness. And for many of us who have been there, the waiting is often all there is.

I am telling you this because - as someone who has lost their faith and then regained it - any faith tradition, any religion, any spiritual endeavor, that judged me for that dark time, that tried to overwrite those times with platitudes and false hopes, that tried to soothe the pain with positive thinking and suggestions that I didn't have enough faith, would have been immediately rejected by me as worthless and false at its core. Not that my personal and subjective experience is any guide to what is true and what is not

true...

But I hold these Psalms, these Biblical expressions of darkness, pain and suffering close, because they resonate with the truth of my own experience. Jesus on the Cross resonates with my own experience. This is why I am insistent as a pastor in the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that we do not skip over the Maundy Thursdays, the Good Fridays, and the Dark Saturdays for the sake of the light of the Resurrection, that we do not skip over difficult verses in Scripture for the sake of a light and happy God who just wants good things for everyone and everything. If the Lord I worship and give myself over to is not willing to suffer with me and with those I love and care for, I am not really sure what the purpose is of faith and belief in God.

Discuss lament/imprecatory psalms

And so I take these Psalms very seriously. So did the Hebrews who wrote them, because most of the Psalms they wrote were Psalms of lament, Psalms of darkness. The lament Psalms are really prayers and they all have a similar, but loose, structure. As we talk about the lament Psalms, think about your prayer life. Let these Psalms help you.

The lament Psalms all have a **complaint** to God. Psalm 69 begins with the complaint. Complaining to God is important to the Psalmist. It is an example of prayer.

There is usually a **cause** for the complaint. Sometimes the cause is other people, as in Psalm 69, which is a Psalm for deliverance from persecution. Sometimes, the cause is oneself, as in Psalm 51 on page 520. The sins I have committed require the intervention of God in order to cleanse my soul. This particular Psalm is written by King David seeking forgiveness for killing Bathsheba's husband. David says,

² *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.*

³ *For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.*

⁴ *Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgement.*

⁵ *Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

And sometimes the reason for the complaint is a person. Sometimes, the people are suffering because of what God has done or not done, and the complaint is to God directly.

Then, the complaint and cause are followed up by a **recognition, an acknowledgment** of God's past work and covenant with God's people, which becomes a **request** for God to act again on behalf of the one or ones who are petitioning God.

The request for God to act is followed by a **promise** to worship, sacrifice, or remember God in the community. This is a loose way of understanding the lament Psalms. Not all of them follow the pattern. But the pattern is something like this:

God, I am suffering and this is how I am suffering.

God, You, they, or I did this and this is the cause of the suffering.

God, you have done these things in the past and promised these things to me/us.

God, please do this particular thing so that my suffering ends.

God, if you do this, I will do that.

Community lament

Psalms 69 is a personal lament and of the 150 Psalms about 40 of them are of the personal lament variety. My personal suffering is brought before God with the expectation God will act in some way to alleviate that suffering. Sometimes, the lament, however, is on behalf of the entire nation of Israel. These community laments comprise about 20 or so of the Psalms. Just so we are clear - almost 60 of the 150 Psalms are lament Psalms.

Whereas the personal lament is in response to a particular event that disorients the soul from the foundation of God's Creation, teaching and wisdom, the community lament is often in response to loss in warfare, dislocation, or enslavement of the people of Israel. These community Psalms can get heated and angry.

Psalm 44

When we lose the foundation of our spiritual understanding, every aspect of our lives becomes disoriented. Things we thought were solid and unquestionable become unreliable or unsure. The Psalms allow for and expect the expression of these experiences in our conversations with God.

I said that the Psalms, the prayers of the people, can get heated and angry. Check out Psalm 44, on page 515. It begins innocently enough. The pattern has changed a little bit; in this Psalm we begin with the remembrance of God's work in the past.

¹ *We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:*

² *you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;*

³ *for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;*

*but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them.*

There is the remembrance of God's promises and covenant in verses 4-8. But then look at who is responsible for the present situation, which is unknown. Maybe the Israelites lost an important battle; maybe the Temple has been threatened and the defenses are unable to resist an attack; maybe it is written from the captivity and displacement exacted upon the Hebrew people by the Babylonian empire - we don't know. Regardless, the Psalm blames one person and one person only - God. Look at verses 9-14. "YOU, God,..." did this to us.

The disorientation is so extreme in this unknown situation that only God can be responsible. No empire or earthly power is capable of such a disordered state. Paul, by the way, quotes verse 11 in Romans 8:36 in his famous speech about the inability of death to disorient us from God in the face of Jesus' resurrection. But back to Psalm 44.

There is no real resolution in this Psalm from the disorientation the people are experiencing. It simply ends with a plea for God to act on the nation's behalf. No, it is worse than that. Look at what the Psalm says:

²³ *Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?*

Awake, do not cast us off for ever!

²⁴ *Why do you hide your face?*

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

It would be one thing if the eternal and powerful God Almighty who created the universe and chose the Hebrew people as his own had chosen this for them for their greater benefit. But no, this God sleeps. Wake up, God! God sleeping while disaster enfolds God's people is quite a statement, isn't it?

It is a situation not unfamiliar to the disciples of Jesus. Check out what Jesus is up to in Mark 4:38, page 39. Asleep, in a boat, during a storm. What do the disciples yell? "Wake up, Jesus! We are dying here and yet, you sleep! Do something!"

I would suggest the tone in both the Psalm and the story of the calming of the storm is fear combined with anger and frustration. Sometimes, the fear and darkness is so consuming there appears to be no resolution whatsoever. See Psalm 88 (pg 545) for an example of that. Sometimes, the frustration and anger get so hot, it turns to hate. One of the most disturbing Psalms, one of the most disturbing prayers in all Scripture, is Psalm 137 (pg 576). Check it out. It is short, beautiful, and violent.

I am aware that it is not in the best pastoral behavior to leave you with an unresolved sermon. This is the point in the sermon when I am supposed to proclaim to you Jesus' power over death and God's universal sovereignty. We are supposed to press forward into a resolution of our disorientation and confrontation with the darkness. But not every story in Scripture does this, nor does every moment in our journey of faith. Not every situation allows for that kind of facile resolution.

Next week, we will take another break in our Psalm series and hear from the

Perry family and their mission in Bihar, India. Then the following week we will see how disorientation within the story of God lays the foundation for new life and new creation.

This week, though, let's be true to the Biblical witness. Let's let the only solace of our present disorientation be what it was for the Psalmist - the promise of God not yet fulfilled, the promise that God has acted on our behalf in the past and that even in the midst of our disoriented life which has turned the solid ground of God's teaching, wisdom and creation into a roiling, liquid instability, we, the gathered community of God's people, remember God's covenant with us. And maybe God will remember, too. That, after all, is why God put the bow in the sky with Noah - not for our sake, but for God's sake - so *God* would remember God's promises to us.

As Psalm 69 says,

*³³ For the Lord hears the needy,
and does not despise his own that are in bonds.*

*³⁴ Let heaven and earth praise him,
the seas and everything that moves in them.*

*³⁵ For God will save Zion
and rebuild the cities of Judah;
and his servants shall live* there and possess it;*

*³⁶ the children of his servants shall inherit it,
and those who love his name shall live in it.*

Amen.
