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**Psalm 13; Psalm 23**

## FAITHFUL CONVERSATIONS

If you have ever struggled to know how to talk with God, you're in luck. Because we've been given the psalms. The psalms are really a collection of people's conversations with God. And we not only get to listen in on them—at least on the human side of the conversation—we also get to *use* them for our own conversations with God. That's what people of faith have done down through the centuries—they've turned to the psalms when they have had something they needed to say to God. And the psalms can offer us words that express our feelings.

And within the Book of Psalms, we find typically two kinds of conversations with God. There are the conversations where the person speaking or praying has deep confidence in God's abiding presence. That is the kind of conversation we find in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. And then there is the conversation where the person expresses profound anguish and despair over God's apparent abandonment. This is what we find in our other psalm for today—Psalm 13.

Both kinds of conversations with God are essential to our life of faith and yet, it is typically only the voice of confidence and trust in God, as found in Psalm 23, that has found a strong foothold within most Christian churches. Our faith communities are typically less comfortable giving much attention to the lament of abandonment and despair as found in Psalm 13.

We may love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for its beautiful poetry and its words of faith in God's loving care, but Psalm 13 should also be cherished by us people of faith for its honesty. The writer of Psalm 13 cries to God in pain, "How long will you forget me? Forever? . . . How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?" Psalm 13 is cry of brutal honesty. We don't know for sure what the

problem is. The enemy could be another person, but it could just as easily be an illness, or a time of grief, or a dark night of the soul. Something painful and distressing has happened to this writer. And the writer vents to God, not only about the hardship they are enduring but also because God appears to be doing nothing about it. The writer cries, "How long will you look the other way?"

The accusations made in Psalm 13 are not unique. The Book of Psalms is a book filled with conversations of honesty about people's real life struggles and pain and how they feel about God in light of these hardships. These conversations are referred to as *laments*. In some of these laments, the writer points an accusing finger at God and say, "Where are you? Why don't you care? Why don't you do something?" And the conversation is filled with a lot of anger and distress toward God.

When was the last time you expressed such feelings toward God? Have you ever allowed yourself to have such feelings? When was the last time you allowed a lament to rise up from within your heart for your personal pain, your loved one's struggle, the circumstances of the world? When did you cry to God, "How long, O Lord, how long will you forget me, forget us?"

Was it after watching someone you love die a slow and painful death? Or when your job search hit a dead end? Or as your marriage was falling apart? Or when enduring unrelenting bodily pain? Or when facing the challenges of an addiction, or being told you had to go through chemotherapy once again?

Maybe your lament, "How long, O Lord, how long," was uttered after watching the evening news—after learning about another mass shooting. Or after the sinking of another vessel filled with migrants. Or when reading about powerful people using their power for personal gain. And you felt compelled to ask God, "How long, O God, will you look the other way?"

These are normal feelings. The psalms give us permission to have such feelings and to voice them—even to shout them to God. The writers get real with God about what is not ok in their lives and in the world.

Psalm 13 takes the platitude we sometimes hear, "well, everything happens for a reason," and chucks it out the window. Everything does *not* happen for a reason. Horrible, awful things happen in life that are not part of God's will. That is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," because God's will is not done on earth all the time.

These laments, both our personal laments and the laments we read about in the Bible, like Psalm 13, are part of a faithful life because they keep us from a false faith where we pretend that things are right and pleasant and just. Things are *not* right and pleasant and just. The biblical laments are an acknowledgement that we cannot abide the present circumstances. We cannot abide our own personal brokenness or pain; we cannot abide the suffering of our neighbor; we cannot abide the predicament of the world. The system as it is presently constructed is not right. And so we vent.

You know, a good venting can be quite therapeutic. So at a minimum, a lament like Psalm 13 has therapeutic value. We've released a lot of pent-up feelings. But it also has spiritual value. When we voice our laments, we are expressing a belief in a God of justice, a God of compassion, and a God of love. And so we turn to this God, in anger and despair, to voice our cry to set things right. In other words, when we shake our fist at God in anger, when we join the long line of psalmists in venting our frustration with God, we are actually making a bold statement of faith because we refuse to pretend that this world's injustice or our personal pain are acceptable to God. We know God desires more for us and our world. And so we appeal to God. Help us. Do something.

Practicing the lament in our life of faith has another value. It also helps us become more attuned to the lament of our brothers and sisters around the world. There is pain, and wrongdoing, and injustice. Are *we* listening? Because unless we listen to these laments, we cannot act with compassion nor consider the root causes of their pain. Unless we listen to their laments, we cannot become the hands of Christ or participate in God's liberating response.

The lament is significant in our Fourth of July celebrations. Consider how instrumental the lament has been in shaping our nation in its ongoing journey toward becoming a more perfect union. Whether it was the voices of African Americans calling our nation to live out its creed of equality toward all, or women voicing their demands for equality, or those advocating for the welfare of children, or those highlighting the injustices against Native Americans or Japanese Americans, or the plight of immigrants, or those advocating for the rights of workers, our nation has constantly benefited from those who do not shy away from the lament—in expressing what is wrong and what needs to be set right.

The lament helps us understand the difference between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is a love of one's country but rooted in an awareness of its flaws, both present and past, and a determination to keep working toward freedom and justice. Nationalism is blind, unquestioning, support of one's country, rooted in a willingness to re-write history or to disregard difficult truths. I like that line in *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*, which we will sing later in our service. After extolling many beautiful aspects of our nation, the song states, "American, America, God mend thine every flaw." Listening to the voices of lament keeps us honest about ourselves, our country, and our calling.

In contrast to Psalm 13, we have the beautiful poetry of Psalm 23. This much beloved psalm is a conversation of confidence in God's abiding presence. The writer expresses deep trust in and love for God. But do not mistake it for a Hallmark card. When we look closely at the

words of the 23rd Psalm, we will clearly see a person who has endured hardship and suffering. The writer knows first-hand that evil exists in this world. There are references in this conversation to enemies and deathly valleys—and they seem to still endure because the writer speaks about them in the present tense. But something has changed. The writer has come through the hardship with a new orientation on life. This transformation seems to be less about a change in life's circumstances and is more rooted in the writer's relationship with God.

Maybe we can relate to this kind of inner transformation if we consider times of trial in our own lives. Sometimes after enduring a hardship—after going through chemotherapy, or enduring a painful divorce, or experiencing profound grief—sometimes after coming through such hardships we may have experienced an inner change—a greater appreciation of our own vulnerability and failings, and of the steadfast love of God. We may have a greater gentleness and grace toward other people, a greater depth of compassion and a willingness to forgive. Hardships still exist. Evil still exists. But we know, having gone through the hardship, that God's love for us is steadfast, and we draw upon and rely upon that presence.

That is the other conversation of faith which the psalms give us: the conversation where we express to God our deepest gratitude and confidence in God's presence with us in all things. And that presence has changed us.

As we know, conversations are two sided. In the psalms we have the human side of the conversation: sometimes conversations of lament and sometimes conversations of trust. But what about God's side of the conversation? What does God have to say to us in response?

As Christians, we look to Christ to better understand God's side of the conversation. Christ, who did not run away from adversity but joined us in our struggles and pain. Christ, who voiced his own lament of abandonment from the cross. Christ, who revealed God's profound grace and love for us in all he taught and said and shared. Christ, whose rising opened the way for us to know a transformed life even as we deal with life's hardships. Christ *is* God's side of the conversation.