

“Stepping Stones to Hope”

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There are no heights unless there are depths.

Psalm 130

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Advent and ascent

There are different ways to understand “The Psalms of Ascents.” The most common is that it was about the triannual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivals. My favorite is that it was about the fifteen steps climbing the south side of the Temple.

What’s the tallest staircase you’ve climbed? For me it’s Koko Head, a volcano crater on Oahu in Hawaii, with over 1,000 steps. That’s still much shorter than the tallest staircase in the world – Mount Niesen in Switzerland, with 11,674 steps.

The psalms in general, but the Psalms of Ascents in particular, climb. They tend to start low and end high. Psalm 130 is one of the clearest examples. It’s perfect for Advent, because Advent is about ascent – hope, peace, joy, and, ultimately, love.

Psalm 130 is about hope, but there are stepping stones involved. Everyone wants hope – wants to find it, hold it, and share it. But when you’re in the depths or the dumps you can’t just leap to the top of Koko Head. You need steps.

My greatest love in preaching is to look deeply into the text itself and see the words, the sentence structure, the poetry, the beauty, the truth. In this sermon today I’m really counting on your sharing that love for the text itself. *What does it say?*

Crying (1-2)

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
O Lord, hear my voice.*

*Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.*

The word “cry” appears twice in these two verses. It’s a common Hebrew word in the Old Testament, but it’s rarely translated “cry.” Most often it’s translated “call,” sometimes “proclaim.” Maybe the best English translation is “yell,” or, in Southern, “holler.” Remember, we’re talking about pre-PA systems, pre-bull horns, pre-megaphones. It’s the role of the “town crier.”

The psalmist is crying “out of the depths.” Everywhere else this Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament, it’s used of water. Think bottom of a well, or a lake, or the ocean. A synonym is used when Jonah gets tossed overboard and the best thing that can happen to him is being swallowed by a fish and then vomited on land.

The metaphor here is drowning. That means that the crying is also figurative. If you’re over your head in water, your tears don’t add volume and you can’t make any sounds that can be heard. This is the psalmist’s plea. “O LORD, I’m drowning and I’m yelling. It feels like my cry can’t break through the surface. O Lord, hear my voice!”

The cry in verse 2 is specifically for “mercy” (NIV). A more common translation is “supplication.” That’s not in our everyday vocabulary, which is why many translations avoid it. It’s a desperate plea for a favor. The asker is in no position to demand.

“Crying” is Step 1 toward hope. We’re going to see in a moment what the psalmist is explicitly crying *for*. What you’re crying for may be different. What need makes you desperate, causes you to feel like you’re drowning?

Crying is about admitting that you need something that you can’t do for yourself. This is what addicts call hitting bottom. As long as you think to yourself, “I’ve got this,” you’re not crying. When you admit you need help, you’re on Step 1 toward hope.

Fearing (3-4)

*If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
therefore you are feared.*

Now we know why the psalmist is “in the depths.” The psalmist has sinned. This drowning is self-imposed. We don’t know the specific sin. Some think this was about King David’s sin with Bathsheba. I think we’re not told because then we’d think it was about that situation or that sin. “The depths” can take many forms, one of which is sin.

The end of verse 4 is a bit confusing on first read. Different translations of the Bible offer a very different feel to the verse. The version I’m quoting (pre-2011 New International Version) is fairly literal, which is why I chose it.

Look at verse 4 again: “But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.” Why would the psalmist say, “You forgive me, so I’m afraid of you”? Other translations use alternate words for “fear” – like worship, reverence, respect, awe.

It’s not about which translation you like. Please don’t say the really silly thing, “My God is a God of love. He doesn’t want to be feared.” When you start defining God in ways that make you feel more cozy about him, that’s the essence of idolatry. The psalmist is talking about the God who really exists, not some personalized version.

I think it’s best to leave the word “feared” in there, in part because it forces us to think deeper. We shouldn’t be afraid of fear. Any authority figure – parent, teacher, coach, boss, judge, police officer – is both feared and respected, and should be.

The key to this section is actually verse 3, which repeats two names for God all through this psalm. Both are translated “Lord” in most English Bibles, but one is in all caps and the other is not. “LORD” is Yahweh – the personal, covenant name for God. It’s sometimes abbreviated “Yah,” almost like a nickname (“Bob” for “Robert”). “Lord” is “Adonai,” which means master, owner, sovereign. The two are used interchangeably, but one speaks primarily of relationship and the other of power.

What I like about verse 3 is that the two names are back-to-back in Hebrew. “If you kept a record of sins, Yahweh, Adonai, who could stand?”

Then follows that wonderful word, “But...” “But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.” The “fear” part is the “with you” part. That authority figure has power to punish you, which is “fear.”

But that authority figure also has power *not* to punish you. The idea of verse 4 is this: “Yahweh, Adonai, you are the only one who can forgive me, so before *you* I bow in fear and humility and reverence and awe and love and need.”

Step two in hope is to turn to the God who is personal (Yahweh) and at the same time the one who is worthy of our respect and trust (Adonai). Step two is to turn to the one who can save us because we’re afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t.

Waiting (5-6)

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

What’s next is the hardest part. It’s waiting. We don’t like waiting. I don’t like waiting. On Thanksgiving Day, I had to wait until 6:00 to eat dinner! That meant I had to wait until almost 9:00 to eat Linda’s amazing apple pie and pumpkin pie. Yes, both.

In this section of the psalm, the word “wait” appears five times in two verses. It’s the most common word in the entire psalm. The Bible often describes waiting for God, but almost never adds what we’re waiting for God to do – just waiting for God.

The psalmist seems to be waiting for forgiveness. Isn’t it immediate? As soon as we sin and confess, doesn’t God forgive? Well, yes and no. I would argue that he not only forgives as soon as we confess, in Christ he even forgives in advance. But the experience of being forgiven takes a lot longer.

Impatience is a real temptation, isn’t it? One of the hardest things to wait for is forgiveness. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had the conversation between married people where one has committed an offense and wants the other just to forget it and move on as if nothing happened. That’s just one example, but forgiveness from God is immediate while relational and emotional and psychological recovery is not. We wait.

Waiting changes us. It grows us. Nothing worth having happens instantly, especially not recovery from the depths. Waiting refines and matures and enriches life. Not waiting has such potential to wreak havoc when we take matters in our own hands.

Waiting for God is the hardest of all waits. Why won’t he use his superpowers to change me or change my family or change my situation or – let’s go for it all here – change the world? God’s not in a hurry to fix things. Waiting like a watchman for the morning – waiting for God to heal a heart or redeem a loss – it’s a step you can’t skip.

Putting (7-8)

*O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.*

In verses 7-8, the psalmist moves from “I” to “you.” He takes his personal experience and shares it with others. “O Israel, put your hope in the LORD.” If these psalms of ascents are written during or after the Babylonian exile, they are times where the wait was centuries.

The word “put” is actually not in the original, but I think it belongs. What’s there is just the verb “hope” in the imperative. It’s a *command* to hope. Do it! Choose it! Whatever is your “depths,” where you think nothing will ever change, whatever has you discouraged and frustrated and angry and desperate, *put your hope in Yahweh!*

Why? Because with Yahweh is “unfailing love.” It’s one of my favorite Hebrew words: *hesed*. It is God’s covenant love, his mercy, his lovingkindness. It’s what the New Testament will call *agape*, the love that never allows a permanent separation.

What does God do out of unfailing love? He brings redemption. This word, which will become so critical in the New Testament, is relatively rare in the Old. It means “ransom.” That’s an ugly word, isn’t it? It’s what you pay to repurchase something you already own. Your loved one is kidnapped, and you have to pay a ransom to return them home. Why should I pay to retrieve what is already mine?

But it’s not just “redemption” in verse 7, it’s “full redemption.” This is actually a plural adverb that means “multiple” or “many.” But “redemption” is singular so we might translate it “repeated redemption.” Think of the story of Israel – God buying back his people over and over and over again, giving a fresh start. Think of your story. How many times does he reclaim you? This is out of his *hesed*.

The psalmist has now moved from whatever sin or situation put him personally in the depths, and in this great Psalm of Ascents he reminds every believer who will ever sing this song or read this poem that you, too, have a drowning story. Your people have multiple stories where hope was gone. The heart of Advent is putting. Putting your hope in the God who over and over again in the pages of the Old Testament keeps redeeming because he just can’t stop loving. He can’t. He won’t. It’s not in his nature.

He will pay the ransom over and over again for Israel until once and for all, in Jesus, he pays it in full on the cross so that we will never again have reason to doubt that he is for us and not against us. What a Savior!

O Holy Night

If there are no depths, there are no heights. Usually in retrospect, though we would never have chosen our depths, they are often the best thing that ever happened to us. It’s never a bad thing to need God. Of course, we always need him but we are often unaware until we’re in the depths.

If you’re like Linda and me, you’ve already been listening to a lot of Christmas music. It used to be that all things Christmas didn’t start until Christmas Day, followed by the twelve days of Christmas. Advent was about waiting. But we’re not very good at waiting, so Christmas got bumped earlier and earlier. When the merchants got involved, wanting us to buy trees and presents, waiting vanished. I remember a song years ago: “Why can’t we have Christmas all year long?” Wish granted.

So we’ve been listening to Christmas music for weeks if not months. I just said to Linda last night as I strung lights on the tree that my hands-down favorite Christmas song is “O Holy Night.” It’s a 19th century poem was commissioned by an obscure Catholic priest for a Christmas mass in a small town in southern France that even today has only about 5000 residents.

The poem was set to music the next year, and became wildly popular with the masses. Then the Catholic church learned the words were written by a wine merchant

who was deemed heretical and the music was by an alleged Jew. So they banned “O Holy Night,” which would be today like trying to ban Santa Claus. The story of this song is well worth a Google, but beware of legends and look for the real thing.¹

While re-reading the story this morning, what was new to me was the original French lyrics in their entirety. I wish I could translate or even pronounce French, and I think I’d love for us to hear it sometime in the original. Close your eyes as I read a free translation of the lyrics. It’s not good poetry in English like the version you’re used to, but the meaning beautifully overlays Psalm 130.

*Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour,
When God as man descended unto us,
To erase the stain of original sin
And to end the wrath of His Father.
The entire world thrills with hope
On this night that gives it a Savior.
People, kneel down, await your deliverance.
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer.
May the ardent light of our Faith
Guide us all to the cradle of the infant,
As in ancient times a brilliant star
Guided the Oriental kings there.
The King of kings was born in a humble manger;
O mighty ones of today, proud of your greatness,
It is to your pride that God preaches.
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!
Bow your heads before the Redeemer!
The Redeemer has broken every bond:
The Earth is free, and Heaven is open.
He sees a brother where there was only a slave,
Love unites those that iron had chained.
Who will tell Him of our gratitude,
For all of us He is born, He suffers and dies.
People, stand up! Sing of your deliverance,
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, sing of the Redeemer.*

Amen.

¹ Click for O Holy Night stories on line: [Popular](#). [Academic](#).