

Waters Up to My Neck  
Psalm 69  
June 16, 2019  
Todd Smith Lippert

We will be spending the next two weeks with the Narrative Lectionary, a schedule of readings put together by Lutheran professors at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. We will be jumping into the middle of a section they suggest we spend on the Psalms.

Two weeks ago, as we ended our series On Relationships, I spoke of our Relationships With Those Who Have Gone Before Us, and shared that I see the Bible as a collection of the voices of our ancestors. Our ancestors wrote about their experiences of God and with God. They wrote what became the Bible as they were finding meaning, facing their fears, and making sense of where they were coming from and where they were going as a people. They also wrote the scriptures as they were in crisis and crying out for help.

In the Psalms we hear these cries clearly. However, as much as I like our New Century Hymnal and the ancient practice of praying Psalms together, whoever arranged the selection we prayed together this morning, left out the most powerful and emotionally charged verses of Psalm 69, the first few. I wonder if the editors felt the verses were so raw they didn't know if they could place them on a congregation's lips for them to sing and pray together.

Here's the beginning of Psalm 69:

Save me, O God,

for the waters have come up to my neck.

<sup>2</sup> I sink in the miry depths,

where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;

the floods engulf me.

<sup>3</sup> I am worn out calling for help;  
my throat is parched.

My eyes fail,  
looking for my God.

These are the words of someone in crisis. They express the feelings of time in life when our whole body is overcome with pain, sadness, anxiety, when there is no room for anything else. This writer is speaking of a time when he or she is seeking to follow the way of God and being persecuted because of it. The writer is following a sense of call and facing deep resistance, but the emotions expressed resonate with any time crisis that we may be in - where we feel like we are a coffee cup that is full and spilling over, or we can't catch our breath, or we don't feel like our feet are on solid ground.

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann, someone who lives with depression and anxiety himself, picks up on this emotional dimension to the Psalms. He says that the Psalms, in general, express *three experiences* we face as human beings in relation to God and he describes them as psalms of **orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.**\*

**Psalms of Orientation** speak of life when it is stable and the world seems trustworthy. Life is good. God is good. Faith and life are easy. We are grateful.

Psalms of **Disorientation** come from times in life according to Brueggemann, "When the bottom drops out and the tradition feels like a lie". That's strong language, but it rings true to me. During a crisis of faith of mine at the end of college and the beginning of seminary, when I was searching for a faith that fit my understanding of the world, I felt like the songs I was singing in church and the words I was hearing coming at me were dishonest. Either people weren't telling the truth or they were naive because what they were saying about the faith didn't make

sense. Similarly, I've heard from many people going through crisis, "I just can't go to church right now. Not only are there all the people who know my business, but I just can't hear those words right now."

We hear this frustration expressed in Psalm 69:

I am worn out calling for help;

my throat is parched.

My eyes fail,

looking for my God.

God, my eyes are wearing out looking for you. My voice is wearing out calling for you? I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, why aren't you doing what you are supposed to do? You are supposed to answer prayer..."Ask and it will be given you, knock and the door shall be opened for you," Jesus says. What is happening?

Finally there are Psalms of **Reorientation**. Psalms of Reorientation are Psalms that spring out of a time when faith in a trustworthy God and creation are found again, but the experience of disorientation is not forgotten. I think the second part of that sentence is extremely important. There's no denial of the pain and the struggle here, no blocking out what has happened, but new meaning is found that finds a home for all we have experienced. Rather than a false promise of going back to the way that everything was, there's a deepening wisdom that happens. As a pastor, one of my hopes has been to talk about Christian faith in such a way that that 22 year old version of myself would have been able to hear my words and not have been calling me a liar as we walked out of church. Maybe our ancestors of faith had a similar hope. The Bible and our ancestors of faith pass on a faith that doesn't ignore struggle, but understands it. Our ancestors sing praises on both sides of heartbreak, and by doing so provide assurance that we can make it through the heartbreak as well.

Psalm 69 is a Psalm of Disorientation and we will get to Reorientation next week. But, there are seeds of that Reorientation in this week's Psalm. There are expressions of faith that are reaffirmed and rehearsed when life is falling 'apart. In verses 13-17 of Psalm 69 ,God's great love, mercy and goodness are named again. Even when the waters are up to the neck, and the footing is faltering, these affirmations are repeated and rehearsed like a whisper of hope.

Last week, a church member handed me reflections the Rev. Gary Titusdahl wrote in response to scattering the ashes of his son Kevin. Gary was a longtime pastor at the United Church of Christ in Cannon Falls, and Gary and his spouse Diane kept their membership here at First UCC for a time while Gary served as an interim minister. They have since moved to the Twin Cities. This winter we prayed for Gary and Diane as their son Kevin died from a heroin overdose in February at the age of 30.

Gary's reflections on scattering their son Kevin's ashes are beautiful, sad, and honest. In my mind the Gary's words occupy much of the same emotional space as Psalm 69, disorientation, but with the same seeds of reorientation being present. I asked Gary if I could share a portion of his reflections with you, and he agreed. Here are a few paragraphs of his words.

Yesterday, (Sunday, June 2) our extended family of 24 gathered at noon on the shore of Minnehaha Creek, just a few blocks from our home, to bless the ashes of Kevin. Pastor Sarah Campbell of Mayflower UCC presided. Kevin was smiling over us, at a spot where he had played in the water with his nieces and nephews and fished for bass, many times....Both the youngsters and the oldsters took handfuls of Kevin's ashes, and handfuls of rose petals, and

released them into the flowing water, to be carried we imagined to the Mississippi River and out into the Atlantic. In times of grief, each of us needs something to hold or hug. Therefore, we remember the people and places we loved, fingering say, a fish pole, or a toy, or a piece of clothing, or artwork, or some writing or a spot on a creek. All tattered memorabilia of the heart.

There was a time when I felt confident about the ways of life and faith. I thought right makes might, and only the strong survive, and character was the essential matter, and up was the opposite of down. In the aftermath of Kevin's death, I am struggling to find my way back to a life with meaning. I stare a lot. I retreat into myself. My energy is in ashes. Nothing tastes as good anymore. Where did Kevin go? Where is God? What do I even believe anymore? My relationship with Kevin was complicated. Addiction robbed me, and us, of a boy I didn't recognize at the end...My appetites and tolerances have changed. I can't suffer fools! The mundane exhausts me. Unspeakable loss is what people call it. But it IS speakable!

When Kevin was 10 years old, he was scheming of a way to get out of going to church one Sunday. "Whatcha preaching on, pops?" When I told him, he turned to go back to bed saying, "I already heard that one. Church it up!" I grabbed him by the collar and said he was coming along. And I told him something I've been repeating to myself these days. That as smart as we think we are, and as good of a memory we believe we have, when times of stress and crisis hit us, the things we thought were deeply embedded in us, just seem to fly out the window. We forget in times of pain and confusion. We keep telling the same stories in church over and over again in hope that they will stick when we need help. So, we need church and family and friends to tell us what we know but have forgotten when we are in trouble. I have always thought the church is at its best when it sings for us when we cannot sing.

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Sometimes we don't know that Christian faith can stretch with us to the very depths of all that we experience and find ways to sustain us. Sometimes we know but can't remember, and we lean on the church, to sing when we cannot sing, to remember the voices of our ancestors who have been in the deep water, in the mire, too.

Then we can carry one another, gently, maybe just with our singing and our listening and with the grace given by compassion and time, from disorientation to reorientation, from wilderness and exile to a new home, from crucifixion to resurrection; rediscovering a faith that can go with us and stretch with us even as life changes who we are, what we see, and what we need.

Those who have found their way to praise on the other side of heartbreak, lend a hand to those whose hearts are filled with hurt and can't hold anything more. That is a tangible sign of hope, a sign of God's presence and sustaining grace the eyes of a whole community can see. Amen.