

Pastor's Message – 7/2/23
Psalm 13

It had been a very busy spring, but now that summer has come and things have eased up a little bit, I've been able to resume my early morning bicycle rides. I don't think about it anymore, but I remember asking my father when I was learning to ride a bicycle, how do we keep our balance on a bicycle? I know now but didn't know then.

There are other questions that we ask, don't dwell on, but to which we know the answers: "Why is the sky blue? Why is the night dark? Why do apples fall from the trees? Why is it summer here, but winter in the southern hemisphere?"

There are bigger questions—questions without clear answers. Perhaps you ask? Why does the war in Ukraine go on. Why do people in the world suffer from starvation and disease? Why can't we just all get along?" No doubt you all have questions about "Who's in charge?"

There are bigger questions for which we do not know the answers: "Why is there death? Why do the young die? Where is the good and gracious God in the midst of life's tragedies?"

Sometimes, those questions are more personal: "Why this health crisis? Why have my children abandoned the church and given up on faith? Why are there constant arguments in my home and family? Why am I getting old and having problems? Why can't I do what I have always done? Where is the money going to come from? Why has God abandoned me?"

I suspect that most of us, most of the time, can get through life without any real challenge. Most of the time things work out pretty well. Sure, there are rocky places along the path, and once in a while I stub my toe on a rock. But I recover, pick myself up, and keep on living.

But some don't just stub their toe. More than fall down and bruise an elbow. Some fall so badly that they can't seem to get back up. And I'm thinking that there may be more than just a few people in this worship service today who have fallen badly at some point in their life and seriously wondered if they could ever get back up.

And as bad as the fall was, the even greater hardship than the fall is that our faith in God can be seriously challenged. With a bleeding spirit and a bruised soul we plaintively argue, "I'm keeping MY part of the bargain. Why isn't God keeping his?"

Might you not say along with the psalmist, "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?"

The real problem that some of us have to live with is not just that life has turned sour, but that life has turned sour and God has forgotten about us.

I've been in my 4 appointments as a pastor to have experienced more than a few people who have been besieged by cancer or another disease, recovered, but then have had it come back again. That's tough to handle.

What are we to do when it hits us like a two-by-four on the side of the head that God has turned his back on us? You know what some people do. They can become very bitter. If they let all their anger out at once they'd explode, so they let it out in constant, belligerent shots fired at everybody for just about everything. They're the "skunks" of this world who make a big stink about everything.

Other people withdraw into themselves. They may become depressed. They may become apathetic. They certainly turn their backs on religion, for that has been a big part of the problem: they trusted God, and God let them down. These people express their anger like "turtles" - quietly but equally effectively.

At some point after arriving in this Church, I discovered a treasure trove of old bulletins with pre-printed covers. I wanted to start using them because they save the Church money—they've already been paid for, and we don't have to buy more paper for bulletins—but it also forces me to preach on Bible passages I might not want to cover. The cover today is a sunny and positive message from Psalm 13:5, "BUT I HAVE TRUSTED IN YOUR FAITHFUL LOVE. MY HEART WILL REJOICE IN YOUR SALVATION." There's even a rainbow on the cover. That's an easy message to preach, but it ignores the previous verses of the psalm which we started with.

In Psalm 13 we find a lament that comes out of the depth of someone's agony: *"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..."* (vv. 1-2a). This psalm is an individual lament with which almost every Christian can identify, for almost all of us have known times when God seems far away and may perhaps even be "hidden" from us (v. 1). How many of us have begged God for a reply and heard none? Psalm 13 provides a text for talking about the silences of God.

Three times the psalmist asks, "How long?" In verse 1 he adds, "Will you forget me forever?" (NIV). Or are you just going to forget me this year, this month, or this week? In human relationships, friends or spouses might have a disagreement, and the aggrieved party may storm out of the room, slam the door, and not be heard from again — or for a very long time, despite urgent and repentant requests for forgiveness on the part of the offending party.

But here there is no hint that the psalmist has been religiously or cultically unfaithful. God has not stormed out of the room. Perhaps God is busy somewhere else. God's silence and absence is inexplicable. It would be easier if there were a reason for God being AWOL. But there isn't. how do we deal with the problem we sometimes have during our "dark nights of the soul," when trial upon tribulation upon test crashes upon us, and we hear nothing from God. No email, no phone call, no tweet, no Facebook message, no text — zilch. We seem to be on our own. So how do we cope?

The psalmist begins with the question “How long?” repeated four times. The question is then expanded from “Why do you hide your face from me?” to how long will you continue to “hide your face from me?” To “hide the face” is a common poetic expression in the OT meaning to disregard or to ignore.

There are other “how long?” prayers in the Bible Psalm 44 and 88 among others. Check them out sometime. You may be shocked at the nerve some people have with God, as the psalm writers have the freedom not only to vent their anger at God but to question his job performance. What will that teach us about God?

As a church that believes the Bible really is “inspired, eternal, and true,” we get the revelation that our God is so emotionally secure that he can inspire a Scripture that second guesses him. God can take it. And if you ask in the middle of quarantine, “How long, O Lord?”, he will not reject you but listen to your prayers. One of the blessings of trial is that it sometimes will motivate people to pray.

We don't know why God sometimes keeps silent when we most need to hear a divine word. Sometimes, according to poet W.H. Auden, “Our dominant experience of today is of God's absence, of his distance.” Maybe the Lord's refusal to give us all the answers we want is an indication that God wants to relate to us not as a vending machine of answers but as a giver of strength. Perhaps God is silent to force us to learn hard lessons of life. We simply don't know.

But we do know that God is not always silent, and that when the Lord does speak to us -- and perhaps you can recall at least one time when you were conscious of guidance or a calling outside of yourself --and it was a life-changing and unforgettable experience.

It is in those times of trial that we might long for certainty and stability—an assurance that every thing will work out for the best—every time.

Some of you have enjoyed the rhubarb custard pies I've baked; I baked a rhubarb custard cake for today. Baking and cooking for myself, I've noticed that baking and cooking are different. With baking, you have to follow the recipe and it will come out the same each time. Not so much with cooking: a little bit of this, a little more or less of that and each time it may come out different. Maybe the certainty of baking is better.

However, certainty is not always best. When it comes to human community, to politics, to cooking, and yes, to religion, certainty is best kept at a distance. A healthy respect for ambiguity is often helpful in these and other areas of life.

In human community it's best to lean into flexibility, making allowances, offering forgiveness, and creating space for people to grow and change.

In politics, certainty is often the enemy of truth and justice. A mind made up and unchangeable is not the mind of a good leader. It is, rather, the closed and concretized nature of an ideologue. Situations and people change. Leaders should reflect that.

In cooking, improvisation breeds invention, and invention results in wonderful gourmet delights. Recipes were not meant to be followed like some map to a destination. No, recipes were meant to be accompanied by loving creativity and experimentation. How else would the hundreds if not thousands of new cookbooks published each year be possible?

And religion? Certainty in this arena can be lethal, especially if that certainty is foisted off on others. It's all right to be certain about one's own beliefs and faith. It's all right, as Psalm 13 clearly illustrates, to place your complete trust in the God of Israel. But if we are unable to allow for that same certainty in others who may see the holy in a different light, trouble is likely to emerge.

We'd like to think that everything is managed and under control; that things inevitably come out right in the end. We cling to the hope that enough knowledge and good intentions will eliminate the darkness in our lives. Unfortunately, the darkness has a remarkable resiliency.

We know that not everything does come out right in the end. Good intentions sometimes get us in trouble. Innocent people sometimes experience great hardships. Sometimes we are victims of other people's mistakes and sins.

But with God things are different. To believe in God in the Old Testament is not to think certain thoughts about God, but to trust in God utterly and completely. Such trust is not the result of abstract thought, but because, as the psalmist concludes in verse 6, "I will sing to the Lord because he is good to me." Belief, in the Old Testament, is not "so that" but rather "because of."

Our trust in God is a result of remembering blessings received, being open to see even the blessings of a trying present, and then believing that there are blessings still yet to come. As I close today, I invite you into a prayer.

Being in God's presence is a place of sanctuary -- a place and a time to remember God's constant love.

God restores our strength, and we are glad!

We sing to God -- of goodness, of hope, of sorrow ...

Sometimes God seems to forget our troubles,
and enemies seem to be all around us.

In reality, though, God is present and will help us endure;

God will inspire us to do what needs to be done.

We will be attentive to life's necessities.

Thanks be to God for divine presence and wisdom working within us!