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Psalm 130: A Song of Ascents.

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Psalm 130
A Song of Ascents.
(RSV) (Revised Common Lectionary)

Introduction to Psalm 130

Psalm 130 is the sixth of the Seven Penitential Psalms in the Psalter; the others are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 143. This is a category of Psalms that does not derive from the Old Testament Psalter, but rather from Christian use of the Psalms. That makes them particularly appropriate for Lent, the season in which we focus on the suffering and death of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

Nothing explicit can be determined from this Psalm regarding when or why or by whom it was written. Since there are no references to anything other than the Psalmist's own feelings, this Psalm has a timeless quality. Psalm 130 can therefore be prayed as easily in our time as it was in Bible days.

Vv. 1-2

¹ Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!

^{2a} Lord, hear my voice!

**^{2b} Let thine ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!**

"The depths" of verse 1 is a figurative description of the Psalmist's distress; it is an allusion to deep waters, to ocean depths. It conveys the image of the panic and terror of one who is in over his/her head and is drowning. In this connection you might want to read Jonah 2 (see below).

In verse 1 God is addressed by His covenant name Yahweh (LORD); then in verse 2, Yahweh is addressed as Adonai (Lord). There is here a kind of confession of personal faith in Yahweh; the God who has revealed himself under the name of Yahweh, "the LORD," is the one whom I joyfully acknowledge as my Lord.

Verse 2b is a longer and stronger parallel of verse 2a. "Hear" is paralleled by "let thine ears be attentive," and "my voice" is paralleled with "the voice of my supplication." The Revised Standard Version's "voice of my supplications" is the more beautiful language, whereas the New International Version's "cry for mercy" perhaps carries a greater sense of urgency.

Vv. 3-4

**³ If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?**

**⁴ But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared.**

Notice again the interplay of LORD and Lord.

Now the reason for the Psalmist's panic comes out; it is a record of iniquity and sins. If God were to keep an honest score, no one could ever stand in His judgment. This statement

recognizes two facts: one, God does not discipline to his Law (recall Psalm 1:6), and the Psalmist is painfully aware that in such an accounting he could not stand. But his confidence is that the LORD is not that kind of a god, one whose delight is in keeping record of transgression. On the contrary, with the LORD, *the* (the definite article is used in the Hebrew) forgiveness, the ever so-desperately-needed forgiveness, is to be found. That is the characteristic attribute of Yahweh.

In this connection please remember that in the Bible forgiveness is never an abstraction, a synonym for generalized love and understanding. In the Bible forgiveness is always the forgiveness of *sins*. God loves to forgive, but His forgiveness is the divine response to our human confession of nameable sins.

The reason given here for God's willingness to forgive sins is assuredly not so that we may think of Him as soft on our sinning. That old saw which thinks, "Since we love to sin and God loves to forgive, the universe is admirably arranged," is not found in the Bible. Rather God forgives so that we may *fear* Him. Such fear has nothing to do with craven cowardice, but it is a high and holy reverence for God, a godly trembling at His Word, a sober acknowledgement that He is our Lord and Sovereign.

Vv. 5-6

**⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;**

**⁶ my soul waits for the LORD
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.**

There is an ascending emphasis in verse 5a: I wait, indeed, my whole being (soul) waits. I wait for the LORD with every tingling fiber of my being. And it is for the LORD that I am waiting, who is Yahweh, the God of the Exodus and of the election of Israel.

Verse 5b is parallel to verse 5a, but with an intensification and clarification. My waiting is not in vain, but it is a waiting in hope. Hope is not wishful thinking, as when I say, "I hope I win the lottery." Hope is not without foundation; I have a basis for hoping; it is the Word of Yahweh. The Psalmist is very likely thinking of such a Word of God as in Exodus 33:19:

And he (God) said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you (Moses), and will proclaim before you my Name 'The LORD' (Yahweh); and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

And again, in that same context, Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD (Yahweh, Yahweh), a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

Sentries on duty at night, indeed anyone who works the night shift, can scarcely wait for morning finally to arrive. Even more so does my soul (verse 5) wait for the LORD to come with His forgiving word for the iniquities that so plague my conscience.

Vv. 7-8

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plenteous redemption (great power to redeem).

⁸ (It is) he (and no one else, who) **will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.**

The Psalmist (not just selfishly concerned with only his own sins) now exhorts Israel to take the Word of Yahweh seriously. Israel is the chosen People of God to whom God has revealed himself as the gracious Yahweh. *The* (the definite article is used in the Hebrew) "steadfast love" is God's promised, covenant love. In the Hebrew, verse 8 is emphatic: "He, and no one else."

Redemption takes its basic meaning from the Exodus, when God redeemed Israel; that is to say, Yahweh freed Israel from her bondage in slavery to an alien rule. Such redemption, when applied to sins, will include the forgiveness of past sins, deliverance from the consequences of our sins, and rescue from the continuing power of sin as the alien rule in our lives. And such redemption is promised for all God's People. As James Luther Mays puts it: "Redemption includes liberation not only from guilt but also from the whole imprisoning network of sin's effects on life. Divine forgiveness will be fulfilled in the freedom that belongs to the children of God. How and when that full and final redemption will come, the Old Testament does not say. But it is in the hope of it that every pilgrimage in the depths is made."

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 130:

God of might and compassion, you sent your Word into the world as a watchman to announce the dawn of salvation. Do not leave us in the depths of our sins, but listen to your Church pleading for the fullness of your redeeming grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

My prayer to accompany Psalm 130:

Heavenly Father,
you give us hope when we are overwhelmed in the depths,
forgiveness of our sins when we dread your reckoning,
and plenteous redemption when we cry out to you.

Into the dark night of our waiting souls bring the dawn of your mercy,
and in your steadfast love free us finally from all our iniquity,
that with perfect fear we may serve only you,
and in reverence adore your holy Name;
through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Jonah 2:1-9

This psalm-like prayer is a prayer for deliverance, not a penitential psalm like Psalm 130. Its similarity lies in the extensive imagery of floundering in the deep ocean as an appropriate picture for distress and anxiety. Here you might notice how the picture of the ocean depths intermingles with the picture of the netherworld of Sheol. It differs from Psalm 130 in that there is no specific reference to sin as the cause of the Psalmist's feeling of drowning, although one might supply that from the context of Jonah's disobedience. But again, as in Psalm 130, deliverance or redemption comes from the LORD (Yahweh), the God who promised grace and mercy.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

**"I called to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice.**

**For thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood was round about me; all thy waves and thy billows passed over me.**

**Then I said, 'I am cast out from thy presence;
how shall I again look upon thy holy temple?'**

**The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me;
weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains.**

**I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.**

**When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to thee, into thy holy temple.**

**Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee; what I have vowed I will pay.**

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

Nugget

The popularization of the concept of victimhood is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows true victims to look firmly at the truth of their enslavement and seek freedom from it. On the other, it allows us to blame our sins on others when that is neither truthful nor appropriate. The misery is that if we do not claim responsibility for our behavior, neither can we ask for nor accept forgiveness.

(Source unknown)

Nugget

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conq'ror be.
I sink in life's alarms when by myself I stand,
Imprison me within your arms, and strong shall be my hand.

My heart is weak and poor until it master find:
It has no spring of action sure, it varies with the wind;
It cannot freely move till you have wrought its chain;
Enslave it with your matchless love, and deathless it shall reign.

My power is faint and low till I have learned to serve:
It wants the needed fire to glow, it wants the breeze to nerve;
It cannot drive the world until itself be driven;
Its flag can only be unfurled when you shall breathe from heaven. Amen.

(These verses were written by George Matheson (1842-1906), who was a Scottish preacher, author, and hymn-writer.)

Walter E. Keller

March 21, 1999 – **The Fifth Sunday in Lent**