

Psalm 30

"Joy Comes With the Mourning"

Everyone's response to trouble is different. Some of us bury our heads in the sand in the hope that our bad luck will simply go away. Some of us confront it head on, choosing to get things over with as soon as possible. Some people whine and complain and make everyone else around them miserable. I know this, not only from being a pastoral care minister for over fifteen years, but from simply observing myself. And sometimes, trouble can even prompt us to feel grateful. But a friend told me once that nothing irritates her more than to have someone suggest that she should be grateful when times are tough. She said, "What kind of remedy is thankfulness when everything is crashing down on you? Makes me want to slug them!"

Her emotions were probably closer to the truth of how WE feel sometimes, but I really HAVE found that it is helpful to make a gratitude list when life is throwing me a curve ball because we can always find something to give us hope. Life is interwoven with a complex web of sins and mercies and contains suffering that we never really understand, but dwelling on our blessings is certainly more helpful than remaining mired down in our troubles.

Psalm 30 was written by someone who has made it through a great deal of trouble and can look back with gratitude on God's presence in that time. Scholars believe it was written at a time when King David had suffered terribly because of his own sins. Things had been going really great for David. He had been anointed by God as King of Israel and had been promised that his descendants would always be King. He was living in the palace and had established himself as a great military success. We can just picture him with a large pension plan and

several chariots in the garage and a vacation home down by the Sea of Galilee. With his eight wives and eleven children, by the way! Now that should be enough suffering for any man!

But as it often happens when people are successful, David had lost sight of the source of his blessings. He had forgotten that everything he had was a gift from God and even became boastful and arrogant of his own power. Many of us are quick to blame God when things go wrong but forget to thank God when life is good because not only do we not see God in our pain, but we do not see God in our blessings either.

What I mean is this – we are all grateful to have a car, until it breaks down! Then we moan and complain about the cost of a new tire or that the battery wasn't THAT old. But how many of us get into our working car and say, "Thank you God that I have a car to drive today!" before we even start it up? Have you ever lost your electricity because of a storm or a traffic accident that knocks down your power pole? If you are like me, you reacted as if Armageddon is right around the corner! But when you turn on your light to read after a long day's work do you thank God for your power? Or your work, for that matter. I think you get the point.

Well, David's main sin was that he had forgotten where his blessings came from. At this time in his life, David decided to order a census of all the men of Israel. The problem was that this was not a census that was ordered by God – in fact God told him NOT to do it. David wanted to conduct the census so that he could consider his own power and might and boast of about how many subjects were under him. This is why God considered David's census to be sinful.

So the Lord decided to punish David and sent a plague on all of Israel for his sins. The book of Chronicles tells us that 70,000 men of Israel fell dead in a three day period. When David realized his sinfulness and how it had affected so many, he pleaded with the Lord for

forgiveness and God, out of his bottomless pit of grace, chose to show mercy on him. And when he received this mercy, he was prompted to write Psalm 30.

The writing of this Psalm is actually the first lesson in and of itself. When David realized the calamity that he had caused, the first thing that he did was PRAY, in the form of this Psalm. This is the model for any of us who find ourselves dealing with struggles of any kind, whether because of our own sinfulness or simply because we are facing life on life's terms.

When I served as Chaplain of Presbyterian Community, there was a resident that I was so close to that I called him my "Easley Daddy". Like my own father, he was a man of faith, wisdom and integrity. Unlike my own father, he didn't think it was necessary to pray when he was suffering. He said, "I have a close relationship with my Heavenly Father. He knows what I need. I mean, Julie, do you think if I say, 'Please bless Mary because she is in the hospital', that God is going to reply, 'Oh no! Which hospital is she in?'" His bottom line was that prayer is mostly for OUR benefit – to make us feel in control or like *we* are doing something.

But as much as I loved this pillar of faith, we never agreed on this issue. Psalm 30 makes it clear that God desires to be sought by us all. This can be seen in the way God responds to David's pleas. God reacts as any parent would who truly values the words of His child.

Here is a case in point. Danny and I have two children and they are extremely different in every way. When our daughter started school, I would pick her up each day and ask, "How was your day?" She would reply, "Oh math was so boring and we read a new book and I sat next to Kelly on the playground." "And how was lunch?" "Well, we had corn dogs and they were gross. And Lindsay didn't like her cookie so she gave it to me." "Do you have any homework?" "Only to study my spelling words which I mostly know so can I go to Lauren's house?"

Then our son started school. I would pick him up and ask, "How was your day?" And he would say, "Good". "Well who did you play with today?" "The guys". "Do you have any homework?" "Yep". But every day, I would ask Carter how his day was, even if the answer was the same "Good" because I wanted him to know that I craved conversation with him. That every word he shared with me was precious in my heart. And so it is with God, our heavenly father.

And the mercy that God showed David also tells us that God not only listens to our prayers but responds to them. God forgave David's lack of judgment and David praised God by saying, "Your anger is for a moment but your favor is for a lifetime!"

You see, I believe that this is why God became Emmanuel – God with us. The theologian Karl Barth believed that God called the world into existence so that in time, God could become flesh and dwell among us. This was God's plan all along. God wanted intimacy with us from the beginning of time. God dwelling among us, first in the person of Jesus and then through the power of the Holy Spirit is how God comes to us. Prayer is how we go to God.

However, God's attentiveness to our prayers does not dismiss God's judgement. Part of David's sadness is brought about by the consequences of his actions. But I think David's relationship with God shows us that God often punishes us BY our sins rather than FOR them. God allows our suffering so that we can understand our own shortcomings and repent. But this does not mean that God has forsaken us.

David understands this too and teaches in this Psalm a lesson for those of us who are actually living in the midst of trouble today. David thanks God for not letting his "foes" overcome him. The first time I read through this Psalm, I assumed David was talking about actual foes – Saul and his armies that were continually seeking David's life or the Philistines or the Ammonites or other enemies of God's people. Actually, his foe was his own lust for status.

The same is true for us. We face foes of every kind. Internal foes – things like pride, stubbornness, addiction, perfectionism, laziness. But we also struggle with those EXTERNAL foes like illness, grief, abuse, injustice, consumerism and more. No matter what trouble we may find ourselves in at the moment, Psalm 30 brings the message that though we may not see, hear, feel or recognize God in our present struggles that God is there, struggling with us.

And I love David's reasoning when he asks for forgiveness, basically reminding God that, now that he has come to his senses, if God punishes him too harshly, he will be of no use to God's kingdom. Eugen Peterson says it best in his translation of Psalm 30 in The Message. "I called out to you, God; I laid my case before you. Can you sell me for a profit when I'm dead? Auction me off at a cemetery yard sale? When I'm dust my songs and stories won't sell, so listen! Be kind! Help me out of this!" God responded to this spirited argument with mercy and forgiveness. This emphasizes, not only the importance of our prayer life with God, but the great mercies that God is willing to extend when a sinner repents.

Which in the end, is the main message of this Psalm. God turns our morning – M-O-R-N-I-N-G into dancing joy because every day, God gives us another chance to live into the promises that he offers. Every day is new with our God of forgiveness. God accepts our best efforts, individually and as a community of faith, whether they are stumbling or successful and turns them into something for the glory of His Kingdom as He sees fit.

But God also turns our mourning – M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G into dancing because the cross and the tomb stand empty on this and every day. By the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, we know that even the greatest sorrow, that is the death of God's son, can be turned into joy. Eternal life for all who believe! And for this, David says, "O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!"

Thus, David ends his Psalm by reminding *us* to praise God forever too. And giving thanks forever is not confined to a few hymns every Sunday, no matter HOW well you sing! Giving thanks forever means living lives of praise, continually. It means praising God in our mourning and in our dancing, in the shadows and in the light. Above all, it means trusting in God to have not only the power but the desire to turn our sadness into joy. It is believing that it is God's desire for us all to dance when joy finally comes with our mourning.

When I decided to accept the call as your Interim minister, I knew in my heart it was God's will. In fact, I had known for some time that God was calling me away from Chaplaincy at Presbyterian Community and into a local church. But I LOVED my job. I was comfortable there. It was what I KNEW I was good at and I was afraid of change. So leaving was a huge step of faith for me.

My last day there was Christmas Eve and I cried throughout the day. In fact, I cried for two weeks. I am sure my husband must have been thinking that I had gone over the edge! Then I came here, my heart filled with a mixture of faith and doubt. And almost since the very first day, I have known what a gift God gave me when I finally trusted in the changes God had planned for me.

One of the first things I came across as I unpacked my office was a framed quote that a dear Seminary friend had done for me. It reminds me every day that God has a plan. That God turned my mourning over leaving a place and people that I loved into the joy of loving a new place and new people. I think it could be a modern day interpretation of David's thoughts.

It reads: When we walk to the edge of the light that we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we believe that one of two things will happen – There will be something solid on which we can stand or we will be taught how to fly.

It is God's will for us to weep when we must and then dance through our mourning into God's joy. In fact, God may be calling us all to fly! Amen.