

## Out of the Depths

Psalm 130

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Why do we have Lent? For those of us in the Protestant tradition, it is not so obvious. It is important for us to realize why. We don't have any trouble with Christmas. Christmas was first made a celebration in 346 A.D., 350 years after Jesus was born. We have no trouble getting kids ready for Christmas. But then there is Ash Wednesday, and maybe we should do something more? We don't want to be like those who say we can't eat meat on Fridays, that we have to do certain things. There is something about suffering, and maybe we should give up Lent for Lent. What's it for?

We have the idea that it is sort of strange, and why do we have it when, as a matter of fact, the center of our faith is Good Friday and Easter? The reason we have this time, some forty days (not including Sundays), is because then we begin to focus on Good Friday and Easter. After all, Christmas is simply the preparation. What it is really about is Good Friday and Easter. That is why we have this practice. It didn't start at the beginning, but then neither did Christmas. It's a way of sorting out our Christian faith.

This Lenten season we are going to lift up certain Psalms. We use the Psalms on Sundays, but in a sort of repetitive, ritual way, and the treasury and the value of the Psalms escape us. The Psalms are the hymnbook and the prayerbook of the people of God. What we should do is sing them and pray them. In the Puritan tradition the Psalms were prayed. It was called The Psalter. In Germany today there is a group of nuns who have made a fortune out of singing the Psalms and selling them. That can be done so well.

As we often note, Hebrew poetry works in terms of parallelism; it repeats the same, or the opposite, or the same thing in a similar way. There are no rhymes but there are accents which come out in the Hebrew. The Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, is written the same way.

The Psalms can be divided into different types. Some are praising the anointing of the king. Some are cursing God and man. Some are glorying in creation. We will stick our feet in the water in terms of what it is we believe and how people have expressed it.

You may object, saying: "We're people of the New Testament. Why spend time on the Old?" A good example of "why" is found in the official US Lutheran—Jewish Dialogue, a series of formal meetings between top Lutheran and Jewish scholars over a period of years. Early on the respective teams wondered: Would it be possible for us, as Jewish and Lutheran scholars, to worship together? It was decided that they could read the Psalms together. But it didn't work. The Jewish team read the Psalms one way, and the Lutherans read them another.

We easily forget that in the First Century pious Jews knew the Psalms by heart. Remember at that time only between one and two percent of the people could read. They had to know things by heart. In time of trouble, as with Jesus on the cross, they recited the Psalms, he and others in that kind of peril.

When we use the Psalms today, as people of the New Testament, we are praying with him as the people of the New Covenant. It's "in him" that we pray and "with him."

We begin today with Psalm 130. Luther points out that this is one of the Pauline Psalms, others being 32, 51, 130, and 143. There is a way in which the New Testament is full of the Old Testament, and Paul was a rabbi. He knew the Psalms in Hebrew and in Greek. We use Psalms this way, that is, to point to Christ.

Most of the time if you ask people: "Do you know any Bible verses?" they answer: "The Lord is my shepherd." People know the Twenty-Third Psalm.

In 1520 when Luther was at the Wartburg, confined there in hiding, he said to his compatriots: "Let us sing together *De Profundis*," which means "Out of the depths," the first line of Psalm 130. Luther wrote the hymn "Out of the Depths" based on Psalm 130. It is one of those basic Psalms. I am going to read Psalm 130 using the RSV translation.

**"Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Hear my voice!"**

You notice that as it starts out and the first two thirds of the Psalm are an individual speaking, but then in the third part it's the whole people of Israel. That's because this would be in the temple. In verses 7 and 8 it's "O Israel." We don't know the situation, but whoever it is, brings his worship and his prayer to the temple.

"Out of the **depths**, I cry to thee O Lord!" The depths here are deep water. Out of the chaos. The Israelites were not seafaring people, and they understood that the Mediterranean was the place of chaos, of evil. They were people who lived on the land where it was ordered and safe. "Out of the depths," I'm caught in chaos. Whatever that might be: Illness, financial peril, loss, trapped, whatever. "Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord! Hear my voice!"

You recall from the Passion story that Jesus prayed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's Psalm 22:1. And the same is found in Psalm 69:14, where again it says: "Rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me."

We remember that Jonah was thrown into the water and swallowed in the depths, and Daniel was trapped in the lion's den. And Elijah after he defeated the priests of Baal (1 Kings 19), he was all alone, and he says to the Lord: "Nothing works. O Lord, hear my voice."

Recall Peter in Matthew 14:30 walked on the water, looked away from the Lord, and then sank. He called out: "Lord, save me!" And Jesus caught him, and lifted him up out of the depths.

Of our Lord himself, as it says in Hebrews 4:15 and 5:7, that he was tempted in every way like us but without sin. In Hebrews 5:7 it says "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears;" he called to the Lord out of the depths and the Lord heard him.

Notice in Psalm 130 it says "Lord" here. It does that seven times because they didn't want to use the holy name "Yahweh," but that's what is meant here, the covenant God, the one who holds them. "Hear my voice!"

It goes on to say: "If thou, O Lord, should mark iniquities (things go amiss), who could stand? It means: Lord, if you could count all that's against me, who could stand? Nobody. "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." The trick there is to realize that the word "feared" means to revere him and hold him in awe.

Then we go to the second portion: <sup>5</sup>"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning."

This is the waiting that is waiting with patience, waiting with confidence, as in Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

We recall also Isaiah 40:31: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Even more striking is Isaiah 64:4: "Who has known a God like thee who works for those who wait for him?" Waiting and hope. Hope and waiting are the same thing.

In our history there is the idea that slavery was over with the declaration by Lincoln in 1862. But in the British Empire, on August 1, 1830, the slaves in the Caribbean were declared free. It was said that they waited up all night for the morning because in the morning they were free. We also notice that this Psalm is at night, waiting for the morning: <sup>6</sup>"My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning."

Finally then in the last portion of the Psalm, it says: <sup>7</sup>"O Israel, Hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love . . . ."

Psalm 63:3 states: "Thy steadfast love is better than life." In Psalm 130:7 it says steadfast love is that love that has been true in the past, it is true now, and it will be true forever. And we think of life being the most important, the one thing to hang onto. It is then pointed out in Psalm 63:3: "Thy steadfast love is better" because he is Lord of life and death. He is the Lord who never fails. More important than life and better than life is his steadfast love.

Then it goes on to say: "With him is plenteous redemption." We think of that well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace," and how plentiful is his grace. As Luke 6:38 says: "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap."

Finally Psalm 130:8 states: "And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." "All," and therefore it is all taken care of. In his electing love, in his covenant love, in the love which he then made sure by what he did on Good Friday and Easter. We are then no longer caught in the depths, but we are lifted up into his new heaven and earth. Amen

"Out of the Depths" LBW 295, ELW 600.