

“How Long?”

Sermon from Psalm 40:1-13

Given Sunday, May 17, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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*Unyielding, I called to you, God - now at last you have stooped to me
and answered my cry for help. You have pulled me
out of the Pit of Destruction, out of its mud and quicksand;
you set my feet upon a rock and made my steps firm.
You put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to you.
Many will look on in wonder and so will put their trust in you.
Happiness comes to those who put their trust in God,
instead of in human egos or people blind to the truth.*

*How many wonders you've worked for us, God!
How many plans you've made for us - you have no equal!
I wanted to recount them, again and again, but their number is too great.
You don't desire sacrifice or oblation,
instead you made my ears receptive to you;
you asked no burnt offering or sacrifice for sins from me.*

*And so I declared, "Here I am! I have come! In the scroll of the book
it is written about me."
I desire to do your will, O God, and your law is written in my heart.
I'll proclaim your justice in the Great Assembly,
and I won't keep my mouth shut, as you well know.
I have never kept your generosity to myself,
but have announced your faithfulness and saving action;
I have made no secret of your love and faithfulness in the Great Assembly.*

*For your part, God, don't withhold your love from me!
Let your kindness and faithfulness constantly protect me.
Misfortunes surround me, far more than I can count;
my sins entrap me and I am unable to escape.
They outnumber the hairs on my head, and my courage is drained.
Hurry! Come to my rescue, God! Be swift to help me!*

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How long?

What variations on that question are you asking these days?

How long until I can sit down for a meal in my favorite restaurant?
How long until we can go for a walk on the coast? How long until I
can pitch a tent in a state park? How long must I be on this Zoom
call?

And then: how long until we know if schools will open back up in the
fall? How long until we can visit our families in senior living
communities, or in another state? How long until we know if our
plans can really happen – how long should we wait before making
any new plans?

And then: how long should I pause before going to the doctor? How
long can I be a little bit sick without worrying about it? And how
long will I have this job? Or how long before I can find a new job?
How long until my call gets through to someone at the
unemployment office? How long until the stimulus check comes in?
How long before it's gone?

And then: How long before I'm comfortable showing my face in
public, or seeing other people smile, not from behind a mask? How
long before we know we're safe around each other? How long until
there's a vaccine?

And then: how long before I get too used to this, or decide I can't get
used to this? How long before I forget how much I need other people
– or before that need overtakes me? How long before solitude

becomes loneliness, before loneliness becomes despair? Or just becomes normal? How long before I stop understanding the needs of my neighbor, because I've stopped encountering my neighbor?

What questions – what “how longs” are you asking that I haven't named? Feel free to add those in the comments...

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“How long?” isn't a question original to this Psalm. But this Psalm has been played with a lot, by people of its own time and people of our time, and that playing, what's been added to it over the years, reveals a bit about who and how we are...

The second movement of this Psalm – we didn't read the whole of it, but the part that begins at “for your part, God, don't withhold your love from me” – from there on this Psalm is almost identical to Psalm 70, which is entirely a call for help. It's like that desperate Psalm was just copied and pasted onto the end of this one, that begins as a prayer of thanksgiving.

And commentator Howard Wallace suggests that we find this movement in this Psalm because we find that same movement in our lives: we find that the way of faith does not just flow in one direction, from lament to thanksgiving. We aren't always crying out and then saying thank you for having been rescued, for prayers having been answered. Sometimes we're saying thank you for the faithfulness of God as we've known it in the past – the goodness of God that has brought us to this day – and then we're crying out in this day, for the world as it is this day, crying out for help to make it through this day.

How long is this day?

Maybe you've heard of the Irish group U2. They've been playing together since 1976, Rolling Stones has them ranked at #22 of their greatest rock bands of all time, and since 1983 they've been closing their live shows, not always but often, with a song they just call "40." It's this Psalm, mostly. It's this Psalm broken up by a refrain they've lifted from Psalm 6, verse 3: "How long?" The fuller context is this: the Psalmist says, "My bones tremble with fear, and I am in deep distress. How long will it be, Lord? Turn and come to my rescue. Show your wonderful love and save me."

The band doesn't include all that, just the cry – just the "how long?" – the way Jesus sometimes used fragments of Psalms to evoke the fuller song. They create this dialogue within the Psalms themselves, between the reassurance the singer has known once, and the precarity he feels in this day. It's a dialogue between past and present, between rescue and danger, between hope and fear, between speaker and community. It's maybe reflective of the movement we feel these days.

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Commentator James Howell tells us this Psalm "isn't a prayer so much as a report on a prayer." That in the time it was written, if you were under duress, you would pray and ask others to pray -- and then later you would share what that was like, what transpired, what God had done. People would be expecting to hear. They would be waiting for a report on how God was faithful. Even if the way God ended up showing up wasn't exactly what or how they'd expected,

they trusted that that God would show up. They would come together in community to hear about it, and to tell about it.

And this Psalm begins in that kind of testimony. The people come together. They hear from the Psalmist a story of God's faithfulness – of being rescued from where he thought he might not be. And then they hear him cry out again.

I wonder if that's a practice we could adopt. We do the last part already – the sharing of where we need prayer, and what for. We always make time to hear, or read, that from each other. We don't do as much of the reporting back, at least not publicly. I wonder what that would sound like. What is the testimony you would give, the new song you would sing? Where have you experienced God's faithfulness lately? What kindness have you been shown? What courage has someone acted upon that's made a difference in your life, or in the world? What's the good news you would announce in the temple?

These days I think no celebration is too small; no supplication is too big. Did you finish a puzzle? Have you reconnected with you sister? Are there flowers blooming in your neighborhood? Did you go for a walk yesterday and see them? Do you want to ask God to heal the whole world? To restore all who are unwell, to repair all that is broken?

I'd invite you to practice this sharing with the community. Turn to someone you're sitting with, watching with, or type in the comments here, and share what you would announce to the congregation: your testimony of gratitude or of need. This Psalm is an invitation to

bring the fullness of who we are to one another – to bring the difficulty and the disappointment and the wonder and the grace of these days, all together – we bring our piece of that, each of us – and we stir it together, and we say this is a picture of our life today.

And maybe our questions begin to shift, too – or at least begin to multiply. Maybe we begin to ask: How long can we preserve the kind of care that's being shown now? How long can we sustain walking this intentionally in the world? How long can we keep up this habit of calling each other, of writing notes, of making sure to connect? How long can we grow food and flowers, and play games, and tell stories? How long can we continue this consideration of how each of our choices will either protect or endanger our neighbors? How long can we pause to notice what God is doing in these days?

Let's try and find out. Amen.