

**“A Song of Deep Waiting”**  
Sermon preached at Church on the Hill  
Lenox, Massachusetts  
Fifth Sunday in Lent • 2 April 2017  
The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

*Text: Psalm 130*

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to You, O Holy One.
- 2 God Most High, hear my voice!  
Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy!
- 3 If You, O Blessed One, watch for wrongdoing,  
God, who will survive?
- 4 But You forgive,  
And thus You are held in awe.
- 5 I wait for the Comforter,  
My whole being waits;  
I hope in God’s word.
- 6 I wait for the Almighty,  
More eagerly than those keeping watch, who wait for the morning,  
More eagerly than those keeping watch, who wait for the morning.
- 7 O people, put your hope in our Creator!  
For with the Author of Life there is unfailing love,  
And great power to free us.
- 8 It is the Holy One who will free us from all the malice we have rendered.

**1**

Out of the depths I cry to You, Holy One.

There are depths we seek out, and depths we wish we could avoid.

Going deep can be good:

- deep into a relationship that enriches and completes you;
- deep into a book so captivating you keep hold of the corner of the page, ready to turn it as soon as possible;
- deep into an adventure, or a problem worth solving.

Going deep can be good. But sometimes it works otherwise. We know other kinds of depths.

A while back Angela and I made plans for dinner with friends. This is a decades-long relationship: our schedules zany enough that we actually get together once a year, twice if there’s a happy accident of timing. So we gratefully await those rare occasions. A couple of days ago our friend sent an email. Subject line: “Still looking forward to dinner, but there are some things you should know beforehand.” I had a chill: what kind of trouble would be inside the message? Turns out that one sister-in-law just received an unexpected diagnosis of cancer, extensive, late stage; her life is now measured in weeks and months. On the other side of the couple a brother died suddenly, and in the wake of that death they discovered they had never really known the

man, that he had kept out of sight a nightmarish series of broken relationships, deceits in marriage and in business, financial chaos, deep discord and hurt.

“Some things you should know ahead of time,” was the subject.

Out of the depths we cry.

Our friends cried out of the depths — cried out to us, though we know that they had been calling first on the Holy One.

<sup>1</sup> Out of the depths I cry to You, O Holy One.

<sup>2</sup> God Most High, hear my voice!

Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy!

## 2

The psalm starts in the depths, but really it is not about being in the depths. Watch the verbs. The first in the psalm is “cry.” But really this song, this hymn, is not even about crying.

Because the next verb is the one that attaches to God.

<sup>2</sup> God Most High, hear my voice!

Watch the verbs belonging to God. “God ... hear my voice.” For this, we cry out. Not into nothingness, but to God. To God who is waiting with an open ear, listening for the crying voices of creatures and creation.

The psalm, which is an ancient hymn sung by our ancestors in worship, is also a kind of prescription pad. One thing necessary, one thing deeply good, when we are in the depths that threaten to close over and extinguish us, is crying out to the one who listens.

Maybe you have had the experience of calling out in pain or righteous anger to people who refuse to listen. The psalm tells us: God is not in them. Because God listens.

Maybe you are outraged by the unanswered cries of the poor, or of the victims of racism and patriarchy, because you know God is the One who listens, and those who do not listen to the righteous cries of pain do not have God in them.

Maybe when you have been in dire straights, in depths of pain or despair or hurt, you have cried out and you have been not-at-all-certain that there was a God who would listen. I know I’ve been there.

Or maybe when you have called out of the depths with a voice choked in tears, raspy and hoarse from calling, you have known as deep as your pain that God was listening. I’ve been there, too.

Whatever goes on in your heart in those depths, the act of calling — opening your mouth and forming the words that declare your hurt, your anger, your despair — the choice to call out is to believe that God is listening. We don’t call into nothingness. We call into the certainty or into the possibility or into the hope that God *is*, that God listens, that God will hear and even that God will respond. Sometimes when my faith has been frayed thin, I have found it again precisely because of someone who called out of the depths and reminded me: yes, God is exactly the one who waits for every voice.

### 3

And God answers with mercy. There's an old notion from scripture that suffering is a result of sin: that if you are suffering, it is because you have done something wrong. There's an old corollary, that if you are fortunate, it's because you have done something righteous. Plenty of scripture suggests that's the way God works. But even more of scripture says the opposite: suffering happens, beyond reason, and often for no reason. There is no moral cause for the illness that riddles your body or that of your beloved. There is no justice served in a death from anything other than old age, regardless of the character of the person who dies. God does not go around doling out punishment — instead, punishment is when we walk away from God, from the One who listens with forgiving mercy.

<sup>3</sup> If You, O Blessed One, watch for wrongdoing,  
God, who will survive?

Suffering happens, and God is looking for every opportunity to deliver healing and forgiveness — to gather every suffering creature back into the Creator's holy embrace. That's the everlasting theme; that's the promise that goes all the way to the cross and beyond into resurrection life.

<sup>3</sup> If You, O Blessed One, watch for wrongdoing,  
God, who will survive?  
<sup>4</sup> But You forgive,  
And thus You are held in awe.

When suffering happens, God's first response is listening and mercy. Forgiveness and mercy. This is why we call out: to open ourselves to God's response — which might come through other people.

There's a story told about a man who falls into a great pit, and can't get out. The man stares up from the depths at the light above and the walls so steep he can't get out.

A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey, you, can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along: guy shouts up, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, [Sally], it's me. Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you nuts? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before - and I know the way out."<sup>1</sup>

God does not promise us protection from the pits and pains of the world. But God does promise a holy presence in times of darkness. God gives minimum protection; maximum support.

### 4

We often get confused about our crying out. Sometimes we cry in the wrong direction, and tell our stories of woe every time there's a lull in the conversation, or to each new

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<sup>1</sup> From "Noël," *The West Wing* (Episode 210), NBC, 20 Dec 2000.

acquaintance, as though a stranger's life is incomplete until hearing our troubles. I mean, I'm sure none of you do that, but you probably know someone who does.

Sometimes we get so weary of the tales of woe — when dinner conversations begin with telling about a gall bladder that had to come out, which leads to the splenectomy story, and on to the biopsy, the new hip that isn't working properly. Organ recitals, they call them. Enough to drive a person to say nothing. To anyone. Including God.

Which would be a mistake, because our knowing God depends on our habit of calling out to God. And then waiting. Because God's time is unlike our time. Picture God as the one utterly impatient with injustice, and utterly patient with each beloved creature. God's time.

So call out! — not to “one-up” the next party guest, but call to God out of your depths. Calling out to God is what hope looks like. Calling out to God is holy waiting, speaking your fear to the Creator, knowing that other voices are calling and waiting, calling and waiting, daring to believe that the Author of the universe is listening.

## 5

Help may not come for every call, in our time. Yet God listens, and hears you and me declare that hope and redemption are for those who dare to believe in the listening God.

Never cease your calling; never cease your song. God's love for you does not and will not cease.