

“Lessons from a Pandemic: ‘How Long, Lord?’”

Psalm 13

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

August 9, 2020

READ PSALM 13

“Is there some reason to shave today?”

“Is there some reason to put on my make-up today?”

“Wait—what day is today, anyway?!”

“HOW LONG, LORD?!”

- Montgomery County officials and the Governor of Maryland disagree on whether or not private schools should open in-person classrooms this fall
- Parents and children have mixed feelings about the safety of in-person school, and are given mixed messages about whether school will be online or in classrooms, but regardless, are spending more time together, more creatively, than ever imagined
- Young adults are living in the same rooms in the same houses of their childhoods, when they had anticipated branching out on their own, and wish they could
- College athletics, a backbone of university budgets and a staple of America’s entertainment culture, are in limbo, the scholarships of student athletes uncertain
- Conservative evangelicals, espousing a muscular, boastful Christianity, eschew the need for masks and social distancing, and are only encouraged by the nation’s leader

Gregory Sterling is the current Dean of my Divinity School. In a panel discussion about the proper role of religion in the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Sterling reminds us: *“Faith is not a naïve neglect of reality. Nor is it a surrender to the hopelessness that can overtake people in a crisis. It is a resource that provides people with the confidence that, no matter what circumstances we may face, we do not face them alone. We face them with the assurance that God is with us.”*

This does not mean that we don't get sick or won't die. But it does mean that we have the inner strength to confront whatever lies before us."

The writer of Psalm 13 enlists the inner strength to confront whatever lies before him. What does lie before him, we do not know. But we know that his psalm is a poignant expression of the deep emotions of a troubled soul. John Calvin saw its value for public worship, so he included it among many that he set to music, in 1539. Psalm 13 is known as "the lament of an individual". It is structured in three parts: 1) a complaint, then 2) an appeal, then 3) the acknowledgement that help comes from God.

Does this not describe the pandemic's lesson for us?: We complain plenty. We issue appeals. And, as people of faith, we acknowledge that God has not abandoned us.

As for the Psalmist's complaint: We are not told the source of his distress, whether sickness, misfortune, political pressure, religious strife, or bitter rivalry. We know only that he is filled with worry and sorrow for trouble that consume him. The trouble may be an enemy, perceived or real, that is out to get him, and if so, he would not want to give that enemy the satisfaction of gloating if he succumbs. The psalmist is perplexed that God seems to be indifferent to his plight.

COVID-19 is probably your first pandemic! What has been our complaint?:

"I am confined to the house, and there isn't any place safe to go anyway! When I do go somewhere, I can't go inside because I forgot my mask! I can't recognize anyone if they are wearing a mask! Other shoppers are walking the wrong way in the grocery aisles, so why shouldn't I?! I love my husband, but he is difficult to live with 24/7! My dad is quarantined in his residential facility, and they won't let me visit him! My grandkids are losing a whole year of

progress in their education! My son has been furloughed and can't pay his rent! Congress doesn't seem to care about anybody but themselves."

As for the Psalmist's appeal: How long Lord? How long Lord?! How...long...LORD!! How...LONG!! The repetition of these words reveals just how troubled is the distress!: Are You going to forget me forever?! I am despairing here, God—don't you care?! I thought I mattered to You!! Did I do something wrong?? HOW LONG LORD?!

COVID-19 is probably your first pandemic! What is your appeal?: *"God, when everything began to change six months ago, I thought it might be for six weeks! I just wasn't prepared for this, even in my wildest imagination! Are you talking six more months? Longer? I don't know if I can handle that! I don't know if I WANT to handle that! Even if I can, God, I don't know if my mom can, and she lived through the Depression! This is no way for her life to end! We've always felt close to you God! But how much longer?!"*

As for the Psalmist's acknowledgement that help comes from God: His confidence that he will be vindicated is based upon his conception of the nature of God, in whom he has always put his trust. Remember that the last verse—verse six—is a hymn of thanksgiving: "I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me."

COVID-19 is probably your first pandemic. What is your acknowledgement?: *"God, I have had down times before, but never anything like this. You've seen me through everything else; I know You will this time, too. I know that I am not facing this alone. I know from experience that You are with me!"*

Complaint...Appeal...Acknowledgement.

I would point out, as many thoughtful observers are pointing out: One very real and encouraging consequence of the pandemic is that the innate connectedness of God's family on earth is now more apparent than ever. Not only is God our companion through our troubles, but so are our families, our neighbors, our friends, our beloved congregation—the entire population! This pandemic teaches that we are connected with everyone else in the bond of shared life that is indissoluble. WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER!

The circumstance of uncertainty, of not knowing, that we find ourselves in reminds me of the theatre production "Waiting for Godot", which I first experienced on my college campus. In Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, friends of mine played Vladimir and Estragon, the only two characters in the cast. You may remember that the script is a sad, bleak, circular, at times inane, depressing dialogue between the two, waiting for the mysterious Godot. Vladimir and Estragon are stuck, sitting on a bench, passing the time. Godot is left to interpretation, and never appears. Estragon wonders: "If he comes?" Vladimir reassures him: "We'll be saved."

Here we are: Stuck, sitting on our benches, in sad, bleak, circular, at times inane, depressing dialogue with one another, passing the time while waiting for the mysterious Godot. And who or what is our mysterious Godot? Watching the news in fear, what are we waiting for? More masks? More ventilators? Flattening of the curve? A vaccine? A cure? The hope that things will get better? That COVID-19 will just...disappear? Because... things...disappear?

Vladimir and Estragon are certain that Godot is coming, and it is their faith that sustains them. Yet in their final exchange, before the curtain falls, Vladimir asks: "Shall we go?" Estragon answers: "Yes, let's go." *They do not move!*

Lutheran pastor Leslie Brandt, in his devotional book *Psalms Now!*, translates Psalm 13 into contemporary idiom:

O God, sometimes You seem so far away.

I cannot in this moment sense Your presence or feel Your power.

The darkness about me is stifling.

This depression is suffocating.

How long, O God, do I have to live in this void?

O God, how long?

Break into this black night, O God;

fill in this vast emptiness.

Enter into my conflict

lest I fall never to rise again.

I continue to trust in Your ever-present love.

I shall again discover true joy

in my relationship to You.

I will proclaim Your praises, my Lord,

for You will never let me go.

Complaint...Appeal...Acknowledgement.

We have the inner strength to confront whatever lies before us.

We are connected with everyone else in the bond of shared life that is indissoluble.

I will proclaim Your praises, my Lord, for You will never let me go.