

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Psalm 63

Title: “God Is Holding Your Life: Desert Blues”

I don't do this very often but I'm going to tell on you Fred Kloepfer because you said it loud enough for a lot of people to hear, so it's really no secret. Fred came through the greeting line after worship last week and told me: “Duane, that was much better than last week's sermon! Last week's was awful!” At least that's how I heard it. Someone else told me this last week that I seemed flat the last couple of weeks. As I've thought about those perceptions, I had to admit to myself that they were right. I have been a bit flat in spirit since returning from vacation, feeling a bit disconnected and weary within. They were right.

We came back from vacation learning that one of the couples with whom we vacationed and have for many years, a couple with whom we have been the best of friends and have known for 25 years, decided to separate after 33 years of marriage. So to be honest, vacation wasn't exactly refreshing and renewing, and I guess some of you picked up on that in my spirit.

That's the way life is, though. We have periods when life is exciting. Work is fulfilling. Vacations are refreshing and exhilarating. Our spiritual lives are full and rich. Relationships are humming along smoothly, but then things take a turn, and it's not so much, and it affects us. Might be an illness that knocks us to the ground or a death or change in relationships or discouragements or ...you name it. Our spirits are sometimes dry like the desert and we yearn for some kind of renewal of spirit.

When we are in such a place or such a state, it can be comforting to know that in the book of Psalms nearly half of them are poems/prayers of lament. Lament means “to mourn aloud” or “to express sorrow or mourning” or “to regret strongly” (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary). Throughout the book of Psalms there are voices lamenting their situation, openly questioning or complaining to God. Jesus on the cross, according to Gospels of Matthew and Mark, spoke the words of Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? (Psalm 22:1)

When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people carried away from their homeland to the land of Babylon, Psalm 137 gave voice to their grief:

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.
³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?

It’s the same sentiment expressed in Psalm 42 in which we hear the psalmist compare himself to a deer in the woods:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

For the psalmists, God’s absence is an occasion to speak openly with God about God’s absence; about the yearning such absence creates.

It’s really not unlike the artists who sing the blues. They sing of the hurt in life openly and honestly. People like B.B. King, Muddy Waters, even Eric Clapton. Clapton many of you may know as an English rock and blues guitarist, singer and songwriter. In 1991, he wrote the song, “Tears of Heaven”, a song that won him numerous awards, including Best Pop Vocal Performance (Male Category) in the 1993 Grammy Awards, Song of the Year, and helped propel his "Unplugged" album to the coveted Album of the Year prize. (<http://www.snopes.com/music/songs/tears.asp>)

Maybe it was so well received because it was a genuine expression of his pain. The song had to do with the loss of his four and a half year old son, Conor, who on March 20, 1991 fell from a 53 story New York apartment building to the roof of a 4 story building below. There were apparently no guards on the balcony when the little boy ran through the glass door to look outside. After his son's death, Clapton sang his blues:

Would you know my name
If I saw you in heaven?
Would it be the same
If I saw you in heaven?

I must be strong
And carry on,
'Cause I know I don't belong
Here in heaven.

Would you hold my hand
If I saw you in heaven?
Would you help me stand
If I saw you in heaven?

I'll find my way
Through night and day,
'Cause I know I just can't stay
Here in heaven.

Time can bring you down,
Time can bend your knees.
Time can break your heart,
Have you begging please, begging please.

Beyond the door,
There's peace I'm sure,
And I know there'll be no more
Tears in heaven.

Would you know my name
If I saw you in heaven?
Would it be the same
If I saw you in heaven?

I must be strong
And carry on,

'Cause I know I don't belong
Here in heaven.

The psalmist missed God as Clapton missed his son and so we hear the blues:

¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Telling God that God is missed is an expression of love, isn't it? To say to God, "I'm looking for you, Lord. I'm not sensing your presence now. I just want you to know that I'm parched here. It's as if I'm in the desert without water when I cannot seem to experience you with me." To say that to God is to love God. "I notice you're not with me, God. I want you to know that. I'm missing you."

What if someone you loved said this to you? What if someone with whom you were in conflict said something like this to you? What if you said it to someone you loved and missed? What do you think the reaction would be?

The beautiful thing about the blues is that they allow us to vent. Maybe it's like lancing a boil which then allows it to heal. Sometimes we just have to get the infection out in order to begin to heal. But it doesn't end with the venting. Venting leads to healing.

So the psalmist doesn't stop with the lament. There is more, there is far more in his heart than the sorrow and the missing of God:

² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.

The psalmist doesn't just sit in his sorrow, in his thirst for God. The psalmist goes looking for God, doesn't just sit in the shadow of some desert rock and wait for God to do something. Instead, the psalmist goes to worship. He takes the initiative in an active search for God in the sanctuary, worshipping God's power and glory through worship in community. He worships not just out of obligation, not because he thinks it will get him to heaven if he checks it off his list for

the week. The motivation for worshipping God is far deeper and richer than that. Worship is done “because [God’s} . . .steadfast love is better than life.”

When we know we are loved beyond belief, when we realize that the love of God is unconditional and that all we have to do is—in the words of the great theologian Paul Tillich—“Simply accept the fact that you are accepted”, when in those moments of time when we know in our own hearts, minds and souls, that “God’s steadfast love is better than life” then the only natural response is gratitude through praising God for the gift. And so the psalmist sings on:

⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

I can’t help but wonder if this expression of joy on the psalmist’s part--this clinging to God as a result of feeling completely satisfied--is what Dr. Tillich meant by those moments when we experience what it’s like to feel accepted by God. In one of his most famous sermons, he spoke about God’s grace:

*Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. **Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name***

now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.

(<https://streetpastor.wordpress.com/2011/07/07/you-are-accepted/>)

So what about you? Are you feeling parched in your soul, missing God, yearning for God? Then sing the blues if you need to, but in the midst of singing them remember that God’s steadfast love is better than life. Spend some time with the psalm this week and the questions in your bulletin insert. Remember that you are accepted and that if you are missing God, chances are God is also missing you.

Which, of course, is why we are here this morning and what the focus of every occasion of worship is about: to let God know through our presence here that we care enough about God and are grateful enough to God to express our love and gratitude and along with the psalmist to praise God with joyful lips. When we know that we are accepted, that God’s steadfast love is better than life, how can we do anything else?