

## The patience to hope

[Augsburg University Chapel, December 1, 2020, Advent 1]

### Psalm 13

#### Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

##### To the leader. A Psalm of David.

- <sup>1</sup> How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?
- <sup>2</sup> How long must I bear pain<sup>[a]</sup> in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- <sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
- <sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
- <sup>5</sup> But I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- <sup>6</sup> I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

I wonder if you have the same experience I have associating particular Bible stories or passages with specific moments in your life – a time while growing up, a season of the year, a person who has a significant impact on me, a place I will never forget?

I can never hear the story of Zacchaeus without being right back at Bible camp, singing "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." Up a tree even. And I will always remember the moment in 1977, in a cathedral in Köln, Germany, when the words of the first chapter of John's gospel were imprinted on my soul in a choral anthem: "And we beheld the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." And so we did. Or the cloudy April morning in Chicago almost 25 years ago, when the words of Paul's letter to the Colossians were made real in our wedding service: "Clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." I trust you have similar connections between scripture and your lives.

I've now decided to add another such connection in these fraught times. The words of Psalm 13 seem like just the way to think about these pandemic times. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Perhaps this is one association all of us can relate to in 2020...How long, O Lord, indeed?

It seems to me that the words of Psalm 13 also are a most appropriate guide for our Advent journeys – especially in this year. As we enter once again into this time of waiting, of preparation for God breaking into human history in the person of a child, this rich liturgical season calls us to think of the last things and instructs us to be patient, to hope for things to

come – and it is hard to be patient, to stay awake, to trust that God is in the midst of all that afflicts our lives – a virus, economic disruption, climate degradation, racial reckoning. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

And yet, as God’s faithful people, we believe that we must be patient to hope. The Psalmist leads us to that realization and writes that despite the lament that God has hidden God’s face from God’s people, there is still this conversation going on between God and God’s faithful people – “Consider and answer me,” the Psalmist writes. Ours is a God who engages us, who breaks into human history, who becomes one of us so that we might know God’s intentions for all of creation, who is the Word made flesh.

And in that sure confidence that God is with us, we join with the Psalmist in this powerful confession of faith: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” God is in our midst – in the midst of these pandemic times – calling us into conversation, into relationship again and again, so that we might be patient to hope for that salvation that is God’s promise to all of creation. I believe, Lord – help my unbelief.

I have been inspired to embrace this patience to hope by what may seem an unlikely source. Frederick Law Olmsted, who lived and worked in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a renowned landscape architect, who once wrote this simple sentence as his creed: “I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future.”

“I have all my life been considering distant effects.” For Olmsted, whose signature projects included Central Park in New York, Mount Royal Park in Montreal, and the National Mall in Washington, DC, this meant that he imagined what his designs and plans would look like decades after he executed them and long after he was gone from this earth. His patience to hope meant that his work was all about believing in things to come rather than fixating on what the current moment offered. He planted the seeds that years later created remarkable creations. Olmsted would have agreed with Martin Luther, who was purported to have said that “If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today!” Legend or not, Luther’s faith in things to come began not with his concerns for the moment, but with his patience to hope for God’s steadfast love and promise of life abundant.

As we consider the distant effects of God’s Advent promises that God is in our midst, redeeming our lives again and again, we too are called to the patience to hope and therein we find the strength and courage and wisdom to do God’s work now so that all creation will know of God’s gifts of faith and hope and love. In our witness, the human cry, “How long, O Lord?” is transformed into a proclamation of faith, “ I trusted in your steadfast love...”

And then we will know the important truth that patience is not passivity, sitting around waiting for someone else to do something. The patience to hope actually calls us out of ourselves and into the world so that we might be neighbors to each other. Our friend and spoken word artist,

Joe Davis, names this call to patience as action in his powerful creed for the Advent season entitled "The Advent of Hope," in these wonderful lines:

Hope happened then  
And hope will happen again

But before any adventure  
There is always an Advent

And so we wait:  
For patience is a process,  
And so we wait:  
For patience is a practice,  
And so we wait:  
For we were in the past, tense,  
But now we know to let go  
As the present has gifts.

And then we have the powerful words Tom sang in this morning's hymn, "All earth is hopeful," that ring out with a clarion call to action:

All earth is hopeful, the Savior comes at last!  
Furrows lie open for God's creative task:  
this, the labor of people who struggle to see  
how God's truth and justice set everybody free.

Mountains and valleys will have to be prepared;  
new highways opened new protocols declared.  
Almost here! God is nearing, in beauty and grace!  
All clear every gateway, in haste, come out in haste!

And that, for me, is what I'm focused on this Advent, in these pandemic times. What are the mountains and valleys to be prepared, the highways to be opened, the new protocols to be declared? How will God's truth and justice set everybody free? The patience to hope calls us ever more urgently into the work of watching for what God is doing in our midst – as God did two millennia ago in the stable in Bethlehem – love breaking into a weary world, then as now – so that we might embrace the distant effects of God's reign on earth, as it is in heaven, and get on with the work we are called to do as God's people, the body of Christ, in this time and place.

"How long, O Lord?" is our human lament. "But I trusted in your steadfast love...(and) I will sing to the Lord" is our faithful response to a God who loves us so much, so very much. Let us be patient to hope. Advent blessings. Amen.