

WHEN GOD SEEMS ABSENT
Psalm 69 (selected verses)

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Each time we gather for worship, there are people here who are buoyantly happy. Someone here today just found out she was selected for her dream job. There's a couple here who recently discovered they're having a baby. There's a man here who has reconciled with his son after a long period of estrangement. Every Sunday, people are here in a celebratory mood.

Each time we gather for worship, there are people here who are weighted down with burdens. Someone sitting near you just lost his job. Someone was told this past week, "I'm sorry, but I don't love you any more." A woman is here who, this past month, found a lump in her breast. Every Sunday, people are here desperately seeking consolation.

So what should the mood of worship be? Should we be singing "Joyful Joyful"? How do we plan worship that helps each person connect to God, knowing that our life circumstances vary so widely?

It's something I have thought about throughout my ministry. My first full-time position was as an associate minister in Waco, Texas. One night I was in charge of worship for a Wednesday night vespers service during the season of Lent. I remember the exact date. April 1. I planned the service around the theme of April Fools. My scripture text was from I Corinthians where Christians are asked to be "fools for Christ." I prepared a short message about how Christians shouldn't be so serious all the time, and that we should laugh more. I wrote, in my meditation for that night, "Wouldn't we encourage more people to the faith if we looked like we were having more fun?" I was

looking forward to a more whimsical service in the midst of the sometimes dour season of Lent. The first person to arrive in the small chapel where the service was held was a man who drove to the church directly from the doctor's office where he'd been told that he had a brain tumor.

I felt just terrible for him...for his diagnosis of course...and for the fact that he'd come to worship to receive comfort and I was talking about foolishness. If it happened today, I'd be more at ease with changing course spontaneously but I wasn't then. I bumbled through my planned presentation the best I could, trying to address his situation. I'm sure everyone in the room noticed the awkwardness.

Fast forward ten years or so. I'm the Associate Minister at Lakewood Congregational Church. Head Usher John Twitchell approaches me after worship. John was very dear and very outspoken. "Kelly," he said, "why is it that when you pray, you mention everyone's problems and not their joys? You talk about death and grief and illness but you don't thank God for good health or recovery or good relationships." It was an excellent point, and one I've thought of often since then. We tend to turn to God most frequently in times of great need, when we're feeling like we're at the end of our ropes...we don't as often thank God for the beauty and joy of ordinary, every day life.

Both experiences taught me something valuable. Every single worship service needs to nod in both directions, acknowledging that life is made up of comedy and tragedy, joy and sorrow. It's perhaps not the way we want our lives to be, but it is the way God has created life to be.

Here's how one writer puts it: "To be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. To want a life with only half of these things in it is to want half a life, shutting the

other half away where it will not interfere with one's bright fantasies of the way things ought to be." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

There are several psalms in the Bible known as lament psalms. They cry out to God with brutal honesty about the state of the world, about fear of enemies. They ask God the question, "Why? Why is this happening? Why are you allowing this to happen?" The writers of these psalms hold nothing back. They're not trying to be polite. They complain to God and about God, and often they say this. "Where are you, God? You seem to be far, far away."

Jesus quoted one of these psalms of lament when he was on the cross. He cried out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Words taken directly from Psalm 22.

If you read the memoirs of spiritual people throughout the ages, you'll read more lament. You'll read of mountaintop moments, spiritual highs, descriptions of people who are passionately in love with God, but you'll also read of what one writer called "the dark night of the soul", the experience of the absence of God. Mother Teresa, often called one of the greatest practitioners of the Christian faith in recent times, once said, "The silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

Maybe it's never happened to you, but I guarantee you it's happened to many people in this room today. There are times when we feel alone, as if God has abandoned us. Times when we try to pray and don't feel as if we're making a connection. Times when we open the Bible and none of the words speak to us. Or times when the world around us falls apart, when nothing seems to make sense.

What do we do in those times? Well, I'm an optimist by nature. I'm a huge fan of positive psychology; I believe that a positive attitude can make a tremendous difference in the way we cope and even in our physiology and our immune systems. But there are times when we need to let ourselves grieve and let ourselves lament, times when we need to walk in the valley, and live in the dark. Because while I'm a proponent of positive thinking, I'm a bigger proponent of honesty. Your spirit can't be fooled; you can't trick your soul into thinking that nothing's wrong when you're despairing. More importantly, you can't find your way to the light if you don't first adjust to the darkness.

Lament is an essential element of honest faith. There are times when we need to cry out to God about the pain of our own lives or about the injustice of the world. If we move too quickly to answers or explanations, we will find them shallow and unsatisfying.

The literature in the Bible is a literature of honesty. It describes relationships between people that are real, human, messy, imperfect, and dysfunctional. And it describes the relationships between people and God as being imperfect as well. God is faithful and present, but we are not always aware of God's presence. The stuff of human life gets in the way. When it happens to you, know that you're not alone. Know that it has happened to all of the spiritual masters of every generation. Know that it even happened to Jesus, when he cried out on the cross, "God, Father, why have you forsaken me?"

We shouldn't be afraid to share our every thought and emotion with God. God can take it. And after all, God already knows what we're thinking and feeling. Letting it out is therapeutic. It doesn't damage our relationship with God; in fact, it strengthens it. The more directly we communicate with God, the closer we become.

If we never cry out about the injustice of life, how will we have the passion necessary to address those injustices? If we always try to see the world through rose-colored glasses, aren't we, in essence, sweeping the world's problems under the rug? Expressing our sadness at poverty and prejudice energizes us to make a difference, to help create the beloved community God envisions and imagines and calls us towards.

When you study the psalms of lament, you notice an interesting pattern. First there's the outcry, the shaking of the fist at God in a way that almost seems blasphemous to us. Then there are questions, "Why, God? Why are things this way? Why is life so hard and so unfair?" And then, there is a turning, a gradual awareness that God is there, that God has been listening. And each one of these psalms ends with words of love and praise. But they're not cheap words; that moment of faith has been hard-fought and hard-won.

We have a God who is sometimes silent, but never absent. Even when we don't feel God's presence, God is here. The journey of faith is lifelong, and it sometimes feels as if most of the time we're stumbling in the dark. God's presence is found there, in the dark, in the silence, in the emptiness, and it always accompanies us back towards the light.

So keep praying, keep worshiping; find in the words of the Bible the echo of the cries of your own hearts, whether joyful or mournful. Our God's name is Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." Let us pray.

Dear God, help us learn to wait with patience. To walk in the dark, our eyes closed, unafraid. To hear you in silence. To know you in stillness. Amen.