

I

A few years ago, my wife Amy and our boys planned to drive from our home in Fort Worth, Texas, down to the Alabama Gulf Coast, a road trip that would cover 687 miles and carry us across portions of four states. We planned to leave about 6:30 a.m., but our youngest son, who was just an infant at the time, woke us up about 4:30 a.m., and so after we fed and changed him, we decided that since we were already up, we might as well go ahead and get on the road. We thought that the boys would drift back to sleep, and as we made our way through the predawn darkness, the streets were empty and quiet.

We had traveled precisely one of those 687 miles when I heard a small sleepy voice call out from the rear of the darkened van. And if you've ever been on a long trip with small children, I bet you know exactly what that little voice said. "Daddy, are we there yet? How much longer?"

II

How long will it take? How long will this last? When will we get there?

I think that generally, we are patient people, and we understand that sometimes, life just doesn't happen on our timetables. There's a traffic jam or a flight delay. There's a holdup in shipping, and our package will be later than promised.

But we've also become accustomed to having instant information at our fingertips about just

exactly how much longer. On a road trip, there are apps for our phone that can calculate an alternative route around the traffic jam and give us an updated time of arrival.

When there are flight delays, the airlines generally try to give us an estimated time of departure, and even if they just keep pushing back that estimated time, at least it gives us hope that we will eventually get to our destination.

These days, when we're expecting a package, we can get tracking information that is so detailed that it will show us how many more stops the driver must make before the package arrives at our doorstep.

We live in an age when the question, "How much longer?" is usually able to be answered accurately about a wide number of subjects.

But not every subject.

III

And that brings us to our text for this morning.

This summer, we will be preaching our way through the Book of Psalms. The word psalm literally means "praise," and the psalms functioned something like the hymnal and prayer book of our ancestors in faith. Just like the hymnals we use in our sanctuary, the psalms are a collection of songs, hymns, and prayers that were collected and edited over a long period of time. Just like the hymnals in our sanctuary, some

of the psalms are so familiar and beloved that generations of people have memorized them and taken them to heart. And just like the hymnals in our sanctuary, some are less familiar and require us to pay a little closer attention to their unique cadences and rhythms.

Most scholars agree that the psalms were originally set to music and sung, and there is a long history in our Reformed Presbyterian way of being the church of singing or chanting the psalms. And just like the hymns in our worship life today, some of the psalms were set in a major key to a stirring beat, and others were set in a minor key and more subdued.

It's been said that every emotion that we human beings are capable of feeling, from joy to rage, from peace to fear, from excitement to boredom, can be found expressed somewhere within the 150 psalms. So the psalms, in a way, are not only God's Word to us, but they're also our words to God.

The psalm before us today, Psalm 13, is considered to be a psalm of lament. In popular musical terms, we'd categorize this psalm as being part of a genre we call broadly, "the blues."

We don't know what specific event has transpired in the psalmist's life that brought on the blues, but we know that the psalmist is deeply troubled, and turns to God in fervent, honest prayer. So listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 13.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

*Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

*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.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We don't know what has happened to the psalmist, but can say with certainty that the psalmist is a person of deep, biblical faith. Because it's one thing to pray and to praise God when everything is going well. It's another thing to turn to God and to say, in Ryan's Revised translation, "Hey! Listen to me! I'm in trouble, and if you are who you say you are, I'm counting on you to answer me! It's not just my reputation that's on the line here – it's yours, too."

This is not a timid prayer of someone tiptoeing around the throne of God. This is the prayer of someone who has enough invested in the relationship

with God to be able to say, “Something is very wrong here, God, and I need you to listen to me.”

And you no doubt noticed that apparently, God did answer, God did move, God did act. Because by the end, the psalmist is back to praising God again. “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.”

Apparently, somewhere, between the end of verse four and the beginning of verse five, something happened. Somewhere, in that empty space between those two verses, God answered, God moved, God acted, and the crisis, whatever it was, was resolved.

But we don’t know how much space to leave between verse four and five. We don’t know how long it was between the end of the psalmist’s petition and the beginning of God’s restoration.

#### IV

And I don’t know about you, my friend, but that blank space, that space between the psalmist’s petition and God’s movement, is where I tend to live most of my life these days. That empty space between the end of the lament and the beginning of God’s saving action can sometimes seem very, very large. Sometimes, that empty space feels especially unbounded, undefined, wide open. And that can be an uncomfortable

place to find oneself, there in the space between verses.

And maybe you’re finding yourself there too, in the blank space between verses four and five this day.

Perhaps you’ve been praying, How long will this pandemic last, O Lord? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Perhaps you’ve been praying, How long can my savings last before I find work again? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Perhaps you’ve been praying, How long must I endure this chronic pain in my body? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Perhaps you’ve been praying, How long will I be estranged from the one that I love? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Maybe you’re praying, How long will I grieve the one that I have loved and lost? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Maybe you’re praying, How long must I be confronted with race and injustice? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Maybe you’re praying, How long until I no longer fear the future? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long? How long? How long?

And the truth is, my friend, I don't know. I wish I had an app on my phone that could instantly give you an updated time of arrival. I wish I had a web site where I could go to tell you how many more stops there are before the goods are delivered. I wish there was a big signboard I could put out in front of the church with an up to the minute answer to the question, "How long, O Lord."

But there's no such app, or Web site, or signboard. The reality that the psalmist knew, and that we know, is that we find ourselves most of the time living in the undefined, unbounded, uncomfortable space between verses four and five of Psalm 13.

And perhaps some might say it's foolish to even bother to pray. Some might say we should find more productive, constructive uses of our time. Some might even suggest that we're being unfaithful or disrespectful or even bordering on blasphemous to keep pestering the almighty, sovereign God with our incessant questions, "How long." Some might say that we must be careful, lest God bark back at us, "We'll get there when we get there, now quit asking!"

But I for one am grateful for the witness of Psalm 13, and even for the uncomfortable blank space between verses four and five. Because it affirms that the God of scripture is big enough and sovereign enough and gracious enough to handle all of our questions, even when they're asked directly and

without prologue or pretense. The psalmist testifies to us that bringing our laments and pain and questions to the throne of God in prayer is an act of deep biblical faith.

The very fact that Psalm 13 was included in the collection of the psalms testifies to the theological truth that the act of apostasy, the act of betrayal of the faith, would be to stop praying – to just turn our backs and just walk away altogether.

The psalmist testifies to us that we are meant to have an intimate relationship with God, which means that yes, God is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, infinite and immortal and far beyond our human imaginations, but also the God who so listens to our petitions and laments and troubles, and who is moved to answer them. Psalm 13 joins with the entirety of Scripture in testifying to us that God so desires to be known by us, who so desires to be in relationship with us, that God was willing to take on human flesh and live among us as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we rightly call the Christ, who himself prayed in the garden, "How long, O Lord?"

## V

I've been thinking about us quite a bit these days, thinking about the nature of our life together as sisters and brothers in Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. In one way or another, I've been involved in some form of leadership in a faith community for over 20 years now, and I cannot

recall a time in that has been more challenging for leaders of faith communities.

I sense that our church is asking, “How long, O Lord? How long until we can meet together in person, until we can sing together again in our sanctuary, until we can break bread together again in our fellowship hall, until we can share our building with our community again? How long until all of the unrest and division in our nation, our state, our community, and even within our own congregations begins to abate? How long, O Lord? Consider and answer us, O Lord our God!

I wish I had a specific answer. I wish there was an app for that.

But I know two things for certain. First, the only way out is through. The only way forward is to take things one day at a time, to put one foot in front of the other, to keep praying and praying and praying and praying and then praying again some more.

And second, I know that God is faithful and good and just and mighty and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I know that ours is a God who wants to hear from us, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And I know that the empty space between verses four and five doesn't last forever.

I know and trust and believe that because of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that even as we sit in the empty space between verses four and five, the day will come when our laments

will turn again into praises, when we will be able to join our hearts with the psalmist as we sing, But we trusted in your steadfast love; our hearts shall rejoice in your salvation. We will sing to the Lord, because God has dealt bountifully with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.