

God is Good
Psalm 77
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I

At our house, when we sit down for dinner, we usually invite one of our three young sons to say the blessing. Usually, the blessing goes something like this: God is great, and God is good, so let us thank God for our food. By God's hands we all our fed, so give us Lord our daily bread. Amen.

It's a prayer that gets said and repeated so often that to be honest, oftentimes I don't really think about the words. It's a simple prayer that even very young children can easily recite. God is great. God is good.

II

But of course, when you stop and think about it, that's not just a prayer, it's a central claim of people of faith. And at mealtimes or maybe when we're not really thinking about it, those words just roll off our tongues. God is great. God is good.

But there's another reality of which we are all acutely aware of in these difficult days. God is great, and God is good, but sometimes, life is not. Sometimes, life is downright hard.

And that paradox leads us to wrestle with some tough questions.

If God is so great, and God is so good, then why does this pandemic continue to tear through our nation, touching every single one of our lives in both big and small ways?

If God is so great, and God is so good, then why do friends and neighbors and families seem so eager these days to rip apart the bonds of fellowship at a moment's notice?

Let's be honest. There are lots of moments in life that God doesn't *feel* great or good.

God doesn't *feel* great in the middle of divorce proceedings.

God doesn't *feel* great when a child you've poured yourself into and prayed over and loved deeply and fiercely rejects your love and wanders off to the far country.

God doesn't *feel* great when you scrimp and you save and you struggle and you toil to make the ends meet, and when you come to the end of the month, there's more month than money.

God doesn't *feel* great when grief after grief after grief piles up one on top of another.

God is great. God is good. But what do we do when life is not? Where do we turn when God seems silent in the face of it all?

III

That's the question with which the psalmist wrestles in our text for this morning. This summer we've been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, and as we've said all along, the Psalms aren't a book at all in the traditional sense, but rather they're an anthology, a collection of poems and prayers and hymns that were collected over a very long period of time, and then brought together into the 150 psalms that stand at the center of our bibles today. They are the prayer book and the hymnal of our ancestors in faith. And so today we turn our attention to Psalm 77, as the psalmist wrestles with grief, memory, and hope. So now I invite you to listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 77.

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me.

In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.

You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago.

I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit:

"Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?

Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time?

Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"

And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.

I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?

You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among your peoples.

With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled.

The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook.

Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.

You led your people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

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

It's been said that every human emotion can be found expressed within the 150 psalms in the bible. And certainly, there are psalms that speak to those mountaintop experiences, those times when we stand in awe of the majesty and the goodness of God.

But this isn't one of those psalms. This is a psalm that speaks of time spent in the valley, when life is not great, when life is not good, and God seems absent, or even silent. One of the things I love about the psalms is that they pull no punches. We don't know the name of the particular valley that the psalmist is in, but the psalmist is awake day and night and wrestling with some deep, honest questions.

Will the Lord spurn forever? Has God's steadfast love ceased forever? Are God's promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?

These are not the prayers of someone about to sit down to dinner. These are the heartfelt prayers of someone deep in the valley, someone who is feeling pain, anxiety, fear, and grief.

In most Psalms of lament, the psalmist expresses some need to God, some particular complaint or lament. God responds to the complaint, and the psalmist often closes by once again singing God's praises and giving thanks for God's faithfulness.

But here's the thing about Psalm 77. We don't know if God ever acts on the psalmist's petition, or if God even hears it. For all we know, the psalmist remains in the deepest of valleys, and the very troubling questions that the psalmist raises go unaddressed.

But nevertheless, there is a dramatic shift in tone right in the middle of the psalm. In fact, it's such an abrupt key change that the second half of the psalm almost seems like an entirely different piece of music. So what happened?

Because by the end of the psalm, it's not clear whether the external circumstances of the psalmist have changed one iota. For all we know, the psalmist is still deep in the valley. But the focal point of the psalmist's mind and spirit has shifted, and that makes all the difference.

In the middle of the steepest of valleys, even when God seems silent or even absent, the psalmist turns to holy remembering. "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds."

Specifically, the psalmist turns to the pivotal story of the entire Hebrew Bible - the story of the Exodus - the time when God's people were trapped between an onrushing army and the deep Red Sea, when they were moments from slaughter, with no way out, but God reached out and made a hole in the water.

This holy remembering isn't escapism or nostalgia or hoping for better days in the sweet bye and bye. This is an act of bold, biblical faith, to call out from the valley, to lay it all on the line before the throne of God, and then, while awaiting God's restoration and redemption, to intentionally bring to mind the powerful ways in which God has made a way where there was no way.

Holy remembering enables the psalmist, even in the midst of pain, and anxiety, and fear, and chaos, to pray with bold confidence, God is great, God is good, even when life is not.

IV

We really had a beautiful and glorious spring here in Georgia, and for a few weeks, the front flower beds of our house were full of beautiful lilies. But I noticed something as they were growing taller day by day – they weren't growing straight up like a tree. Instead, they all developed a lean – a lean toward the afternoon sun. They all oriented themselves toward the source of energy, for which the scientific term is heliotropic.

I am convinced, my friend, that you and I are heliotropic, too, on an emotional and spiritual level. What I mean by that is that we tend to orient our minds and spirits toward the most powerful sources of energy. But of course, we know that energy can be either positively nor negatively charged - like the positive and negative terminals on a battery.

I don't know about you, my friend, but my world seems like it's oriented around negative energy these days. And I don't know about you, but over the last four months,

I've noticed that the amount of time I spend reading the news and scrolling through social media accounts has risen dramatically, while the amount of quality time I've been able to spend in the presence of real live human beings has decreased dramatically. And I can feel my spirit and my mind being drawn to all that negatively charged energy.

But the psalmist made a decision – “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.”

Perhaps the Apostle Paul had Psalm 77 in mind when he was writing to his friends in Philippi from the pit of prison. He had no idea when, if ever, he might be released from that pit. But he instructed his friends in faith, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about *these* things.”

And so I wonder, my friend. What have you been focusing upon these days? What have you been meditating upon? Is your spirit and mind being drawn to negative energy? I'm not saying that you shouldn't pay attention to what's going on in the world, that you should shut your eyes and plug your ears. But I wonder, how does your consumption of news and engagement with social media compare with your engagement with prayer and meditation on God's Word? Are there some adjustments to that ratio that might be worth considering? The practice of holy remembering can bring comfort in the midst the steepest of valleys

V

Families and communities and churches and nations are made up of humans, and so families and communities and churches and even nations are heliotropic, too. I submit to you, my friends, that in many respects, the First Presbyterian Church of Athens is not only an organization, it's an organism – a living, breathing thing that orients itself and responds to energy.

This year marks our bicentennial, our 200th year of mission and ministry in this city. And it's an understatement to say that this year has not gone according to plan. And it would be easy for our church to focus and orient ourselves around negative energy.

But even though this has been a year of great upheaval and change, this church has shown remarkable agility, improvisation, and grace.

Our highly-trained Stephen Ministers continue to provide much needed care and compassion for those who find themselves in steep valleys.

Just this week, our children's ministry mobilized and the children of this church made beautiful handmade get well cards for a dear friend who has been ill.

Just this week, our youth and the adults who love them engaged in a virtual service learning trip where they learned about homelessness, hunger, education, and mercy, and then they met in person to chalk-bomb the local food banks this week, writing words of encouragement and prayer and creating works of art on the sidewalks to offer Christ's comfort and love to our community.

Over the last month, our church has received countless expressions of thanks from our community for the beautiful interactive prayer station on the Hancock side of the building, and even more expressions of thanks have come in this week as our incredibly talented staff found a creative way to extend that ministry through a week of e-mails and social media posts.

Over the last month, the women and men whom you have elected and whom God has called through the voice of the congregation to lead the church have been engaging in continuing education and vital conversations with each other about race and its impact on our church and our community.

And so while we long for the day when we can be together in this room again, while we wait for God's redemption, let us call to mind the deeds of the Lord. Let us practice holy remembering – remembering who and whose we are – remembering that ours is a God who, when we were trapped between Pharaoh's chariots and the deep Red sea, opened a hole in the water and led us through on dry land. Let us remember that ours is a God who so loves us, who so wants to be with us, that God became one of us and lived among us in human flesh, full of grace and truth in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we rightly call the Christ, the Messiah.

While we wait for God's redemption, let us focus our minds and spirits on that which is true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable, on that which is excellent and worthy of praise.

Because God is great. And God is good. Even when life is not.

Thanks be to God. Amen.