

On Friday evening, I had the opportunity to sit about here and have a conversation with a really awesome group of seven high schoolers who are taking part in our baptism exploration class. Our subject on Friday was the Bible, what its purpose is, and how we interpret it.

As part of that, we tried to shoe-horned a semester-long Bible survey class into an hour. So I pulled out this thing. I don't know how old this "bookshelf" is, but Char Stoltzfus says it's been around since at least the time that she began working with children in the late 1970s, so maybe 40 years or more. Who knows, it might have even come with us from our days as a church at Bethany! If anyone knows the history, I'd love to hear it.

Now one of the things that's cool about it is that each of the 39 books of the Old Testament is represented by one of these boards. They're color-coordinated for the books of the law, the books that recounted history, the major prophets, and the minor prophets. And by the way, the difference between the major prophets and the minor prophets is not so much about importance – it's really about length. They could just as easily be called the "long-winded prophets" and the "cut-to-the-chase prophets!" In the class, I talked through the sections and correlated them to our banner for when they were written and what times they describe.

But this summer, we are looking at the pink books. Starting next Sunday, Ron will lead us through several Sundays where we'll be looking at a book a Sunday – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs.

This is our third Sunday with the big fat board, the Psalms. As Ron introduced us to them a couple weeks, he named how there are 150 of them. You can imagine that with 150 of anything, our tendency is to try to find a way to group them (kind of like we do with the books of the Bible). And, as the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes, "of the making many books there is no end." And as I sat in the AMBS library over the last few years, I know

what the Preacher was talking about. Quite frankly, “of the making of books about the *Psalms* there seems to be no end.”

In all of those books, you’ll find about as many ways to group the psalms as there are books about the Psalms. We have been using a model by Walter Brueggeman, where he largely groups them into psalms of orientation; psalms of disorientation; and psalms of reorientation, or better, new orientation.

Another scholar uses the terms of “hymns, laments, and thanksgiving psalms.” Hymns were composed for times when all is well. They are songs for those trouble-free times in life, times when life is well ordered, well oriented. Ron preached about those two weeks ago. The psalm that Loanne photographed and wrote for us was another hymn, a psalm of orientation.

But life is not always experienced as well ordered or well oriented. “Disorientation” better describes life at times. The laments were written for situations such as these. Psalm 13, which Cindy preached and Veronica shared so passionately last week, is a classic psalm of lament. “Lament psalms can be ... among the most disturbing passages of the Bible, until you actually encounter crisis, and then they can become the most comforting and helpful.”<sup>1</sup>

Lament psalms are where we have been given permission to yell at God with all of the anger and violence we can muster. But it’s important to remember that in the psalms we don’t have violent *acts*, only violent speech. Now – we have all heard the phrase that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And we know that’s wrong. That’s because words spoken in violence against another *are indeed* acts of violence. In the lament psalms, the psalms of disorientation, this is violent speech directed to God! God’s skin is thicker than ours. God can handle it. The lament psalms are addressed to God.

But the time hopefully comes, however, when we look back at those troublesome days and say to God words like what Ron just said, “You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy” (Ps 30:11 NLT).

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<sup>1</sup> Broyles, C. C. (2008). Lament, Psalms Of. In T. Longman III & P. Enns (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (p. 394). Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press.

When we think of hymns and psalms of thanksgiving, they may sound similar. We sometimes use the words interchangeably. But there is a significant difference. Hymns, or psalms of orientation, give praise to God *for who God is*. “Psalms of thanksgiving [or psalms of new orientation] give thanks to God because of what God has **done**. “God has responded to a specific request for help, which leads to giving thanks to celebrate God’s deliverance.”

There’s a common flow to many of these psalms of new orientation. The order can vary, but there is a declaration of intent to give thanks, usually followed by an account of the distress and the way God has brought deliverance. There is often a statement directed to others that Yahweh was the one who brought deliverance. Then the psalm might end with further affirmations of thanksgiving or exhortations for others to give thanks.”<sup>2</sup>

So let’s look at Psalm 30 with that background. If you have your Bible, turn to Psalm 30 and we’ll walk through it together. In verses 1-3, the psalmist praises God for being healed. This could be metaphorical, but with how the references to healing keep coming back, it’s likely referring to physical illness or even a near-death experience.

Specifically, in verse 1, the psalmist says “you did not let my foes rejoice over me.” It doesn’t identify who these enemies are, but perhaps it’s those who hang around people in difficulty and “rejoice” over these people’s downfall. It’s those who, like Job’s friends, say that the writer’s illness is the appropriate punishment for some kind of sin.

Verse 3 says that “you have brought up my soul from Sheol.” Sheol isn’t not “hell” the way that we have come to associate hell with a place of punishment. This is a righteous person speaking. Rather “Sheol” or the “Pit” refer to the place of the dead.

In verses 4 and 5, the psalmist invites others to join in praise. That’s an indication that the setting of this psalm is likely temple worship. The saints are called to “sing” or “play music” and “give thanks to” Yahweh’s name. The call to praise flows from a belief that God’s final word is never lament. God’s final word is never suffering for his faithful ones,

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<sup>2</sup> Belcher, R. P., Jr. (2008). Thanksgiving, Psalms Of. In T. Longman III & P. Enns (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (p. 805). Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press.

but rather it is deliverance. “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

In the rest of the psalm, then, we hear the changing mental and emotional processes that accompany the psalmist’s downfall and deliverance. In other psalms, we don’t often find such a clear and linear description of the circumstances behind lament and thanksgiving. That is what makes Psalm 30 such a good psalm to think about the move from disorientation to new orientation.

In verse 6, the psalmist names his only wrongdoing, this almost naïve sense of safety and security that he has. There are other places in the psalms where an author says that he will not be moved or not be shaken, but in those cases he will not be shaken because of God. In Psalm 55:22, for example, we read that we should cast our burdens upon the Lord and that God will sustain us, because he will never permit the righteous to be moved. Psalm 21:7 says that the king trusts in the Lord and “through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.”

By comparison, here the psalmist says, “I said in *my* prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved.’” It’s a question of perspective, and it makes all the difference.

But from this false position of security, the psalmist is thrown into some kind of personal distress. “You hid your face,” “why do you hide yourself,” “why do you stand far off,” are common complaints to God in cries for help, both in the psalms and elsewhere. In Psalm 27, the author pleads “Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger... Do not cast me off, do not forsake me.”

Then in verses 8-10 we hear the psalmist’s cry for help. “What good will it do, God, if I go down to the Pit?” “What good will it do, God, if I am separated from you in death?” “If my only gain for you, God, if the only way you actually profit from my existence is to give you praise, what good will it do for me to die?” “Will the dust praise you?” “Be gracious to me!” It sounds a bit like Job, asking questions of God and demanding an answer.

But, finally. Finally, in verses 11 and 12, the psalmist completes the circle.

- He completes the circle by recognizing, like the preacher in Ecclesiastes 3, that there is a time to mourn, but that God also provides a time to dance.
- He completes the circle by recognizing, like Job and so many others, that there is a time to clothe ourselves in sackcloth, but that God also clothes us with joy.
- He completes the circle he began in verse 4, by suggesting that his soul cannot be silent, that it must praise God and give thanks to God forever.
- He completes the circle from disorientation to a new orientation. ***“For that, my God,” he says, “For that I will give thanks to you forever.”*** Life will never longer be the same, thanks to this new orientation he has been given.

My hunch is that most of us can easily recognize those times of deepest disorientation that we have felt. Now often, the disorientation has been visible, and those around us can see it in our lives. For me, it’s easy to identify one of those times. We’re in the process of moving from one house to another, and so I’ve been packing a few boxes. I’m finally getting rid of some of the stuff that’s been stacked on our bedroom floor for most of the past 14 years.

Recently as I packed, I came across some notes that I’d written to myself for sharing time back in May of 2004. (That I don’t throw away such things is one of the reasons why there has been stuff on our bedroom floor for most of the past 14 years!) But I remember that day in 2004 clearly -- I was standing about where \_\_\_\_\_ is sitting.

On that day, I shared with the congregation, and I reflected back on the birth of our oldest son exactly 11 years earlier. And I reflected on the day exactly 10 years earlier on his first birthday when that son was diagnosed with this thing that I knew nothing about -- cerebral palsy.

And I talked about how I had spent that first year of Tony’s life praying that he would be “healed,” that he would be “normal.” But I also talked about how I had come to realize that *I* was the one in need of healing, about how I had come to realize that the way we are each created “normal” is with our various perfections and imperfections. Without these glasses, I feel blind as a bat. Don’t ask me what time it shows on the clock back there – I can barely even see the clock, let alone the hands. But that blindness, that

physical limitation, is not what defines me. What defines me is that I am created as a beloved child of God.

This is Father's Day. I have said many times since then that while the expectations I had of what it would be like to be a father didn't turn out quite the way I had imagined or even hoped, I also don't want to go back to being the person I was 23 years ago. That experience gave me a new orientation toward fatherhood, and more importantly, toward God. And in the way that people here responded, I would even say it gave me a new orientation toward this church.

***For that, my God, for that I will give thanks to you forever.***

I can think of other times of disorientation as well. I could take you to Goshen College, to the basement of Coffman Hall, and walk you to the spot where I was when I got the call that one of my best friends had had a blood vessel burst in his brain. When I do a hospital visit at Elkhart General, I can walk you to the place I was when the nurse told us that he had died. More than 10 years later, I still miss Jamie dearly. But experiencing God's grace through that experience of grief and loss gave me a new orientation. It gave me a new orientation toward call, and it played a role in my move toward ministry.

***For that, my God, for that I will give thanks to you forever.***

I know that many of us have experienced these very visible kinds of disorientation – death, divorce, job loss, and more. But often the disorientation is not visible to those around us. The disorientation of many things is invisible. This is Father's Day, a possible day of disorientation for those households struggling with infertility. There is the disorientation of mental illness, a broken relationship, a marriage strained by the presence of pornography or abuse, the disorientation of a painful experience at work.

I remember one of those invisible times of disorientation that I experienced a dozen or so years ago, when I couldn't come up with the words to say to God. All I could do was hit the repeat button on the CD player and play a prayer song over and over and over again. A year or so ago, a combination of stuff that was happening in my personal life and some stuff that happened here at church combined to make it the most challenging time of disorientation that I have ever experienced in ministry. Pastors are human too, after all.

But feeling nowhere to go, I began reading the psalms – particularly seeking the psalms of lament. Now many, in fact almost all of the psalms of disorientation end by at least making the turn toward a new orientation. Ironically, the psalm that was able to pray me through that disorientation was the one that Cindy preached last week – Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord? How long must I bear the pain in my soul?... Consider and answer me, O Lord! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death.”

In the Bible that I was using, the page ended there. But when I turned the page, I read these words that helped to start that turn towards a new orientation: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. [And so,] I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.” And I thought about all those times over the years, those times when I *wanted* to cry out to God, and those times when I actually let myself do it. And I reminded myself that if God had been faithful in those times, almost always in ways that I could not imagine, that God would be faithful again.

***For that, my God, for that I will give thanks to you forever.***

Now, this sermon needs some caveats. Life has powerful stuff. Disorientation and new orientation are powerful things. And when those around us are experiencing disorientation and reorientation, we have the potential to do things that aren't so helpful. I would be remiss if I didn't name some of these. As Cindy named last week, it is difficult for many of us to acknowledge that we are in disorientation. It is difficult for us to slow down our lives to the point where we can recognize the disorientation. We want to get past the disorientation as fast as we can. And in the same way that we don't like to acknowledge that we are disoriented, we don't like to see it in others. And so we say, “Oh, you'll get over it,” and we try to push people toward reorientation when they are not yet ready. That's not necessarily a helpful thing. In many ways, the most helpful thing that Job's friends did when they came to him was to simply sit there in silence. As Safwat Marzouk reminded us when he was here during Soul Food Wednesday, Job wasn't in need of a theologian; Job was in need of a friend.

Cindy also named our tendency to say, “at least...” and to compare our laments to each other. It's not helpful to look at disorientation, either for ourselves or for another, and say, “Well, at least it's not as bad as such-and-such.” Or just as bad, when someone is experiencing disorientation, it's not helpful to point out to them how our experience has been worse.

And in the same way, it's not helpful to use some measure for the depth of our disorientation for the measure of our reorientation. It's not helpful to say, "well my disorientation was worse than yours, so my reorientation must be bigger as well."

And finally, it's often not helpful to turn to that verse that is simultaneously one of the most helpful and least helpful verses in the Bible – Romans 8:28. In the examples that I shared from my own life, I have begun to understand how "all things work together for good for those who love God." But in the midst of those experiences, those were NOT words that I needed or wanted to hear. I did NOT need to hear a message that what I was experiencing was a gift that would make me stronger; that there was a blessing in this for me; that there was a method to God's madness. That is not a helpful thing to do to another.

This morning, as we conclude our time with the Psalms, we as a pastoral team would like to offer a time for response. Often when we invite a response, we are recognizing the disorientation that is present in our lives. Or we might offer anointing for the way that God has been at work in our lives. But when we do that, we sometimes make the assumption that we are all at the same point in our lives, and that's not reality.

Two weeks ago, Ron spoke of orientation. Last week, Cindy spoke of disorientation. And this morning, I spoke of new orientation. All are appropriate times for communicating with God.

In your bulletins this morning is a blank sheet of paper. We will have a few moments of silence. If you have a prayer of orientation, of disorientation, of new orientation, I invite you to write that prayer and to bring it forward to the cross. These prayers won't be read by anyone.

In addition, Velma, and Cindy and I will be available at the front of the sanctuary for a time of anointing. If you would care to come, we will offer a prayer with and for you. Perhaps you have been experiencing a time of disorientation in your life, for which you lament. Or perhaps you have experienced a time of being reoriented to God's faithfulness, for which you are thankful. You may choose to name a specific thing for which you would like anointing. Or, you may simply say "orientation," or

“disorientation,” or “new orientation,” and we will pray with you. And we will be available after the service if you would like to talk further.

After a few moments of silence, we will move to those places and Anne will play quietly, and we will conclude our time with our song of response, which will be that prayer that I played over and over and over again. It will be No. 71 in the green Sing the Journey book, so you may want to turn to that now. Let’s spend some time in silence, and then I invite you to bring prayers forward or to come to one of us.