

Service of Remembrance

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Nov. 4, 2018 – PM Sermon

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Psalm 13

We don't know what personal event led the Psalmist to write Psalm 13; it could have been persecution, it could have been sickness, it could have been loss of a loved one. Whatever it was, verse 2 suggests to me that this personal event involved lots of grief. The first two lines of verse 2 show us that this poet is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. *"How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?"* That's the question of a grieving person. How long will this grief persist Lord? Is it ever going to go away? Do I have to carry this sorrow for the rest of my life? The psalmist understands the persistence of grief.

When you are young, you don't understand the persistence of grief. You think that loss and grief must be something like a bad cut. When you get a bad cut how does it go? At first there's real trauma: blood, pain and tears. Then you go to the hospital and they clean you out and stitch you up. If the cut is bad, it can hurt for quite a while. You are constantly aware of its presence. But, as the old saying goes, time heals all wounds, and so the cut eventually heals and you don't even feel it. A lot of the time, even for a deep gash, you barely see the scar! You're back to normal! You're as good as new! When you are a child, before you've experienced a deep loss of a central person in your life, you figure that's how it must go with grief. It hurts for a while, it brings groans and tears, but then time heals it and you're fine, back to normal! Good as new!

The psalmist knows better. Grief does not heal like a cut. Grief persists. It doesn't persist in the same shape - it changes its shape over time - but it never leaves. When you first lose your loved one, grief is sharp and piercing. As time goes by, most of the time it settles into a dull and persistent ache, like background noise, only in your emotions. But even then, in certain situations, this dull ache can form itself into a great wave and swamp you.

James Cook was a professor of New Testament at Western Seminary back in the 80's and 90's. In 1980 his son Paul was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, and aggressive form of bone cancer. Professor Cook walked with his son through his fight with cancer for two painful years until Paul died in 1982. Five years later Jim Cook published a wonderful article in Perspectives magazine in which he shared his experience of pain and loss. Even after five years he described the way his grief could still swamp him. Here's a quote: *"The loss, the emptiness, the separation [you feel at the beginning of your grief] will subside to a dull ache you learn to live with. But that dull ache will be painfully interrupted now and again as you stumble, at unexpected moments, into little ambushes of grief."* Cook talks about walking down the street and seeing a car go by that was the same make and model as the one his son drove. Grief swamps him. It's an ambush. He talks about walking through an airport and walking by a departure gate for a plane going to Rochester, Minnesota, where his son was treated at the Mayo clinic. Just those words – Rochester, Minnesota – and grief swamps him. It's an ambush. *"How long O Lord must I wrestle with my thoughts, and have sorrow in my heart."* Grief persists.

Sometimes grief persists in a way that feels like it's winning, like it's triumphing over you. Sherman Alexie is a writer and a poet. He has a poem called "Grief calls us to the things of this world." In that poem reflects on the persistence of his own grief in the loss of his father. He tells the story of a time he was in a hotel room a full year after his Dad's death, and reflexively

he picked up the phone, called home, and when his Mom answered, he asked for his dad. His Mom had to remind him that dad was gone. Alexie apologizes for his mistake, but his Mom says, “Don’t worry about it. The other day I made him his usual cup of instant coffee in the morning. I left it on the counter. I only realized what I’d done later that afternoon.” Alexie is not a Christian and he ends his poem bitterly, comparing grief to dark angels who torment you all the way to death,

[those angels] slap our souls with their cold wings.

Those angels burden and unbalance us.

Those ... angels ride us piggyback.

Those angels, forever falling, snare us

And haul us, prey and praying, into dust.

That’s the poem of an unbeliever, but Alexie’s words aren’t all that different from the Psalmist’s cry in verse 3. “*Look on me and answer O my God! Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death!*” Give me joy! Don’t let grief haul me down to the dust. If all we had was the first 4 verses of Psalm 13, it would be an ancient version of Sherman Alexie’s poem. At the end of verse 4, the poet seems to be completely out of gas. At the end of verse 4 the poet talks as though grief is winning. He pictures the enemy standing over him and gloating.

But the poem does not end at verse 4. Out of nowhere, out of the depths of the Psalmist’s fear and grief, like a kind of miracle, like a resurrection, comes verses 5 and 6. “*But I trust in your unfailing love! My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise for he has been good to me.*” Where does this hope come from? Is his grief gone? Has the loss been taken care of? No, I think the grief and pain are still there. Verses 5 and 6 are the Psalmist committing himself to sing and praise and love, even while the tears are on his face and the ache is in his heart. Verses 5 and 6 are the Psalmist holding up his fist in the face of his grief and saying, “*Grief, you will not define me. Lord, my life will be defined by your steadfast love and your salvation.*” When you put it all together, Psalm 13 suggests a shape for our grief. It begins with Honesty. You acknowledge that you’re in pain and you confront God with that pain: “Look on me and answer! Do something!” But then, in the middle of your pain and loss, there’s a determination not to let that loss define you. A determination to live out of the steadfast love of God. A determination to stand in the middle of your loss and still love and praise and sing.

Not only is this the shape of the Psalmist’s grief in Psalm 13, it’s also the shape of Jesus’ grief on the cross. On the cross, Jesus’ approach to grief is much like the psalmist. He acknowledges his pain and he confronts God with it: “*I thirst!*” “*My God, My God why have you forsaken me!?*” That’s like verses 1-4 of the psalm. On the cross Jesus is frank and honest about his pain. But then in the middle of the pain, there is an even deeper determination to love. Jesus’ grief and pain do not define him. He may be crucified and in pain, but Jesus does and says loving things: “*Woman behold your son; son behold your Mother.*” “*Truly I say to you: today you will be with me in paradise.*” “*Father forgive them; they don’t know what they are doing.*” That’s like verse 5 and 6 of the psalm. Jesus has the grief of the world is on his shoulders, but he doesn’t live out of that grief; in the middle of his pain he blesses, he loves.

Let me be clear: as we watch how Jesus deals with his grief on the cross, we are not just getting an example of how we might carry our griefs; we are being rescued from our griefs. Jesus didn't just come to show us how to love in the middle of our loss, he came to save us when we can't find the strength to love even though we know we should. He descends into the depth of human grief to save all of us who sink down into the depths of grief and can't find our way back to the light.

As I think of Jesus loving from the cross and the Psalmist singing in the middle of his grief, I think of the prayer service for Olivia Haverkamp, held two weeks ago at Eastern Avenue. Olivia is a beautiful, talented 17-year-old girl from Grand Rapids Christian High School who is dying of cancer. The prayer service took place the day after she announced that she would stop treatment and go into hospice. I didn't go to the service, but I know a number of LaGrave members who did. The place was full of people, young and old. The people prayed. Their prayers were honest. They pleaded for rescue, they asked for a miracle, they asked God why this had to be. After the lament, they celebrated communion, and the pastor there announced that as people came forward for communion, they were welcome to sing a song as the Spirit moved them. As the people came forward there was silence at first, but then someone started to sing "When Peace like a River." *"When Peace Like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say: It is well, it is well with my soul."* They sang the whole thing a cappella, without the words printed out, without a hymnal. They sang it, as they say, completely by heart. And if one person forgot a line and lost the words for a moment, if someone was too overcome with grief to sing, the rest of community brought them back on track, helped them remember the words, and helped them to keep going. Which is what all good communities do. That service is a picture of Psalm 13. A whole group of people in deep grief, but refusing to be defined by that grief. A whole group of people who begin by crying out, *"Answer us O Lord. Give light to our eyes or we will sleep in death!"* But who end by saying, "We trust your unfailing love Lord, and whatever our lot, we will sing.

Thanks be to God for the sacrifice of his Son. Thanks be to God for his presence and his promises in the middle of our grief. Thanks be to God for the resurrection hope we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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