

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 15 Year C
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Oddly, somehow, we as humans seem hard-wired to believe what some may call the prosperity gospel – the belief that if we are faithful to God, then God will smile upon us and we will receive God's blessings of wealth, happiness, and good fortune. There seems to be a basic equation going on here – we please God and God pleases us. One could trace that theology back to Abraham to whom God promised if you are obedient to me, if you follow me into the promised land, then I will bless you and your barren wife with offspring more numerous than the stars in the heavens or the grains of sand in the desert.

The problem with this theology is that it implies that when the opposite is true, when we are not blessed with wealth, happiness or good fortune, it means that God has chosen not to bestow these gifts upon us because we have done something wrong. God has turned God's face away from us and the only explanation can be that we must have turned our face away from God, unknowingly or not. Our course of action can take two routes: 1) we can repent of the sins we are unaware of but feel certain we must have committed if God's blessings are absent, or 2) we can remind God of God's covenant with us, for clearly we are keeping our part of the bargain but God is not.

Our psalmist writes to us today from Babylon, where he has been exiled from his homeland, from the physicality of the location of God within the Jerusalem temple. For as often as he could manage a pilgrimage to this holy site, which contained the ark of the covenant, the real presence of God, for as often as his heart would lift from his chest when we saw the temple from afar, for as often as he automatically, without hesitation, removed the shoes so he could set what he knew were his unworthy feet upon this holy ground, he yearned for this presence of God he knew he would encounter when he entered the carved and adorned door to the temple. Whenever he was there, he felt at peace, he felt at home. God was there and God was good. And God blessed him with a good life.

Now he finds himself in what seems like millions of miles away, in a foreign country, and he is certain God was not here. He struggles each day to continue his prayers, to lean into the hope that he would return to his beloved city, but he is here against his will. He is oppressed. He is under captivity. His access to his God has been denied. So it was time to remind God that indeed God had made a covenant with him and the Jewish people and it was time for God to live into that covenant by bringing them home and restoring them to the place of prosperity.

This was only way he could think about this situation: before the exile, he believed that if he pleased God by being obedient, God would please him by offering him a life of prosperity. So now that all fell apart, in terms of his prosperity of wealth,

happiness, and good fortune, the only way he could make it better was to implore God to hold up God's part of the bargain and to offer him again a life of prosperity, wealth and good fortune, for he had not become unfaithful. He had kept his part of the equation, now God better keep God's part.

It's a strong and powerful psalm we have today. It's a lament psalm, which means, it addresses God, recounts God's powerful deeds, lists the psalmist's complaints against God, expresses a trust that God will make this better, and then offers thanksgiving for God's actions.

The psalm also draws us into a pattern the Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, identifies in this and other psalms, that of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. I agree with Bruggeman that this is the pattern of faithful living with God, for the ancient Jewish people and for us. It is what dispels the myth of the prosperity gospel. Our faithfulness does not guarantee a lifetime of wealth, happiness, and good fortune. Our faithfulness instead guarantees a lifetime of growth and change, which follows the pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. If our life is a mess, it does not mean that God is absent or displeased with us; it merely means that in the messiness of our life, in these moments of disorientation, in those moments when nothing makes sense to us, in those moments when we can so easily plummet into despair, in those moments when our whole world seems turned upside down, we are provided with the invitation from God to move into a place of reorientation: that place of new beginnings, of new perspective, of transformation. God has not given us the hard stuff to deal with because we have somehow been unfaithful, but God is in the hard stuff always inviting us into a new way of being. This is how the resurrection is made manifest in our lives.

There is a huge amount of energy in each of the stages Bruggeman offers. When we are in a place of orientation, when our worldview matches our reality, when what we have always believed to be true seems to line up with what we see before us, we want this situation to stay forever. It's comfortable, easy, and there's energy about keeping it that way. It is inherent in the phrase, whether it's in church or home life, "we've always done it that way". We know what to expect and we like it that way and we don't want to change it.

But then life happens. It can be something that we deem to be bad or unwanted: tragedy, illness, death, infidelity, loss of some kind~ and we're thrown into a brand new place. Disorientation.

Disorientation is really hard. It's uncomfortable. It makes our heart hurt. It shakes our beliefs to the core. All that we have believed had been true is suddenly not. It's what the psalmist wrote about and it's what we experience in life over and over again, if we're honest with ourselves. The prosperity gospel tells us all these things are bad, and yet the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that in each of these moments,

resurrection is possible. And that's the difference between what the psalmist experienced: if it's bad, it must mean God is absent and needs to be reminded to pay attention and us, as Christians, who will say, if we are disoriented, if we are experiencing something that appears and feels very bad, then God is present and is inviting us into something new. This is a huge distinction. Reorientation, not the previous state of orientation, follows disorientation in the Christian faith

So the energy in the disorientation phase is often toward what in the past. We often refer to this time (the previous orientation) as the golden age, when things were great, even if in reality it wasn't, because it was a time that was known and comfortable to us.

I see this dynamic in the women I counsel through Women In Need – the disorientation happens when they begin to feel that flicker of hope that this isn't how their life needs to be, but then the energy of the abusive system can consume them and convince them that their previous orientation wasn't all that bad: they had sometime paying the bills, they could get their children to school, they had a house to live in.

It's true too, don't you think, for the church. We are living in a time of disorientation, when others tell us the mainline denominations are declining, that attendance is down, membership is fragile, and mission is evaporating. I don't see it happening here, but for some this is their place of disorientation. They don't know how we got here from the "golden age" of church, when we remember church was great, when crowds flooded in on a Sunday morning, there were no sports on Sunday morning and the blue laws were in place so we couldn't even be distracted with shopping on Sunday. Things were great – or at least they appeared to be. But for those of us who remember these times accurately, we also know this was a time when the church was very inward looking, when we chose not to be involved in the civil rights movement of the day, when we allowed clergy misconduct to be rampant, when we cared more about church buildings than being the church in our neighborhoods. I'm not sure that was so great. But that was our orientation that the church was strong, growing, and the center of people's lives. There are many of us who want to go back to that time, when church was the center of people's lives and the only thing imaginable on Sunday morning was to be in church. We can expend a great deal of energy going back to a place that perhaps never was and certainly will never be again.

The energy to keep us in our current worldview is strong. The energy to move us out of disorientation back to the worldview we remember or imagine is perhaps even stronger. But, let me tell you, the energy to move into reorientation is stronger than you can imagine, because it's not our energy we're using to move into the new place or understanding, it's Jesus' power. For that's what Jesus is all about. Jesus lives with us in the place of disorientation. This is fertile ground for Jesus to work in. Our disorientation, whether we are called into this uncomfortable place through grief, loss, anger, betrayal or misfortune, can be for us a place of release, cleansing,

or refreshment into what really matters in our lives. This can be the holiest place in which we could ever reside. It can be a time for growing up spiritually, for looking with new eyes, for opening our hearts and souls to new expressions of God, for a renewed commitment to follow the Holy Spirit.

This is a faithful rhythm of life: orientation, disorientation, and then reorientation. If your goal is to always stay in the same orientation of life, my suggestion is that you may not be fully and completely living; if you stay in disorientation, you may not be seeing the new life possible in the midst of your messiness, and if you embrace the reorientation made possible for you by Christ, then you know it will always be unfolding for you.

So let's imagine the psalmist is one of those who makes the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem, after the Persian King Cyrus conquers Babylon and sets the Jews free. I bet he is filled with gratitude and awe that God has indeed kept God's part of the covenant and filled him with prosperity, but suddenly that prosperity looks different than a life of wealth and good fortune. It looks like a life filled with gratitude. May that be for us also, for that is the good news of Christ. In the midst of disorientation, we may find a life of gratitude that turns us always toward what is emerging of God within us.

Amen.