

WHERE IS GOD WHEN THE WATERS RAGE?

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer

***Based on Psalm 10:1; Psalm 13:1–6; Psalm 69:1–3; Psalm 89:8–9;
Psalm 46:1–3, 10–11***

The sermon this morning is the second in a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” We began the series last week by looking at one of the opening stories of the Bible which is a story of a journey through a storm—the story of Noah and his family journeying on the ark through the waters of the flood. We noted from that story three key messages about how to journey well through any sort of storm in life.

First, *put your faith in God*. It was only by the power and guidance of God and Noah and his family came out of trouble into a bright future. Secondly, *get on the boat*, and we noted how the ark has become a symbol of the community of faith—how we can journey together, sustained by God, through the various storms of life. Finally, *keep on in faith*, even when you can see little progress for good. The journey on the ark was a long one, as many days passed with nothing happening, but the journey in this regard is a picture of perseverance in faith.

As this sermon series progresses, we will find these themes recurring, and we will also return to other Biblical stories which literally took place on boats in the midst of storms; but of course the image of passing through stormy waters applies quite broadly to life. In one of the Psalms we heard this morning, the Psalmist says, “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me” (Psalm 69:1–2) We don’t know what specific circumstance the Psalmist was describing here, but we can likely identify with the basic situation. We may find ourselves in various times in life when we are up to our neck in troubles. This morning we will look at what the Psalms in the Bible tell us about how to journey in faith when, as the passage says, we are in deep waters and the flood is sweeping over us. Let us begin with a moment of prayer. . .

When we confront great trouble in life, we often respond by asking “Why?” We ask this about troubles that we see in the world at large. When devastating floods hit, as they did recently in Louisiana or a couple months ago in West Virginia, or when massive earthquakes strike, as they just did in Italy, we look at the destruction and ask, “Where is God in all this?” Or when we are hit with some personal crisis, we may ask God, “Why is this happening?” This sort of question comes out in the Psalms, as in Psalm 10, which begins, “Why, O Lord, do You stand far off? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1)

Faced with this question, people often respond by trying to offer some sort of *explanation* for why God allows trouble and seems at times absent from view. One of the most common explanations when trouble comes, which people have offered through the centuries, is that God has sent the trouble to punish people for their sins. When, for example, an earthquake devastated Haiti a few years ago, Pat Robertson said it was punishment for the sins of Haiti’s past. But if that is so, then you have to wonder why God doesn’t send a really big earthquake to swallow up the Islamic State. Trying to explain suffering as

punishment never makes much sense; because then you have to ask why some of the worst people in the world don't get hit with more disasters, or why some good people have so much trouble. So another explanation is to take the responsibility off of God and blame Satan for all the trouble. When a tsunami struck Indonesia a few years ago, Franklin Graham said it was the work of Satan. But this just kicks the theological can down the road and leaves you asking why God would allow a demonic figure the ability to cause such trouble. So some people simply throw up their hands and say that all this trouble proves there is no God. But that fails to explain why people feel there is some sort of issue here in the first place. If we are just material creatures who developed by chance out of an amoral universe, then it should not bother us when people far away are obliterated by natural disasters. And yet we are deeply concerned for them, we have a moral consciousness about it all, and we have an innate sense there that is a good God above everything—all of which points us to the reality of God, and brings us back to the question of the Psalmist, "Why, O Lord, do You stand far off? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1)

When people have attempted to explain why God allows trouble, there have been a lot of bad explanations offered through the years. At the same time there have been some very good and helpful theological reflections about why a good God would allow trouble, in world in which God also allows human beings genuine freedom and the ability to encounter real challenges. We will return to some of those concepts about how to understand trouble in future installments of this sermon series. But what is especially notable in the Scriptures is that, in response to the question, "Why?" the Bible makes no attempt to offer any sort of explanation. In fact, when the Psalmist asks the question, "Why, O Lord, do You stand far off and hide Yourself in times of trouble?" or the related question of "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1), the Psalmist is not really looking for an explanation. The Psalmist is looking for an action—some sort of response from God. When, like the Psalmist, you are "sinking in deep mire," [*I sink in deep mire . . .*] Psalm 69:2] you don't need an explanation for why you are sinking in deep mire. You need someone to take your hand and pull you out of the mire! This brings us to the heart of the Psalms that we are considering this morning.

When faced with trouble, the Psalms do not look for explanations; they look for God. The Psalmist reaches for the hand of God; and this movement toward God out of the midst of trouble is especially expressed in what we now call "Psalms of Lament." We heard a classic example of this in Psalm 13, the one that began, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1) When you are feeling low, a "Psalm of Lament" may not sound like a very happy place to turn. But in fact these psalms are a tremendous resource, because the writers of the psalms, like us, hit real troubles in life; like us they had experiences when no answer seemed to be coming for a very long time, so that they cried out, "How long, O Lord?"—and out of the midst of all that, these psalms outline the way that we can journey through a storm. The Psalms of Lament put forth five basic steps to take whenever you find yourself in rough seas.

The first step is to *look to God*. The Psalmist addresses God. How often do people remain hopelessly stuck in trouble because they do not look to God? The first crucial step when you are sinking in deep water is to realize you need a Savior. We need to look to the Lord.

The second step in a Psalm of Lament is *complaint*. This is a perhaps surprising but also refreshing aspect of the Psalms of Lament. So often in the church we tend to think we need to put on a pious face before God. But the writers of the Psalms do not hesitate to yell at God, bellyache, and complain. When the Psalmist says, “How long, O Lord,” or when the Psalmist says, “Why, O Lord, do You stand far off?” these are not philosophical questions; these are complaints! And in Psalm 13 the complaint goes on, “How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long.” (Psalm 13:2) The Psalmist is real and honest before God and just lays it all out. Notice that there is, in all this, an implicit belief that God cares, and that we can relate personally and openly to God. So we are encouraged to come with all our feelings and our pains and our concerns into the presence of God.

The third step is *petition*—the Psalmist appeals to God for help. “Come and answer me, O Lord my God!” says Psalm 13 (Psalm 13:3); or in Psalm 10 the Psalmist would say, “Rise up, O Lord; lift up Your hand.” (Psalm 10:12). The process of asking is the process also of opening ourselves to what God will do. So Jesus would later say, “Ask, and it will be given you, seek, and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened unto you.” (Matthew 7:7)

The fourth step, which accompanies asking God for help, is *trust*. In Psalm 13 the Psalmist says, “I have trusted in Your steadfast love.” (Psalm 13:5) This trust is grounded in the conviction that in spite of all the storms that may rage around us, it is God who reigns above everything. So the Psalmist said, “You, O Lord, rule the raging of the sea.” (Psalm 89:9) Psalm 46 summed up the trust we can have in God in these words: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change . . . though its waters roar and foam . . . The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” (Psalm 46:1-3,7)

Finally, the fifth step outlined in the psalms of lament is *commitment*. The Psalmist vows to praise and serve God. So Psalm 13 concludes, “I will sing to the Lord” (Psalm 13:6), Psalm 69 says, “I will magnify God with thanksgiving” (Psalm 69:30), or another Psalm of Lament, Psalm 143, concludes, “I am Your servant.” (Psalm 143:12) God in the view of the Psalms is no Santa Claus—one to whom we look to drop nice gifts from on high. God is one which whom we can be in relationship. We come to God in our pain and our need, we open ourselves to God’s saving help, and we offer ourselves to God, to continue to journey with God and to share in God’s purposes.

All these themes are encapsulated in a profound way in the sacrament of Communion. In Communion we remember how God right now is reaching to us in Jesus Christ, bringing not explanations for suffering but bringing God’s grace and saving help. In Communion we look to God, we open our hearts to God, we seek the touch of God’s blessing, we trust in God, and we commit ourselves to God. Communion is an experience of the

uplifting presence of God.

Where then is God when the waters rage? God is with us; and so we can say with the Psalmist, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”