



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Praying In The Vortex"

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Let me begin with a question. Have you ever been in a lot of pain and never admitted it?

When I was about 17 years old a girl came by to visit me. All afternoon I was Mr. Joe cool trying to impress her with my charm. The afternoon was great *until* I walked her to her car to say goodbye. I opened the door like a gentleman. She got in and sat down. And then I closed the door...*on my thumb!*

Pain shot through my body and Mr. Cool of course never said a word. I just silenced the pain and smiled at her as she drove off never knowing a thing.

Over the years I played that scenario out more than a few times, not just with physical pain, but also with deep, emotional and soulful pain.

In fact, I have met a lot of Christians who do the very same thing. They stuff their pain and suffer silently and remain alone in their agony. As you can imagine, *this is not* what God has in mind when it comes to suffering and living into the Christian life.

Today we are continuing in our new series on prayer and I want to talk specifically about praying in a way that is real, raw, and effective in expressing and getting through our deep soulful pain.

I'm going to use the book of Psalms as our guide this morning. The psalms are filled with an assortment of songs and prayers that are all about living with God in what I call "The Vortex".

Do you know what a vortex is? (Sounds like some kind of fabric for ski suits.) A vortex is what is created when various streams of water or air come together and create some kind of whirlpool. It's created by forces that want to go in opposite directions...like when your tub drains. Gravity and weight want to pull the water down the drain, but the air in the pipes wants to push upward through the hole in the drain. And these opposing forces creates that churning "whirlpool" you see.

Sometimes, perhaps often, our lives resemble this kind of convergence of opposing "forces" that want to go in different directions even as Christians.

It would be nice if life were *like this* (a serene picture of someone sitting in front of a calm mountain lake). No swirling, no opposing forces—just peace. We may get to experience this once in a while, but I think we all know this is but a brief stop.

It is brief because the reality of life is like a vortex between our pain and God's promises; a vortex

between joy and sorrow; a vortex between praise and lament. And because this is reality our faith, our hope, and our prayer life must be based in and expressed with such a reality in mind.

This is why I want to delve into the book of Psalms today. The psalms are all about living with God in the vortex. One type of psalm in particular that helps us pray well in the vortex are what some scholars call, "Psalms of Disorientation" (also known as lament and imprecatory psalms).

One researcher says that 40% of the psalms are infused with words and expressions of disorientation. So it was a very common way to pray and sing as a follower of God in the ancient world.

Disorientation psalms are those prayers of raw expression. They are words of people who find their once smooth circumstances in life and their clear doctrines of God suddenly or painfully altered. And they are left feeling devastated, alienated, fearful, and even traumatized.

Often we read in these psalms about physical, emotional, spiritual and even socio-political trauma. But there is also another kind of trauma that is created in the vortex of life.

call it theological trauma. It happens when we experience something traumatizing in our lives and now our vision of God is questioned, our trust in Him has met a new challenge, and our nice airtight theology is now blown up in pieces. You'll see what I mean as we read this first psalm.

Psalm 6: *²Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony. (You can just hear the physical and emotional trauma, can't you?), ³my soul also is struck with terror, while You, O Lord—how long?*

Not only do you hear the emotional trauma, but you also hear the frustration and wrestling with disappointment toward God. "Are you going to be there for me God? Lord, where are you?" How many of *us* have been there at those moments?

What I really appreciate here is the awkwardness of the grammar in verse 3. The sentence itself is incomplete and twisted with discomfort: "*My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord... how long?*" Sometimes real, raw, honest prayer is ineloquent. It just stumbles out of our mouth. In the ineloquence of this psalm you can just hear the theological trauma in his words. And that is how we can pray as well, with ineloquence, if that is where we're at.

Then he goes on later in verse 6 and 7: *⁶I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. ⁷my eyes grow weak with sorrow...*" (Remember that *this is a guy* talking like this, so he must have been in a lot of pain).

How do you imagine such words and emotions are stated? Like a mechanical computer voice? Like Siri? "I'm worn out from

groaning?, etc." No way. There would be way more emotion than that. So how would *you say*, "I'm worn out from groaning?" "My soul is struck with terror"? Do you feel free as a Christian to express such deep and honest pain?

Here's the thing about this prayer: this person's pain is real; it cannot be denied. It has led to real despair and distress and fear. But in letting his doubts and fears be *bluntly* expressed to God something happens in the process.

Read on in verse 9: "*The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.*"

At first blush we think, how does verses 2 through 7 jive with verse 9? One minute, "God where are you?" And then next minute, super confident God has heard his cries. Again, you have these two things going in opposite directions just like a vortex. Notice how the writer can't deny his agony, but he also can't deny his God. That's what it is like to live in the Vortex.

Don't we all live there now and then in that torn, ambivalent place? Somewhere between doubt and faith? Somewhere between our pain and God's promises?

Now to be honest, not all of us do well with strong, negative and sorrowful feelings. Sometimes, with some folks, strong negative feelings freak them out. And that is often because we ourselves don't know how to express them well, and/or we don't know how to process them with others and with God. So as a result, normal things like anger, sorrow, grief, fear, frustration and anguish end up hidden, downplayed or even silenced. But here is the thing, if we end up trying to deny these very important and normal aspects

of being human it can leave us with *more pain*, not less.

A woman I knew several years ago came home with three friends from her Bible study only to discover her home had been robbed. As you can imagine this woman went through a gamut of emotions: shock, outrage, fear, and anger, and she started to express all that.

As her Christian friends heard and saw such feelings arise they immediately became uncomfortable in light of such seemingly "un-Christian" expressions. And so they swooped right in with a lesson in theology. They quickly told her, "You just gotta forgive and move on." This frustrated my friend greatly. Their theology had no place for real or raw emotions, so they quickly tried to silence such emotions.

Ever have that happen to you by well meaning Christians?

Look, in reality difficult and devastating things happen: Robbery happens, harm happens, sickness happens, fear happens. And to pray as if the world is so wonderful in the midst of a personal or communal disaster is ludicrous and downright hurtful.

It's a fact that a heart shut down to pain and honest disappointment, will make healing and change all the more difficult to experience. The way to peace, healing, and joy is not simply by being spiritually perky and denying reality, but it is in coming to terms with our real grief, our real pain, and even our real anger at God.

And this is where the psalms of disorientation come in to help us. They free us to pray and sing from the reality of our souls.

Now I can't really blame these friends for being so uncomfortable with intense, negative emotions. The American church is not exactly a great place to learn how to be comfortable with expressions of lament, sorrow, and disorientation. For example, as I said before, even though 40% of the psalms constitute disorientation, such proportions have not found their way into our American way of worship.

According to Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), the entity who licenses the use of contemporary worship songs for local churches and who also tracks which ones are employed by local churches, they report this: In 2012 of the top 100 worship songs used, *only five* of the songs would qualify as a lament. I looked up the top 100 songs used in 2016 and I counted possibly four. What's going on there? You may think these are meaningless statistics but I think it has real ramifications.

A number of years ago I had a friend named Arthur. As a young man he had an accident that left him a paraplegic. Nonetheless, he eventually married a great gal and they lived as best they could.

Then one day he found out he had cancer. In the last days of his life while I sat with him, he would rock back and forth in his bed, in great pain and say, "Steve, I'm ready to die." Every time pain shot through his body he would just resolutely say, "I'm ready Jesus. Just take me, Lord. I'm ready Jesus." It was a tremendously courageous thing to witness.

After a little while a small church group came into his home to sing some songs for Arthur. They were not just any songs, but real cheery songs (e.g., "I saw the light, I saw the light, no more darkness, no

more night. Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight, praise the Lord, I saw the light."). While they sang such "cheery" sentiments, Arthur looked tortured. I thought to myself, "Are you kidding me? In a situation like this you are saying, 'Now I'm so happy...no sorrow in sight...?!'"

Yet when they finished, he was gracious and thanked them for coming. But I have to admit I was furious. To be honest, I wanted to smash their guitar into a thousand pieces. You see, five minutes before they came in there, Arthur was coughing up blood in a napkin. But do you think they knew that? If they just took five seconds to actually ask of Arthur, "What do *you* need? How can we be with you in this time of pain?" If they could only simply be with real pain and the reality of dying, then they would have brought *God's best* to this man in his suffering. But unfortunately their "worship" had no room for sadness, sorrow, grief, or death.

In light of such heartbreaking stories and statistics, let me take us into a more visceral, more earthy, more primal expression of prayer in the book of psalms. Prayers that are laced with what I would call "unguarded speech."

Let me read what is arguably the most pain-filled psalm and prayer of them all. It is in Psalm 88. "*O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before You. ²may my prayer come before You; turn Your ear to my cry.*"

These are very typical expressions in psalms of disorientation. But from here on out it gets a little raw!

³*for my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.*
⁴*I am counted among those who*

go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength.

⁵*I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, who are cut off from Your care.*

Now guess whom he puts as responsible for all this misery? Notice in the next set of verses the use of the pronouns "You" and "Your".

⁶*You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. ⁷Your wrath lies heavily upon me; You have overwhelmed me with all Your waves.*

⁸*You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; ⁹my eyes are dim with grief. I call to You, o Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to You...*

¹³*but I cry to You for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before You. ¹⁴why, O Lord, do You reject me and hide Your face from me?*

¹⁵*from my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered Your terrors and am in despair.*

¹⁶*Your wrath has swept over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. ¹⁷all day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.*

And just when you think he couldn't get more depressing, he says this: ¹⁸*You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; and my closest friend is darkness.*

No cheery or hope-filled ending here just darkness.

That may sound depressing to you, but over the years I have seen it as a reality for all kinds of folks. My question is, do you feel free to pray with such raw honesty? If not, why not? Because, after all, God can handle it. Moreover, if some person in *your* small group prayed like this how would *you* respond? Would you “cheer them up”? Or could you join them there with prayer in the darkness?

Now sometimes our deep pain can lead to real desires for real vengeance. Let’s look at Psalm 58. In Psalm 58:6-10 we see a man who calls out to God to do something about the wicked and the ungodly (I nickname it the “Tony Soprano prayer”).

“O God, break the teeth in their mouths... (that sounds so Jersey) ⁷let them vanish like water that runs away; like grass let them be trodden down and wither, ⁸let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime; like the still born child that never sees the sun.

And last but not least, ¹⁰*the righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.”*

Can someone use a little Anger Management? Again I ask, “Are you free to pray this way? I remember teaching a class on the Psalms and one of my students said, “I could never pray that. That sounds terrible.” Do you feel that you couldn’t pray like that either? And what would our response be in the face of such heartless and cruel sentiments? Would we jump in here with a “righteous panic” and say, “Calm down. You just gotta forgive and move on”?

We may think Christians should not use these psalms to pray because Christians ought *not* to feel

that way. Okay, I agree. No Christian should ever be bloodthirsty like this. But what should we do if in fact we *do* feel this way?

Should we deny it? Hide it? Pretend we are okay? Perhaps it is best to actually *name it* and *give it over* to God. Which is what I think is exactly happening in these vengeance-filled disorientation psalms. They know it is God’s to avenge and so they put all that hurt and hate into the hands of God, which is a really *healthy* place for our hatreds to go. It is a powerful and godly thing to *entrust* your deepest hatreds to God, knowing that they will be taken seriously.

I know this Psalm assails and defies everything Christian in our theology, but let me just make a couple of points about why even such nasty prayers are important to life as a Christian.

First, to bring some relief, when we pray like this, it does *not* mean God answers such prayers. It’s not like we pray this and then God just jumps up and grabs a baseball bat and starts breaking teeth. God doesn’t just jump to vengeance just because someone in pain asked Him to do so. So relax, God knows exactly how to handle even the nastiest of prayers.

Furthermore, remember that God is the greatest psychologist in the Universe. He knows best what can heal us and change us, and sometimes unguarded speech is part of the journey to such ends.

This may sound really odd, and please understand my heart when I say this, but when I counsel people who are really bust up inside, and they finally start to use cuss words to express themselves, I am completely comfortable with it.

In fact, I’m almost glad they are doing it. I’m glad because such unguarded speech with a pastor tells me that we are really getting *deep into* the pain and struggles of this person’s life and so now the road to healing can begin.

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t encourage it or join it, but I let it happen and I try to validate the pain below such hostile words. I think by doing that I help them to put such expressions right where it needs to be, into the hands and ears of God.

You see folks, hiddenness and repression *cannot* create hope. Even Sigmund Freud (who was an atheist) realized this and said, “The abandonment of pretense is a prerequisite to new joy.” That’s what we want to do in our prayers and in our prayers for others.

My brothers and sisters if we don’t learn how to pray authentically, then we move away from biblical community and move toward becoming like dysfunctional families. I say that because it’s only in dysfunctional relationships where silence about trauma and pain is maintained.

As one wise Old Testament theologian wrote: “The first condition of healing is to give voice to pain.” (Kathleen O’Connor). *That’s why* those psalms are there, because God wants us to heal, and in order to heal He knows we have to give voice to pain.

I sometimes think that the reason so many of us Christians feel stuck in our negative attitude, anxiety, and soul pain is because we have not found often enough a person or a community of persons who can handle such adult unguarded speech.

So again, these raw prayers are important because they help us give voice to pain and put us on the road toward healing, growth, and change.

Another reason these psalms are helpful is because as Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says, “All serious theology begins in pain.” Why does he say this? Because things like pain, doubt, and fear create questions we may have never considered before. They sometimes motivate seeking where we had once been complacent. They can also open a heart to things towards which, we may have become numb. In other words, pain, etc., opens our eyes to the realities of suffering in our world.

You see if we lose the ability to lament well in our own lives we may become callous to the suffering of others in our community and our world. For me, the Psalms of Lament help us to stop and reflect deeply on pain in our world (even if I, personally, am not going through such pain), and it can motivate us to action we would not normally take.

I think part of the reason we may never personally pray like Psalm 58 or Psalm 88 might be because we have never seen a Psalm 58 world or have never walked down a Psalm 88 street.

In the last church I pastored I used to take folks on missions trips to Thailand where I used to be a missionary. But they didn’t get the tourist tour, where you get to ride elephants and all that. They got the “Darkness Tour”.

I did this because I was discipling these Christians to live as Christ lived and to serve as Christ served. And to do that I knew they needed to see what Christ sees, to

smell what He smells, to feel what He feels, 24 hours a day in the dark places. Having lived in Thailand for four years I knew the places of Psalm 58 and Psalm 88.

So I took one team through this one area world famous for its prostitution and human trafficking. On the surface, you think you just entered Mardi Gras. Everyone is in a “party” mood, laughter and blinking lights everywhere, etc. But there was more going on than meets the eye.

So as we walked down the street these folks saw things they never saw before: things like young girls and young boys being bought and used for pleasure by a bunch of older guys. They saw people in the image of God treated with such terrible degradation.

And by the time we walked just two blocks no one could speak, but *their faces* spoke. They spoke shock, horror, anger, and sorrow—all the things we said about the prayers of disorientation. After the initial shock of it all, my then 17-year-old daughter cried inconsolably for 40 straight minutes.

That’s what can happen when you finally see a world where Psalm 88 and Psalm 58, with all their rage, despair, and darkness, is very real. You begin to understand how one wants to pray for God to smash someone’s teeth.

Now some of you might think, how did that help anyone? It just tortured those poor people. Let me tell you the rest of that story.

All that sorrow and rage that evening turned into mission later on. You see, three of the four folks who walked with me that day, including my daughter, eventually ended up in Thailand as

missionaries helping those trapped in human trafficking and in other forms of human brutality. Although they raged in the beginning—in the end, there was no rage, no praying for the breaking of teeth, just compassion and the love of Jesus influencing the places of darkness.

That’s what can happen when we put our rage and sorrow in the hands and ears of the Almighty God, and when we become familiar with and adept in the way of praying the prayers of the vortex.

I guess much of what I shared today can be summed up in the words of the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis, “Lay before God what is in us, not what *ought* to be in us.” This is exactly what you see in these disorientation prayers.

So let me invite you to come to God in prayer today just as you are. Let us put away all the pretentious piety and all the things we *ought* to say as a Christian, and simply come to God in all honesty and surrender. Come to Him as one on a journey between your pain and His promises.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com