

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Alarming Psalms”
2nd in the series The Spirituality of the Psalms
inspired by Brueggemann
Psalm 13
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Your alarm goes off. It's the start of another day. You get up and start the same routine you've been doing. In fact, you probably don't even have to think about it do you? There's a pattern to your morning that starts a pattern to your day that has become the pattern of your life.

Depending on who you are and what responsibilities you have that pattern may look different than the person sitting next to you. My pattern is probably different from yours and yours is probably different than your neighbors. But you have your pattern, your way of going about this life.

You've put the pieces of your life together in a particular way that shapes what is “ordinary” for you. Maybe you were very conscious about that.

More likely, it just kind of happened over time, right? Routine. Responsibilities. Choices here and there... and now you have this framework that's shaping your life.

There is some order to it all. Something that grounds it all. Something that undergirds the way you are living this life of yours...

You may be able to name it. You may not. But it's there nonetheless.

So your alarm goes off... and another 24-hour period begins.

Maybe you get ready for school.

Maybe you rush off to work.

Maybe you sit down to make the grocery list.

Maybe you methodically work your way through the Post-Dispatch.

I don't know what it is for you. But there is some order there.

And behind that order... there are certain things you've settled. Things you've nailed down about your life... at least about this season of life:

- I'm going to do this, and not that.
- These are my people... not them.
- Here are my questions... the things I'm not sure about.
- And here are my answers... the things I am sure about.

Those are all there. Ordering your life in a particular way.

And if you're connected to the church, if your life is rooted in following Jesus, then that shapes certain things for you too. It can still be different from one person to the next, but there is something about following Jesus, about this life of faith, that orients you in a particular way. Doesn't it?

It shapes some of your fundamental values.
It guides you in the decisions you make.
It defines the rhythm of your week... maybe the rhythm of your day... with particular spiritual practices.

You have a particular orientation to life because of the life of faith that you're living.

Last week we talked about how there are psalms of orientation. Psalms that give us this fundamental orientation that we need. An orientation that says God is the creator and life-giver. God is the foundation of this world. God's goodness is at work around us... An orientation that looks a lot like Jesus: healing, loving, making us whole.

And this is what we believe and trust about God. And it's important that we, as a church, we are giving that orientation to our children... and offering that orientation to one another. We are followers of Jesus.

Like Jesus, we are committed to loving God with our whole life.

Like Jesus, we are committed to loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Like Jesus, we are committed to participating in the "Kingdom of God"

...God's surprising way of healing, and wholeness, and reconciliation... and shalom for this world.

We are followers of Jesus. This is our orientation.

This is our spirituality... and it's embodied in the psalms of orientation.

But then... one day... your alarm goes off... and your life doesn't make sense anymore. The routine. The order. The trust. The words.

None of it makes sense to you anymore. In fact... you can't do it anymore.

And maybe that has been brewing in you for a long time. Like an unsettled stomach that eventually gives you heart burn. You wake up and there is a burning in your gut... It's been brewing for a while. There's a longing in you that you can't ignore anymore.

Maybe the questions have been plaguing you for too long.

Or maybe it came on all of a sudden, like you're driving your car and a massive semi sideswipes you out of nowhere... Or at least that's how it felt when it happened:

- Out of nowhere, you're hit with the diagnosis: Boom!
- Out of nowhere, you're hit with what is really going on with your child: Boom!
- Out of nowhere, there is this death.
- Out of nowhere, your finances change.
- Your friends change.
- Your world changes.
- There is a collision. Boom! There is wreckage.

It can happen in all kinds of ways... but when it does... something profoundly disorienting is breaking into your world... and everything starts cracking apart.

What worked before, what made sense to you before... is thrown into profound question... doubt.

It's like the big event we're all looking forward to tomorrow. What was once so clear... is being eclipsed... Maybe it came on gradually... maybe suddenly... but the totality of that eclipse can be profoundly disorienting. Because this isn't an eclipse you expected or were prepared for. And it lasts a lot longer than a few minutes.

It's an eclipse of your soul... and you didn't bring glasses to wear. You didn't calendar it into your week. It's just there... and you're not sure what happened to the sun... And the longer it's there, the more you wonder if you'll ever see the sun again.

There is profound disorientation. And so the alarm goes off... like it always has... but now... now you're not sure what to do. [pause]

This is what we hear... what we find... in what Brueggemann calls the psalms of disorientation. In fact, he even calls them "psalms of darkness." And you can hear the darkness, the eclipse of the soul, in Psalm 13 that we heard earlier:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? [there is an eclipse there]
How long must I bear pain in my soul?...
Consider me and answer me, O Lord.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death..."

It's just a few lines of the hundreds of lines in the psalms that express a profound disorientation in life. And just as much as we need the psalms of orientation (of joy and praise that we talked about last week), we need these psalms of disorientation... because this eclipse of the soul is a real part of any active spirituality.

The temptation, of course, is to avoid all this... especially in the life of a church. We don't like not having the answers. We don't like having cracks in our beliefs. And so there is a temptation to only emphasize the spirituality of orientation that we talked about last week.

Barbra Brown Taylor describes this as "full solar spirituality" She points to verses like 1 John 1:5, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." and has noticed how verses like that can inadvertently lead to a spirituality that denies darkness. A spirituality that insists on always focusing on the sunny side of faith.

You tend to recognize that sort of spirituality at work in churches that emphasize the benefits of faith... benefits like: "a sure sense of God's presence, certainty of belief, divine guidance in all things, and reliable answers to prayer."¹ Which of course... sounds wonderful. Who wouldn't want that? Sign me up!

The problem comes when the darkness starts to move across the sun... and the only one to blame for all that disorientation must be.... you... your lack of prayer... your lack of faith.

"If you just pray more..." you'll hear.

¹ Barbra Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 7.

“If you just believe...”

And of course it is offered in genuine love. I know because I’ve been in those churches. There is an honest sincerity about it that is good and holy. But it’s fundamentally missing the spirituality of darkness that is woven throughout the Old and New Testament... and prominent in the psalms.

Being in the light of God is good, and wonderful, and a grace, and so needed... but full sun all the time... will inevitably leave you with a burn that hurts to the touch.

Brueggemann says that as important as the psalms of orientation are... all those psalms that emphasize God’s goodness, and power, and control... they also have a dark side.

If we only stay there... we end up basking in our own well being and neglecting the needs of others. In fact, they become a kind of social control. They are used to maintain the status quo.

Because you see, your “good and ordered” universe can become somebody else’s “disordered chaos.”

Your blessing and well being... may just be coming at the cost of somebody else’s suffering.

We see this in all kinds of ways... like when white Christians in America, like myself, have assumed that “racism isn’t much of a problem in our country anymore, because we’re past that” ... blocking out or discrediting the cries of disorientation from our African-American brothers and sisters.

Your “good and ordered” universe might be somebody else’s “disordered chaos.” Like when straight Christians, like myself... have been unwilling to at least listen to the stories and struggles of Christians with a different sexual orientation.

The psalms of disorientation are an essential part of our spirituality, if for no other reason than we learn to hear, and sit with, and to take seriously, and to bear one another’s pain.

So that we can begin to see how... our “good and ordered” universe might just be contributing to somebody else’s “disordered chaos.”

Maybe our blessings and well being... at times... inadvertently... might just be coming at the cost of somebody else’s suffering.

Somebody who is crying in the deep hours of the night...

“How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”
How long must I bear this pain in my soul?
How long will my enemies be exalted over me?
How long, O Lord?”

Sometimes the psalms like this one...
are like an alarm going off...
trying to wake us from our slumber...

to drag us out of the comfort of the dream world we've been in... and into the messy world that Jesus chose to enter, and that Jesus choose to suffer and die for.

Sometimes these psalms are the echoes of our brothers and sisters across the globe...

Sometimes they are an echo of our brothers and sisters... across the room, here with us and among us.

And in their echo... we hear the echoes of Jesus himself... hanging on the cross... crying out echoes of Psalm 22:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cries out on the cross this psalm of disorientation.

"Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest."
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus enters the disorientation and chaos of our world.
He knows what it is... to feel lost in the shadow of death,
to feel lost in the eclipse of the soul.

The scriptures say that as he hung on the cross, darkness came over the whole land.
There was an eclipse.

Jesus enters that place of darkness... for the sake of a broken world.
And he enters that place...

...for you... in your brokenness,
...in the disorientation of your soul.
He enters it so you don't have to be alone.
He enters it so that you can be honest-to-God in it.

And that is the other reason we need these psalms so much.

They teach us to name the fear, the doubt, the loneliness, the God-forsakenness,
to name the hate, the anger, the despair, the envy that is in us.

They teach us to name the resentment and anxiety that is in us. To see it and to name it.

All these things we think we're supposed to not allow and so we hide it, or suppress it, or ignore it. Right? Because it's ugly. We don't like it. In fact, sometimes we hide it so well we don't even know it's there inside of us. But it is.

And reading these psalms... praying these psalms...gives us words to name it. To allow it.

Because if we don't, it will fester in us. And it will come out in strange moments with those we love....

And in strange moments in our work places...

And in strange moments with one another here in the church.

But to name it and recognize those ugly realities in us... those dark emotions... as a real presence within us...when we own it and call it out to God... may just be the greatest act of faith possible.

You see, what sounds like “unfaith” in the psalms, when they are spoken to God becomes a “bold act of faith.”

The psalms are teaching us that just because this language is uncomfortable or impolite,

it is not improper language for our God.

Because there is nothing that is out of bounds with this God.

There is nothing that is left out.

There is nothing too dark for this God to hold,
nothing too harsh for this God to hear,
nothing too ugly for this God to love.

Despite the politeness of our civil religion, God made known to us that Jesus is present in the darkness... and participating in our soul,
and bearing our chaos... bearing the cross with us... in love.

The psalms of disorientation... as hard as they sound... are a profound act of faith every time they are spoken.

Which means they are words we need to learn to speak...

...for the sake of one another....

...and for the sake of our own soul.

We need to pray... the psalms of disorientation.

And so this morning, I want to teach you a practice of prayer that is rooted in this tradition of full honesty before God. It’s a practice called the “Welcoming Prayer.”

It’s a prayer that Cynthia Bourgeault teaches in her book on Centering Prayer.²

The idea behind this prayer is to learn to recognize, and notice, and name the dark emotions and drives that we’ve suppressed and tried to ignore or cut off because we either don’t like them, or are ashamed of them, or we know that it’s not what God wants for us.

In many ways, it’s owning the experience of disorientation that we hear in the psalms again and again.

There are three parts to the Welcoming Prayer:

- Focus and Sink In
- Welcome
- Letting Go

² Cynthia Bourgeault, “Chapter 13: The Welcoming Prayer,” *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 2004.

You start by focusing on the sensation in your body. If it's anger or fear, questions, or lostness... where do you feel that in your body? Often our bodies know something is going on in our soul, before our minds do. So we begin by listening to our body. What is going on there?

Then you learn to welcome that emotion, that sensation, that dynamic in you. And this sounds counter-intuitive, I know. You'd think we should try to cut it off. To kick it out. But this prayer takes the approach similar to the psalms. You name and welcome what is going on in you.

"Welcome anger." "Welcome fear." "Welcome pride." "Welcome loneliness"... whatever it is. Rather than rejection... you welcome it with grace. You honor your experience. You name it before God and your own soul.

And you stay there for a while.
This isn't something to rush through.

But eventually, if you focus on it long enough, and welcome it with enough grace, you'll notice that its power over you and in you begins to dissolve. The knot in your gut slowly loosens. And if you're ready... you let it go.

If you're not ready... you don't. The most important parts of this prayer are in the first two steps, in the focus/recognizing it and in the welcome.

But if you're ready... you let it go. And even then, that doesn't mean it's gone forever. And it doesn't mean you stop caring about the situation. But for this moment... you are able to release its power over you. For the moment, you are able to not be controlled by it.

... and so what happens is, you're actually able to care about it from a deeper place... a place of love.

This is a prayer practice that I've found very helpful along the way. It can be helpful in all kinds of situations of disorientation.

So I want to invite you to practice it with me this morning.

Take a moment, close your eyes, and breathe with me.

Focus and Sink In:

Pay attention to your body.

Maybe the events of our world this week have taken over your being. The events in Charlottesville, the political discourse, the reaction and counter-reactions. Are you carrying that in your body?

Or maybe there is something going on in your home, in your family that has consumed you... that has become like an eclipse over your soul. Is there something in your relationships that you are carrying in your body?

Or maybe there is a dynamic at work or school.

Or maybe something with your future... or your health...

Whatever it is, it is working on you.

Take a moment... and locate that reality in your body. Where are you carrying it in your body?

Maybe your jaw is clenched, or your stomach is in knots, or your back aches... or your heart rate is elevated...

Start by paying attention to the sensations in your body.

Where are you carrying it? See it. Focus on that place.

Don't judge it. Don't try to change it. Simply focus on it.

Welcome:

Now... from a place of compassion and love... Try to find a name for what is going on inside of you. Name it and welcome it.

"Welcome fear." "Welcome anger." "Welcome pain." "Welcome loneliness."
"Welcome resentment." "Welcome restlessness."

Try to find a name for it... and simply welcome it... again and again...

Whisper it to yourself. "Welcome..."

Stay with that "welcome...."

Let Go:

The last step, we don't want to come to too quickly. But if it is ready... if it is dissipating in you... you can let it go. You give it back to God.

If you're not ready for that... it's OK.

Simply continue to welcome it in grace and love.

Some end this prayer by saying the words there in your worship guide and on the screen:

Pray these with me.

- I let go my desire for security and survival.
- I let go my desire for esteem and affection.
- I let go my desire for power and control.
- I let go my desire to change the situation.

Through Christ we pray, Amen.