

July 26, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: My Soul Longs: to find Comfort
Scripture: Psalm 55



Hear these words from Psalm 55

Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea, hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me, and I am distraught
 at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked
 for they bring suffering upon me, and revile me in their anger.
My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me.
Fear and trembling have beset me
 horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
 I would fly away and be at rest
I would flee far away and stay in the desert
 I would hurry to my place of shelter,
 far from the tempest and storm.

We humans have a survival response woven into our DNA. When danger is perceived, signals go flashing from one part of our brain to another. Heart-beats race, breathing increases. On your mark, get set, go! We assume fight or flight stance of survival. The psalmist is distraught, his enemies bring suffering upon him; his heart is in anguish, terrors of death assail his thoughts fear and trembling, horror overwhelms and he says,

oh that I had the wings of a dove.

I would fly away

I would hurry to my place of shelter

We long to hurry to a place of shelter, a place of refuge or safety when we feel afraid or threatened. The place we desire to flee to in the midst of suffering is called a sanctuary.

The phone rang late in the night. The pastor answered. No one calls at 2 a.m. with good news. The voice on the phone was firm,

“Wake up. You have to open the church.

 I have to get in. My son what shot.

 Corey is dead. I have to go into the church.”

66% of people surveyed report that they go to church
to find comfort and solace in times of trouble.

For some it is in those crisis situations, those who know church as a sanctuary who flee into her shelter, a cavern of comfort to be enfolded in God’s embrace. Even for some who dared not darken the doors of a church before tragedy strikes, when worlds torn apart, they too can find themselves walking through unknown arched doorways seeking - sanctuary.

For those new to a church, studies have shown that 97%¹ of all people coming new to a church have had a life transition even within the last two months : births, deaths, marriage, divorce, illness, change of job, relocation are all stressors - good or bad - that send folks to church seeking comfort.

Church is important as a sanctuary to find comfort and meaning in times of sorrow, to make meaning out of suffering, to wrestle with existential questions of life and death

Where to find help in times of distress? the answer seems woven in our DNA as well. Knowing it or not, our hearts sing with the psalmist:

I lift my eyes to the hills-
from where will my help come?
My help comes from God,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121)

How to get through the difficult days? My help comes from God.
So How? The How questions follows the why. How can coming into sanctuary, into church community, bring us comfort?

First, the church proclaims our faith: We are not alone. God is with us. Emmanuel. We come to church to find comfort in reading our holy scriptures, in listening to the experiences of ancient faith ancestors, in singing the words of our hymns. Over and over in every way possible, we announce to one another that we are not alone in this journey of life. We are enlivened by the breath of God, whose Spirit flows in and out of our lungs with each breath, whose sacred center is lodged within us. It is God in whom we live, and move and have our being. There is comfort in remembering, no matter what else, we are not alone in our distress.

Second, the church provides comfort in reminding us: We are not wretched, we are not defective. A theologian about 400 years after Jesus put forth the idea of original sin. Some other church leaders gravitated toward the idea that we are marred at birth. They had some sexual issues and equated human conception with a depravity that stained all. It became a common doctrine, but not all theologians, not all preachers, not all seekers- agree with this. The church - other than the Augustinian thinkers- reminds us that we are all made in the image of God . That we are made sacred and beloved. It is God who wove us together in the intricacies of our mothers womb, and God makes us holy. So, if we can hear it often enough, if we can be reminded of it every week, every day, you are a beloved child of God sacred, holy and treasured. It can bring comfort to our soul; it can drown out the voices who would say critical and hurtful things. In claiming our identity as God's image bearers, we can choose each day to set our intention to live as the image of God bringing and giving comfort in the midst of cruelty.

Third, we feel (sorrow, grief, despair...) and faith teachings do not deny the suffering of life. Again, check out the scriptures. They are honest. The Psalmists sing laments. The poetry of our Psalm book pours out anguish fear, grief, suffering. Whatever emotion you've had, you have a companion in the psalms who wail, who shake his fist at God. Read Job again, a upright and righteous man whose children die, property is destroyed, and health dissolves. His friends blame him for his suffering, and through it all he maintains his

¹ Anderson, Douglas T. and Michael J Coyner. *The Race to Reach Out*. Abingdon Press.

innocence and honestly questions the cause of his suffering. Our holy book does not hide suffering from us. Return again to the life of Jesus who was misunderstood by his family, betrayed by his friends in his hour of greatest torment, an innocent man executed falsely. Ask Mary, mother of Jesus, who watched her son headed for trouble when he was provoking the authorities, and she was unable to stop him from a path that all knew would end in death. She watched him die in violence and shame; her heart was pierced as well. The Apostle Paul can tell us of suffering: the whippings, the imprisonments, the beatings. There is suffering throughout our holy book. The Bible never promises us life without pain.

Suffering is part of our human story; it is part of being human.

We suffer, and we suffer particularly when we decide how we want things to be- of course, we want our children safe and healthy, of course, we want to be spoken of kindly and appreciated, of course, we want the world to be fair and just according to our judgment. We want just the right amount of rain not too little, not too much. We want the right temperature not too hot, and not too cold. We want bad stuff happen to the bad guys and good guys to always win according to our understanding.

We suffer when life doesn't turn out like we want. We will suffer especially when we live in the narrow mind of OUR will. We find comfort learning to let go of our will in learning to seek Divine will, in learning to live in GRACE, in lessening our judgments of what should happen and accept life as it is. trusting God's grace through it all

We trust in grace. Sabbath is an expression of Trusting in Grace. Sunday / church can be our sabbath reminder. We can set down our worry for a day. We can set down our burden for a day. we can set down our judging. We can set down our work for a day. Sabbath is showing that we live as if we trust in God's grace.

Fourth, perhaps the base fear we have for which we search for comfort is the face of Death. We Come to church to remember our resurrection faith; death is not the end. We come to be reminded that we are made of the essence of God's love. Our earthly bodies only last our earthly life however long or short that may be. But we are spiritual beings. We have the Divine as our soul essence and the Light of God is not extinguished when our earthly bodies fail. Our soul does not die: it transitions to new life. Even in our grief and suffering we are reminded, In life and in death and in life beyond death, we are not alone for God is with us, within us and cradles us always.

Thomas Merton wrote:

“Let there always be quiet, dark churches
in which people can take refuge.

Places where they can kneel in silence.

Houses of God filled with his silent presence.

There, even when they do not know how to pray,
at least they can be still and breathe easily.”²

Why church? to find comfort - to find our grounding, to remember who /whose we are, to profess Sabbath, and to live in Grace.

Let me finished the psalm which we heard at the beginning. Listen to the end of Psalm 55 after the psalmist pours out his grief he concludes.

² <https://thechristianreview.com/looking-for-refuge-in-unlocked-churches/>

...but I call to God and the Lord saves me.
Evening, morning and noon,
I cry out my distress
and God hears my voice.
Cast your cares on the Lord
and God will sustain you.

May it be so.