

Sermon | Psalm 116

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[0 : 00] We're in the middle of a sermon series here on the Hallel Psalms, which is a group of psalms, kind of in the middle of the book of psalms, that focus on this great phrase, Hallelujah.

It's a phrase that many of us know just by our culture, but it's hugely important in the history of God's people. It's a great phrase of simply saying, praise the Lord, Hallelujah.

And this sermon today continues in that series. First of all, let me introduce myself. My name is Brian Wandel. I am a deacon of Church of the Advent, but I'm based at our Brooklyn location where we were this morning worshipping together.

So it's great to be here with you today. Let me ask you a question. What do you do when you have distress? What's your go-to reaction?

Your go-to response without even thinking about it when you've got pain and distress in your life?

Here's what I do. I clench my fists and I clench my teeth and I burrow through it as hard as I can.

[1 : 12] And it doesn't matter where I'm going to. It doesn't matter what, it doesn't matter how it affects the other people in my life. It doesn't even matter if I think I'm going to succeed.

That's just what I do. And somehow I'll get to the other side. Or at the very least, something is going to change. That's the best I do. Why do I do that? Not because I get good results from it.

Not because I learned it from someone who studied it. But it's probably just because it's what my father does. My father is a serial marathoner.

He has run some 80 or so marathons in the last 30, 35 years. The only marathon he's never finished is the one in which he was hit by a car in the 25th mile of a 26-mile race.

When the going gets tough for my dad, he works harder than he has to. When he's at his physical limits, he pushes beyond those limits, regardless of what's going to happen.

[2 : 21] Why would he do something like that? Probably because he got it from his father. My grandfather was a World War II veteran. He didn't see action in the war.

But when he got back to the States, he got married. He had a family. He got a job as a chemist. And then his wife died, leaving him with four school-aged children at home to educate, to raise, to house.

And he did the only thing he knew how. He worked harder. He pushed harder to get to the end. And I've got to admit, these strategies have not typically borne the best results of the men in my family.

It has not always worked out well. This approach to distress is not necessarily the best one. So we're going to think about this today in the context of this psalm, which is about someone who has had a very distressing situation and is on the other side.

How can we go through something that is like that in a way that works and is in accord with who we are and is glorifying to God? So let's pray.

[3 : 36] Heavenly Father, we pray that through this psalm, you will teach us to walk according to your ways. We pray that you will teach us to live and to act, even in the most distressing moments, according to your plans, according to the nature that you have put into us, according to the measure of grace that you are giving to us.

Amen. So distress. That's what this psalm is about. The psalmist, the singer who wrote this down, who composed this tune, was someone who had had a really distressing situation.

And in the context of this sermon, we're going to talk about a specific kind of distress, which is physical pain. Physical pain. Something that all of you are either feeling right now or have felt sometime recently.

I probably don't need to tell you what pain is like. But this psalm has a couple of words that we might recognize because we've all been in the same place.

So here are some things that the psalmist says about his pain. If you look in your Bibles, these are the parts that appear in quotes where the psalmist is reflecting back. This is what it was like for me back when I had this experience.

[4 : 48] He said things like, I am greatly afflicted. You've probably said that. You might have posted that on Facebook recently. Here's another good one.

This is a gem. He says, all mankind are liars. Liars. Have you said that one? Have you thought that one? I think I etched it into my desk last week while I was on hold for half an hour.

This is like, why does no one get this? Why is no one on my side? How can everyone else be faking it? And I'm feeling like what I have is real, but everyone else is just faking it.

Have you had that feeling? Right. So these are some feelings that this person had in distress, and you probably recognize in some way or another. But when we read the psalms, what's so great about them is that they walk us through things that we feel and we go through in life in a way that is in accord with how God has made our spirits.

And so when we read through this, we shouldn't just be listening for things that we're like, yeah, I've got that. We should be listening for things that show us how we can do it better, how we can do this in accord with how God has made us to live.

[6 : 11] And so here's the last part in quotes in this psalm. The psalmist said in that time, Oh Lord, I pray, deliver my soul.

Oh Lord, I pray, deliver my soul. It's easy to read over that, like it's some kind of just exclamation of like, oh my God, this really hurts. But it's not.

This is a very specific prayer that's at the core of this psalm. Oh Lord, I pray, deliver my soul. What does that mean? What does that mean for us?

When I hear the word soul, I think body and soul. Oh Lord, I pray, deliver my soul. That's what it feels like. And so I hear that and I hear something like a resigned religious feeling.

Like, well, this is going to hurt. But now God can get on with the more important work of saving my spirit, the invisible part of me, or something like that.

[7 : 14] And you know what? That actually, that really makes me feel like a champion. It's like, I'll leave my body behind and my spirit will conquer. That's what I want to do.

You know, it sounds really courageous, like something that's going to get you on the cover of a Wheaties box. But it has nothing to do with the book of Psalms.

It has nothing to do with the book of Psalms. In the Bible, when pain comes into someone's body, their soul cries out to God.

Pain comes into someone's body and their soul cries out to God. It's one process, the whole thing. So how do we understand this when the Bible talks about a soul?

Then if it's not what we think of, it's just like the immaterial part of ourselves. One person who struggled with this, what does the Bible mean by the word soul then, is Wendell Berry.

[8 : 10] Here's how Wendell Berry came through it. He said, The crucial test is probably Genesis 2-7, back at the beginning of the scriptures, which gives the process by which Adam, the first man, was created, where it says, The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.

Wendell Berry continues here. The formula given in Genesis is not man equals body plus soul. The formula there is soul equals dust plus breath.

According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed man of the dust by breathing his breath into it.

He made the dust live. Insofar as it lived, it was a soul. The dust, formed as man and made to live, did not embody a soul. It became a soul.

Soul here refers to the whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together, but as a single mystery.

[9 : 31] That's the reflection of Wendell Berry on what this meant. And I think that's a biblical way of thinking about these things. So when we are distraught in our bodies, our souls suffer.

It's all connected. It's all part of one thing. So then, when we think about that, when the Bible puts out for us a common thing the Bible says, something to the effect of, humans are far from God and that's a problem.

That's something that the Bible says a lot. Humans are far from God and that is a problem. So when we hear that, the Bible is not just saying, you know, it is saying that our hearts are in a bad place.

But it's also saying that our bodies shouldn't be this messed up. It shouldn't be like that. And that's what's being said here when we say that humans are far from God.

So that's what finally brings us to the book of Leviticus, our first reading here. Some of you have been regular attenders here at Church of the Advent and maybe you brought a friend or your mother or a neighbor and you heard this first reading and you put your head in your hands.

[10:43] This is not happening. Why are we talking about spots on skin, things that smell and look weird and should be between a person and their doctor?

Why are we reading that? There's something actually amazing about this book. The book of Leviticus is at the very center of a big story of God saving his people.

God saving his people, the descendants of Abraham the Hebrew, taking them out of slavery in Egypt, putting them in a new land. And at the very center of this big story is the book of Leviticus asking a very deep question.

In the midst of that great saving activity, here's the question. What is it like to come back into the presence of God? What is it like to come back into the presence of God?

So the problem is that we are far from God, right? So what would it be like to turn around? And I think that's actually a really fundamental question. Even if you're just someone who entertains the idea of God, it's captivating, isn't it?

[11:53] What would it be like to turn around and be back totally in the presence of God? What would that be like? And since this is a Christian Bible answering that question like we are talking about, therefore it has something to say about bodies.

Remember, soul equals dust plus God's breath. So that's why, you know, we read these verses which seem odd at first reading. And if the leprous disease breaks out in the skin so that the leprous disease covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot as far as the priest can see. And we're reading this and, you know, why are we reading ancient Near Eastern pre-modern medicine? What's the point of that? In the book of Leviticus, there's a recognition that bad hearts are a part of being far from God.

But there's also a clear admission that the decline of our bodies is also a part of being far from God. Having death in my body, as is symbolized sometimes by a skin disease that looks like death, having death in my body is a part of having death in my soul.

Now, we can be totally clear here. It's not like people with physical problems are less moral or less important. Not in any way.

[13:25] In fact, what this is really about is that each of us individually bears this burden, that the decline of our physical bodies is an indication of how our bodies have been pushed away from God.

Let me draw your attention to the role of the priest in this situation. Why is a priest here? Is the priest here some kind of shaman to, you know, whip up some kind of a spell or potion to get rid of someone's problems?

Not at all in this text. The priest is there so that when a person does get better, when a person experiences healing, whether it is a miracle or it is simply the passage of time or some medicinal usage, the priest is there to say one thing, to say clean, to say life, to declare that God has brought a new bit of life to a person's soul, by giving a new bit of life to a person's body.

They're there to rejoice that some death has been made into some life, if in a small bit. And it's a small part of the answer to a big question.

What is it like to come back into the presence of God? This particular passage is unfortunately hit a little bit too close to home for me recently.

[14:52] I took my family, my wife Casey and my two small kids, out to a wilderness area that had sunflower fields.

And we went there, and we got great pictures of little kids running through sunflower fields. And we got a great time just running around in a wide open space.

And I also got a poison ivy rash on both of my legs. And that developed two further skin complications, and it was horrible.

And I'm not going to go into the details, but it would have compared to our reading here. And I wanted to tear my skin off for a few weeks.

Night and day, wherever I was, I just wanted to tear my skin off. And the problem wasn't just like, I have this pain down around my calves. The problem wasn't just, I have this problem here.

[15 : 51] But that, I couldn't concentrate. When I got up in the morning to pray, I couldn't pray. When my kids are asking me for things, I could hardly respond.

When I see my wife at the end of the day, I just, I have no patience. It was terrible, because pain was coming into my body, and I was crying out through my soul. My whole soul was affected by what was going on in my body. And, you know, this is a young group of people we have right here.

Probably the average age is 30-something, whatever it is. Which should be physically a relatively good point in your life. And yet, for each of us here, there is something I know. There is something that is difficult. Something you only share with your doctor. Some problem that you have, or have had sometime in the last year. And if you are lucky, it hides beneath your clothes. [16 : 59] And if you are unlucky, it hides beneath your skin. And we have this pain in our bodies. And so we have this distress.

So what do we do with that? What are we going to do with that pain and that distress? The answer of this psalm, Psalm 116. The answer is to live a life of crying out to the Lord.

To live a life of crying out to the Lord. What does that mean? What is that like? To live a life of crying out to the Lord. Well, there are three things we can point out from this psalm.

Three things that that's like. First, we must persist. Persist in prayer and persist in crying out to the Lord. Here's verse 2 in the psalm.

Because God inclined his ear to me. Literally, because he extended his ear to me. Therefore, I will call on him as long as I live.

[18 : 03] I will call on him as long as I live. I think many of you here have cried out to God. And have received some answers to prayer in your lives.

Even if you can't think of something right now, though. Even if you're like, I have never received an answer to prayer. We came together this morning.

And we asked God for some simple things. We asked God that he would purify our hearts in this worship. We confessed our sins to God and asked for forgiveness. And you know what? He has forgiven us.

In Jesus Christ, our sins have been forgiven. For those who would repent and seek forgiveness from Jesus. God has answered us. God has met us.

God has extended his ear to us. So I encourage you. Call on him as long as you live. That prayer that you've had.

[19 : 00] Pray it again. I encourage you. This is a God who has power to act. This is a God who answers prayers. How could you not but bring that to the Lord again?

Who extends his ear to you. Now, I know this is a heavy burden to bear. Maybe you have prayed that prayer many times.

To take away this physical burden that has been clutching your soul. Maybe you have prayed it many times and you feel that you cannot pray it again. Let me say that there are many here who can share that burden with you.

In a few moments, we're going to partake of communion. And we'll come down here and we'll receive bread and wine. And as a part of communion, we have some people who stand off to the side, ready to receive people in prayer.

They are there. This isn't just like a side thing, like an extra, just to kind of fill up some space, to have another activity for us to do. This is actually an important part of how we do communion.

[20 : 07] Because we come together and we receive bread and wine. And we are reminded that Jesus Christ has begun the process of turning our souls back to God.

For those of us who would trust Jesus, our whole souls, the whole soul, is being turned back to God. And we receive that in these elements of bread and wine here. And yet, at the same time, you eat and you drink and you are still in pain.

You are reminded of that suffering, in part, through taking the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist. And with that reminder, please bring that burden to those who would like to pray.

Persist in prayer. If you cannot pray, ask someone to pray with you. So that is the first part of crying out to the Lord. Persist in prayer. Second.

Second part of crying out to the Lord is presence. The presence of God. Verse 9 of the Psalm says this.

[21 : 13] I will walk before the Lord. Or another way of saying that. Another way of translating that. I will walk in the presence of the Lord. In the land of the living.

I will walk in the presence of the Lord. In the land of the living. Perhaps, perhaps you have been praying for the same thing again and again. And perhaps you feel that for a time or for whatever, you have to stop praying for a time.

You need to accept, here's where I'm at. If that's where you're at, let me remind you that the presence of God is always available for those who cry out to the Lord in their pain and distress. The presence of God is available. But what is that like? You may be thinking, but I don't feel the presence of God. The verse here says something a little bit different than simply, you know, you feel pain in your body and that will be replaced by a different kind of feeling.

It says, I will walk in the presence of the Lord. Walking in the Bible is a common metaphor that is used for how you live your life.

[22 : 24] And walking in the presence of the Lord, it includes a number of things. But it includes loving the Lord with all your heart. It includes loving one another.

It includes worshiping God. Confessing our sins. Walking in these ways is walking in the presence of the Lord. And God promises his presence for those of us who will walk in his ways.

This is part of our reading in 2 Corinthians. It said, since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, I believed and so I spoke.

And that's a quote from Psalm 116 here. We also believe and so we also speak. Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.

And bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

[23 : 30] So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self, the outer man, the outer woman is wasting away. Our inner self is being renewed day by day.

The presence of God is in those who will cry out to the Lord. Third part of living a life of crying out to the Lord in our pain and distress.

The third part is praise. Verse 14 of the Psalm says this. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

I will pay my vows to the Lord. That's another thing that's a little bit difficult for us to read because we don't know exactly what this means. Actually, for many centuries and millennia, one way that people prayed was to make vows to God.

And they would do something like, God, hear my prayer. And if you do, I will worship you before your people in some particular way. And when they did this, this wasn't like some kind of a quid pro quo.

[24 : 35] Like, God, if you give me something, I'll give you something. And it wasn't like, I'm not going to worship God if he doesn't give me what I want. It wasn't like that. What it was, was a promise.

God, I will remember you for your work. I will praise you for your work. Every work that you do for me, I will praise you. And this will be one of them if you will bless me in this way.

So when people made vows, if God answered them in one way or another, what they did was they offered a thanksgiving offering. This is also mentioned in this psalmist. A sacrifice of thanksgiving. And it's easy to think of that as, like, a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

That means, like, saying some particular prayer, like you say it at Thanksgiving. Or something like that. But a thanksgiving offering was a very particular thing these centuries ago when this was written.

A thanksgiving offering was where you took a part of your property, a lamb or a goat or something, and you brought it to the place of worship, and they, you know, killed it.

[25 : 35] They pulled out part of the body and burned it on an altar. As you watched it there burning on an altar, you saw the smoke going up.

And you were reminded that your prayers have gone up like that smoke to God. And he has heard you. And as that smoke went up, you praised God, singing psalms like, like this psalm here, Psalm 116.

And then you took some of the meat, and you gave some to the priest, and then all of your friends and family were there, and you gave some to them, and you had a big feast. And you all ate together, and you worshipped God for this great thing that he had done.

Now, some translations are necessary here because Jesus Christ has been the final sacrifice for us.

Sacrifice is no longer necessary or needed. Jesus Christ has been the final sacrifice for our sins, but we can think about this in our own lives in a very particular way.

[26 : 39] Has God answered you in prayer? Go to the store, buy a big honking slab of meat, invite all your friends over, and praise God for his great work in your life.

Praise God in the midst of his people. Feast with them for the great thing that God has done. What is it like to live a life of crying out to the Lord?

Persisting. Presence. Praise. And I know, as I've gone through these things, you may think I've skipped something. We talked about crying out to God.

We talked about something you might do when you're not receiving the answer to your prayer. We talked about what it's like when God has answered your prayer. So, how do we get God to answer our prayers?

I've got to admit, I don't have a bullet point for that one. I don't have a bullet point, because I don't know when God will act in the way that I want him to.

[27 : 42] But I do know, I do know, I do know, that in all things, God has called us to cry out to the Lord. And so that was my encouragement for you.

Cry out in all things to the Lord. We talked about persisting in prayer, like, doing it across time, like, keep on persisting in prayer. But there was also persisting, like, filling our whole lives with prayer.

Every time you go for a run, every time you have a difficult deadline at work, when the kids are screaming, persist in prayer, in all things, and cry out to the Lord.

And in all good things that you receive, whatever it is, offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Because every little healing, whether it's a miracle, or just the natural end of a poison ivy rash, every little healing is a small spoonful of life.

It is a small spoonful of the final resurrection of the body, which Jesus Christ has promised to those who have faith in him, and who will walk according to his ways.

[28 : 55] It is a small spoonful of what God will give us. Verse 7 in this psalm says this, Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

Every little good thing, every little healing that God gives us, in that, we should pray, return, O my soul, to your rest, for the little bit of life that God has given to us, in anticipation of the great resurrection of our bodies, when we will live in the presence of the Lord.

And we can say, with all our hearts, louder than ever, return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. Let's pray together.

God, you have blessed us so greatly by giving us the opportunity for life, for choosing life in Jesus Christ.

And yet, we still feel pain in our bodies. God, we cry out to you, take away the pain. God, we know that your presence is with those who would walk in this way.

[30 : 14] And we praise you, God, for every way that you have brought healing this week, this day, this year. We praise you, all of us together.

And we await the day when we can say, return, O my soul, to your rest. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. policy spider, walk out of practices and