

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
² *O Lord, hear my voice.*
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ *If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,*
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ *But with you there is forgiveness;*
therefore you are feared.

⁵ *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,*
and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ *My soul waits for the Lord*
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ *O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,*
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ *He himself will redeem Israel*
from all their sins. (Psalm 130 NIV)

Out of the Depths

There are two great threats to our faith. We face them every day. Do you know they are? One is complacency. It's figuring that I know this stuff. I know I'm forgiven and I'm never going to forget it, even if I don't get to church as often as I should – and we start to drift away. The other great threat is just the opposite: despair. It's feeling like our sins are so bad that God could never forgive them. It's wallowing in our guilt and refusing to let go of it. Those two threats have one thing in common: our human pride. We think we're clear enough that we don't need to hear God's Word or we think that we're so bad that God's Word can't help us. If either of these attitudes sinks its claws into our heart, we can lose our faith. This morning, we want to focus on the second great threat because Psalm 130 is the desperate cry of the believer who is in danger of despair.

Out of the depths we cry for forgiveness.

Out of the depths, we put our hope in God.

I.

What are the depths? I picture them as a pit or a shaft going deep down into the ground. Light barely comes in. The walls rise up and you're trapped. You can't possibly climb out. Do you ever feel like that? In one sense, the depths in Psalm 130 could mean any time of grief or sadness or depression, because all the hurt and sorrow of our lives come from sin. God created us to live in a perfect world forever. But once Adam and Eve disobeyed him, they opened the floodgates of despair and depression. But if you look carefully, you'll see that in this psalm, God is talking about more than the general causes of depression and sorrow in our lives. He's talking about the despair that comes from guilt.

Guilt is an incredibly powerful force. People with drinking and drug problems are often trying to escape from feelings of guilt. I've seen people ruin their marriages because they feel guilty. Guilt causes us to run away. Guilt causes us to wallow in self-pity. Guilt consumes our lives and robs us of joy. Amazingly, we Lutherans who should know God's love and forgiveness better than anyone, are unbelievably good at guilt. Whether it's beating ourselves up because we aren't perfect parents or perfect children or perfect spouses or it's Lutheran parents loading their kids with "you should know better than" memories, it is appalling how many of us wallow in guilt. Why is that? Partly, it's because we Lutherans preach the law, as God commands. We understand that we are sinners and that we cannot do anything to please God on our own. Our best efforts are

filthy rags. But somehow, we easily move beyond that realization to an obsession with our own worthlessness. We are not worthless. We are worth the blood of Christ to God. He loves us and forgives us.

So what do we do with these feelings of guilt? Many psychologists think that guilt is an unhealthy emotion. And obsessing over it is unhealthy. But guilt is necessary. Strictly speaking, to be guilty means that you committed the crime. When a jury finds a defendant guilty, they aren't saying anything about whether he feels guilty or whether he admits that he did it. They saying this person did the crime. When we feel guilty, we feel like we should be punished, here or in the life to come. When we Christians – especially we Lutherans who have been thoroughly instructed in the Word of God – commit sins, we feel guilty. That is supposed to drive us to our Savior. But the devil turns the natural accusations of our consciences into despair: God will never forgive you. You're a Christian! You should know better!

That is the road to hell. Faith is trusting that Jesus died and paid for all that we are guilty of. Despair is thinking that our sins are too bad to be paid for, so clearly, we aren't trusting in Jesus to forgive them. And every Christian has moments when the pit of despair yawns before our feet. That's when we need to echo this psalm: **“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.”** In spite of all the devil's whispered messages, in spite of all the guilt we heap up on our own shoulders, we come to him anyway. That's faith. In the worst, blackest, most terrible place I can be, I cry out to the LORD because I know that he still loves me.

The psalm says, **“O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”** We don't come to him because we think that we deserve a second chance. We deserve God's punishment. But we come to him and we ask him to hear us. We cry for mercy. Mercy is what we feel when someone is hurt and needs our help. God is rich in mercy. We come to him when despair is threatening our faith because his mercy is deeper than the darkest pit we'll ever be in. He will forgive us.

The psalm says, **“If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.”** We have to get away for the picture of God as a bean counter who is carefully totaling up our sins and then marking which ones we've specifically gotten taken care of and which ones are still out there. Repentance is not a mechanical process. “I told two lies today, so I have to say I'm sorry twice and get God to cross those out.” God doesn't count up and then cross off our sins. If he did that, who could remember every sin and get it crossed off? Who could even know every sin? Sometimes, we think we're doing the right thing, but later we discover that it was sin, either because we didn't fully understand what God's word says, or because we lied to ourselves and tried to make ourselves look good. But really, it was all pride or selfishness.

God isn't a bean counter. He's a Savior. He simply wipes our sins away. The blood of Christ washes all the ink away and there are no marks next to our names. With God there is forgiveness, as the psalm says, therefore he is feared. Huh? Doesn't fear go with punishment? I could see it if the psalm said, “With you there is judgment, therefore you are feared.” But forgiveness? How does that cause us to fear God?

Because fear here does not mean being scared. It's a Hebrew way of saying reverence. You come before the king and you know that you deserve to die. And he pardons you. He simply wipes your crime away. How will you feel about him? Won't you love him? Won't you be loyal to him forever? God has done that for you and for me. He sacrificed his Son so that we won't die and go to hell. The only proper response is reverence. We revere the God who not only sent his Son to die for us, but also gave us pastors to hear our confession and forgive us, who gave us baptism and communion so we know that pardon applies to us personally, who recorded his love in the Bible so that we can return to it again and again, who built the Holy Spirit into all that gospel to lift us out of the depths and make us know and even feel his love. For all those reasons, **out of the depths we cry to the Lord for forgiveness.**

II.

When we do that, we expect that God will forgive us. That's the point of what he says in the rest the psalm: **“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.”** In these verses, God uses a special set of words for waiting and hoping. They imply certainty. Sometimes, when we wait and hope, we don't know what's going to happen. Have you ever had to sit in a surgery waiting room? Even if the person you love went in for a relatively routine procedure, you didn't know how it was going to come out. In those situations, you wait and you hope, but you have a touch of fear. If it's a big, scary surgery, it's even worse. That's not what these words mean. These words are waiting and hoping for something that you know is

coming, it just hasn't arrived yet. It's like waiting for pay day. You are going to get paid, right? It just hasn't come yet.

Or, as the psalm says, it's waiting for morning. The writer uses the picture of guard duty. If you pulled the night watch, you had to man your post until dawn. At that time, it probably meant you were on a wall or in a tower somewhere, looking out into the darkness for enemies. It was probably cold and you couldn't huddle by a fire, because then you wouldn't be able to see or hear anything. You had to face the wind and the rain and the darkness. You wished the sun would just rise. If God had given this psalm today, maybe he would have said that we wait like people working third shift wait for the morning. You just want the night to be over – and you know it's going to be.

That's what it's like to wait for God's forgiveness. When we feel guilty, we long for God to come and forgive us. We're waiting for him to set our hearts free from guilt and sadness. Where do we find that freedom? "In his word I put my hope." God tells us in the Scriptures that we are forgiven. God applies the word to the water of baptism and washes all our sins away. God combines the word with the bread and wine of communion and gives us the body and blood of Christ to say to us each time we come that we are forgiven. God sends pastors to hear our confession and announce the word of God: Jesus died and that terrible sin that torments you today is gone forever.

Our soul needs that message. It is the only antidote for despair. The psalm says, "**O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.**" Expect God to deal with your guilt. Put your hope in the Lord because his love never fails. In my last church, I did a fair amount of prison ministry. Sometimes when I was sitting in a prison waiting room, there would be an elderly couple there, obviously waiting to see their son. He had committed some crime that put him away for years. No doubt, there were people who hated that son for what he had done and with good reason. Yet, year after year, those parents came to visit. Why? Because they loved him no matter what he had done. God's love for us is even greater than that. No doubt, there are parents who would never visit their son in prison. But God's love cannot fail us, no matter what sin we commit. God always forgives us.

Why? Because with him there is full redemption from all our sins. What does redemption mean? It means paying the price. God doesn't just look the other way. God doesn't say, "Your sin isn't that big of a deal. Just forget about it." God says, "Your sin has to be punished." But then he sent his Son, Jesus, to take that punishment for us. On the cross, Jesus suffered death and hell, he suffered God's anger at our sin, he suffered the shame that we deserve because we have betrayed God. Jesus took it all. Now there is nothing left for us to suffer. There is no reason for us to feel shame. There is no point in beating ourselves up. Trust is the opposite of despair. God wants us to rejoice in his love and to be at peace. To make sure we have that peace, he raised his Son from the dead. When Jesus came out of the tomb, God was saying to you and to me that every sin we ever have committed and every sin we ever will commit is wiped away. We are forgiven. We are loved. We will live with him forever. Rejoice in that love! That is the true meaning of repentance. Not beating ourselves up, but trusting and rejoicing in the love of God. **Out of the depths we put our hope in God.**

There are two great threats to our faith. I think we tend to worry more about complacency than despair. We don't want to wander away and so we use the law to beat ourselves into better obedience. But that is the source of Lutheran guilt. That is the road to despair because I can never be good enough. But Christ was good enough for me. He died and rose and God has taken away all my sins. In this life, our hearts will never be perfect. We are going to struggle and sometimes feel the onset of despair. But the devil will not win, because God loves us and he sends his forgiveness to set us free from the depths. This year, during the Sundays in Lent, we're going to study the psalms appointed for each Sunday. Once we've meditated on each one, as we have today, we're going to sing that psalm and rejoice in God's love for us. So let us sing Psalm 130 now.