

## **“God’s Most Distinguishing Quality”**

### **Psalm 13; Luke 7:18-23**

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Walter Brueggemann calls it one of God’s most distinguishing characteristics. It is what separates Him from all others. Furthermore, there is no gift we need more. What is it? It is God’s ability to make something new.

Why is this good news? Life is filled with endings that can paralyze us. Jobs, marriages, friendships, good health, dreams and a host of other things we value can be terminated.

Sometimes this change occurs abruptly with no warning while at other times it is gradual and predictable. Some endings are the result of unwise decisions we make and we have no one to blame but ourselves. On the other hand, we can be victims of others’ unhealthy decisions and suffer because of their actions. Whatever the cause, even circumstances beyond our control, the effects are the same. All endings lead to feelings of despondency, despair, depression and hopelessness, which make bad situations worse.

This is where our faith makes such a difference in our lives because it says that the end is not the end. There is more, always more when you place your faith in a God that can create something new. Believers never have to settle for things as they are and give into despair like those that believe that nothing happens apart from us and no one is at work but us.

In Brueggemann’s book, The Psalms and the Life of Faith, he states that in ancient Israel, grief was always linked to hope. This was what distinguished a lament from a complaint and the Psalms are filled with laments. In a lament, the writer does not focus primarily on the object loss but the God that can create something new.

This is not to say that the loss is not mentioned or felt. It is and the feelings of remorse and grief are strong and vocal.

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Psalm 13:1-2.

There is no doubt the Psalmist was suffering and wondering where God was. Four times he asked God how long He was going to remain hidden and silent. Was the Lord going to stand idly by and give his enemies a reason to gloat? His mind was filled with questions and his heart with anguish. However he did not give into despair and hopelessness. Notice how the tone of this Psalm changed dramatically as the focus shifted from the Psalmist’s pain to the God that makes all things new.

“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because He has been good to me” Psalm 13: 5-6. The depth of his despair is matched by the height of his confidence in a God that will be faithful to His covenant promises. This contrast is what makes this lament noticeable and unforgettable.

Israel never settled for things as they were because the people had too much confidence in God, even when He seemed so far from them as Psalm 13 implied. God would not always stay hidden or quiet, they believed. He would come and turn their sorrow to joy, putting a song on their lips.

Brueggemann links this lesson from the Psalmist’s laments to the dialogue between Jesus and the messengers of John the Baptist. They approached Jesus with the question, “Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?” Luke 7:20.

I’m sure John had time for reflection while confined in a prison and was perplexed about Jesus’ identity and mission. I know I would have been. No doubt John expected to hear Jesus talk more about justice and judgment, especially condemning the people that treated him unjustly. Note Jesus’ reply to this question about his identity, though. “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are

cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” Luke 7:22-23.

What is the link between the Psalmist’s lament and the dialogue between Jesus and the messengers of John the Baptist? The confirmation of Jesus’ identity and purpose was his ability to make something new. Everyone that Jesus mentioned in answer to John’s inquiry was the recipient of something that led to a better life. Each person experienced and endured an ending that was turned into a beginning that broke the cycle of despair, isolationism and hopelessness.

The entire Bible bears witness to this gift of newness from our God and His son, Jesus. “The forming of the worlds, the liberation of Israel, the anointing of David, the deliverance of the exiles, the summons to disciples, the silencing of the storm, the call to Lazarus, all of these attest to the God’s ability to give newness to a world filled with endings,” according to Brueggemann.

So what does this mean for you and me? As people of faith, we never come to the end of the road. Always and at all times, there is more. Even when it seems improbable or even impossible, there is more.

Dr. John Claypool is the Visiting Professor of Preaching at the McAfee School of Theology on Mercer’s Atlanta campus. He is known for his “confessional” style of preaching. He often shares with his listeners events from his own pilgrimage and his feelings about those incidents. He is willing to be transparent and vulnerable for the sake of his audience, characteristics very rare in public speakers.

I shall never forget the time I heard Dr. Claypool talk about the pain he has endured from traumatic events in his life, the death of his nine-year-old daughter who died with leukemia, his divorce and subsequent exit from the pastorate of a Baptist church. He reached a point in his life when he had depleted all his resources and said, “If there is anything more, it is up to God.”

Dr. Claypool would be the first to tell you there has been more, a lot more. God was not finished with him and opened doors of opportunity and brought people into his life so that he could continue ministering. I would be willing to say that Dr. Claypool has encouraged more people through his books, sermons, lectures and counsel in the last twenty years than the previous twenty. I know I am one.

Perhaps you feel you have reached a dead end this morning. You are getting a divorce or your beloved mate of many years died. You have lost your job and don’t know which way to turn. You are facing limitations because of health issues. Your best friend moved away. Your children are no longer home and have left you with the empty nest. You recently buried a dream.

What do you do? Talk to God about it. Lay your need and life before Him. Ask Him to create something new in your life even as you share your fears, anxiety, doubts and confusion with Him. Let Him know you trust Him but you will need a lot of help to remain confident and faithful as time progresses. Be patient and give Him time to work out the details as you prepare your heart and mind to receive what He will create.