

“The Movement of Life”

Psalm 128, 88, 40:1-3

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Have you ever had a day, event or season in your life that you wanted to freeze and hold forever? I'm sure we all have. There are times that are so good that we don't want them to end and feel sad when they do. We may even look back upon them with such fondness that we try to recapture and relive them. We probably do this more often when we are experiencing problems and difficulties. “If only I could go back to another time and place,” we tell ourselves.

We're not the first to do this. The Psalmist did it, too, and was bold enough to write about it. As a matter of fact, realizing this helps us to understand the purpose and function of the Psalms, according to Walter Brueggemann in his book, The Psalms and the Life of Faith.

Brueggemann, with the help of Paul Ricoeur, sees a progression or sequence in the Psalms he refers to as orientation, disorientation and reorientation. This sequence, which he calls the movement of life, reinforces the idea that life is a pilgrimage with many twists and turns. I found his thoughts to be very helpful and want to share them with you as we examine several passages this morning.

The Psalms of orientation are what I label the sunny day Psalms. They are characterized by order, goodness and reliability. Life is predictable and makes sense. People are happy, healthy and wealthy; at least they have everything they need. The recipients of these blessings are grateful and confident that the sun will shine forever.

Psalm 128 is a good example of this. Optimism abounds. Life is good for the Psalmist because he has a productive job, adequate provisions, a healthy and growing family, a gracious God and lives in a land of peace. There is not a cloud in his sky.

Read some other Psalms, though. The clouds have moved in and rain is falling. **Brueggemann refers to these as the Psalms of disorientation.** I call them the stormy day Psalms.

The predictable has been replaced by the unpredictable, order by chaos, constancy by change, security by fear and the familiar with the unknown. The good life has disintegrated, dissolved and collapsed.

Psalm 88 is an example of this. It is read in worship in many Good Friday services. The Jews refer to it as their national lament. It contains the words of one that lost his health, friends and hope. His world was turned upside down and he was lonely, scared and miserable. “Darkness is my closest friend,” he wrote.

There are many Psalms that speak with this same voice. The source of the problems varies but the reaction is almost always the same. The immediate response to the chaos is resistance, resentment, anger and protest. The Psalmist complains and appeals to God to restore what has been lost. He insists that God turn back the clock and give him his old life, the safe and happy one he knew.

Then something happens in the heart and mind of the Psalmist. He realizes what he is asking cannot be done. He is hoping and praying for the wrong thing. His previous life cannot be retrieved and doesn't need to be.

So, instead of wistfully looking backward he looks forward with the hope that God will create something new and good in his life. He moves from bitterness and resentment to hope and anticipation. He made this transition in Psalm 51:10 when he wrote, "Create in me a pure heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me." David was ready for God to do something new in his life. He was tired of trying to rewrite history or repeat it. It was time to move on and he had to have help to do so.

This attitude adjustment produced a third category of Psalms called reorientation. I refer to these as the rainbow Psalms. New life emerges as God responds to the Psalmist's cries for help, resulting in feelings of awe and wonder. Psalm 40:1-3 is an example of this kind of celebratory Psalm.

"I waited patiently for the Lord. He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to God."

Recently I saw three ladies interviewed that lost husbands in the Attack on America on September 11, 2001. All three gave birth to children soon after their husbands died. Looking back, they said that their normal and predictable life was turned upside down in a matter of moments. Everything changed, never to be the same.

When asked how they had made it the past three years, they replied, "At some point you have to quit looking back wishing bad things had not happened and look ahead and ask what you must do to continue. For the sake of our children, we had to move forward and with God's help and the help of family and friends, we have. It is not easy, but we have."

This is the movement of life that Brueggemann and the Psalmist wrote about. Life is not static. Change is inevitable. Good times and happy days need to be enjoyed, appreciated and remembered. When change comes, however, we need to look to God for strength, courage, wisdom, guidance, patience, comfort, peace, healing and hope. We need to trust Him to do something new in our lives when it appears we have been struck a fatal blow, never giving in to despair and hopelessness.

In which category do you find yourself this morning? Do you identify with the sunny, stormy or rainbow Psalms? What do you need from your faith today? Like the Psalmist, perhaps you need to know that you are not alone and never will be. Whatever surprises come or changes occur in your life, God will be by your side helping you to cope and guiding you along the way. You can have this kind of assurance. Just ask the one who wrote, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."