

God Bait
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 30

- ¹ I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
- ² O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
- ³ O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.
- ⁴ Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
- ⁵ For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.
- ⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”
- ⁷ By your favor, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.
- ⁸ To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
- ⁹ “What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?”
- ¹⁰ Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!”
- ¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
- ¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

A man was driving down the street, in a sweat, because he had an important meeting and couldn't

find parking. Looking up toward heaven, he said, “Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life and give up drinking.” Miraculously, a parking space appeared. The man looked up again and said, “Never mind. I found one.”

We “tempt” God, maybe even “taunt” God, to use God’s power on our behalf, buttering God up, sometimes offering promises in return. We bait God. “If you choose, you can make me clean.” “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?”

When God does act, do we respond like the man with the parking space, making our promises empty? Writing off God’s power and claiming it as our own? Or do we behave like the leper and the psalmist - proclaiming God’s greatness, praising God with our very souls, unable to keep our mouths quiet?

Crying out to God in times of trouble is natural. And many a Biblical lament, like our own and such as Psalm 30, appeals “to God’s self-interest.”¹ Christine Roy Yoder describes this lament as “juxtaposing the silence of dust in Sheol with the sound of life as the psalmist envisions it: ‘*praise you, tell of your faithfulness...Hear, O Lord!*’ The psalmist’s plea entwines her life with praise of God.”² And not only might we call upon God’s self-interest but we might try manipulation with self-pity. Anne H.K. Apple says well, “Despair can make faithful people manipulators who weave their life story with threads of sarcasm, anger, and cynical niceties instead of threads of hope.”³

It’s not so much that we shouldn’t bait God but that there’s no point. Without any cajoling or manipulating, we are important to God, just not in the way we sometimes think. God isn’t in relationship with us so that we’ll praise God; God is in relationship with us to be in relationship with us. We give great pleasure to God, not because we talk about God but because we are God’s creation. We belong to God and God to us. From that sense of belonging, it is natural that we talk about God.

And we don’t have to convince God to care for us or that we are worthy of care. God already does care and more than we can imagine. In Jesus’ response to the leper, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Jesus not only takes **away** the uncleanness, the affliction that kept the leper on the outskirts of town and also permanently away from the temple, permanently separated from God’s presence, but Jesus takes **on** the uncleanness. Touching a person who was unclean made the touch-er unclean. Few Jews would knowingly risk becoming unclean. It is part of what makes the actions of Joseph of Arimathea, “a good and righteous man...from [a] Jewish town,” so notable. Taking the body of the crucified Christ and placing it in the tomb made him unclean, for the dead were considered unclean. Joseph knew and cared

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 349.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 346.

for Jesus and risked uncleanness for him. The leper had never met Jesus before yet Jesus cared for him.

In response the leper “went out and began to proclaim freely” what Jesus had done for him. The psalmist extols God, sings praises to the Lord, and vows to give thanks forever. When our prayers are answered, it is important to continue the conversation with God as earnestly as we did when we were in trouble. When our prayers are answered, it is appropriate to shout from the mountaintops about how great our God is and to tell of what great things God has done. How can we be genuinely thankful to and trustful in God not just with empty words? Do remember that the next time a prayer is answered.

But what if? “But what if?” goes through my mind as I read these accounts. These accounts are only part of the tale of our relationship with God in times of trouble and I cannot help but hear in these stories the question “but what if?” But what if we “bait” God and it “doesn’t work,” meaning we don’t get our desired outcome in response from God? The stories today talk of healing and restoration received. What about addiction, mental illness, chronic illness, terminal illness? What if we offer our prayer “Oh, God, you’ve been so good to me in the past and I know you’re so good that you’ll help me now; after all, I’ve told others how great you are and how great I’m sure you will be in this circumstance”? And what if healing as we picture it does not happen? What if suffering continues? If it seems God does not “choose”?

We may never know what the thorn in the apostle Paul’s side was but it persisted, as best as we know, until his death, even after Paul asked God to remove it from him not once or twice but three times (2 Corinthians 12:8). Paul notes that God’s reply was “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” This answer was enough for Paul and this answer describes the expression of God’s power through Christ in the world, power through weakness. Not having the fortitude of Christ, nor even Paul, I find this answer insufficient when I think of the friends who have fibromyalgia and Crohn’s and degenerative diseases of the spine and some days cannot leave the house for the pain. I find this answer insufficient when I think of my grandmother who suffered from bipolar disorder for decades and suffered through electroshock therapy as a means of easing it and her daughters who suffered through her multiple attempts on her own life. I find this answer insufficient when I think of my dear friend who does battle daily against an addiction.

I trust that God is with them, with us, in our sufferings, especially through the people who support us and care for us and show us a love like God’s. But what if the healing doesn’t come for them like it did for the psalmist and the leper? Are they still compelled to praise God and give thanks, to extol the greatness of the Lord? What does faith look like for them and those who love them? This idea of God, seemingly, selectively intervening and our role in prayer has troubled me for some time so years ago I asked my own pastor, in ministry for near 30 years and someone for whom I have great respect in many

ways, what he makes of it. I asked him “How do you make sense of free will (God being with us but not intervening, say, to pluck people out of danger) and prayers requesting healing, comfort, even a specific outcome?”

He replied,

It’s a tough question, isn’t it? How does God intervene in the world? If not at all, then what good is God, and if only sometimes, then why does God choose favorites? It’s clear God does not intervene all the time...but why not? The peace I have made with this involves the old Jewish understanding of creation that in order for anything besides God to exist, God must withhold / limit himself in order for anything else to be. Thus God voluntarily limits himself to enable anything else to exist. This withholding of God’s own self is what enables the opportunity for things to happen beyond God’s purpose / intentions. Thus, the following axioms apply:

- God’s intent for creation is always strength, health, forgiveness, love, etc.
- however, God does not force our actions; God seeks but does not compel our response
- therefore, not everything that happens is God’s will
- when we pray, we join our energy to God’s in support of a particular person’s healing, or a particular cause
- our prayer energy always makes a difference in a situation in some unseen way; at times our prayers, when focused and combined with God’s Spirit, visibly affect a situation for the better.⁴

So I have taken from him good reason to continue in prayer. Praying does matter. Our prayers don’t convince God to behave in one way or another but our prayers matter, sometimes in ways unseen.

Today’s readings, or their un-text, the unspoken counterpart of what is actually said, reminded me, though, that I am troubled by how one who is not healed as desired could possibly respond with praise for God. So I asked a friend who struggles with addiction to help me with this question. This is what he said: “I don’t think the value in prayer is that you ask God for what you want and then you have a 50/50 chance of getting what you want, like a parent saying ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Praying is keeping up your end of the relationship. Sure, it would be nice if God took away my addiction but what God does, what God is doing is surrounding me with examples of gentleness and opportunities to be loved. God couldn’t know me, know who I am, and leave me to be by myself in this so God continues to give me a shot, a chance to make a better choice. God continues to show me that I am totally lovable just as I am today. Through

⁴ E-mails dated May 3, 2009 - May 4, 2009.

people, I understand God's gentleness and grace. And even if all those people went away, I know God would not leave me alone. How could I *not* thank God for the people who stand by me and who show me that I am lovable?"

Oh, how we wish life was like the psalm and the gospel. Sometimes, for some people, for some reason, it is. What I know is that it's not because God loves some more than others or because some people pray harder than others. What I know is that for most people, our hopes for our ideas of healing are not met. What I know is that whether you are the psalmist or the leper or the person battling addiction or the person struggling through illness, God will not leave you alone. God cares too much about us to forgo the relationship God so strongly desires. We may not get the outcome we hope for but that doesn't mean we aren't still left with reasons to praise and thank and extol God.

Let us pray: God of mystery, we pray for the healing needed in each of our lives and we ask you to send your Spirit upon us that we might see how it is that you reply. Amen.