

Psalm 69 Disorientation, June 21, 2020

I want us to think about disorientation for a few minutes. Do you feel at all disoriented these days? I know I do, and I'm guessing most of us might, and for good reason. One small example of disorientation for me and maybe others is in regard to the passage of time. On the one hand, I have felt like time is passing quickly these past several months. I find myself surprised that it's already the time of the summer solstice and Father's Day---the days, weeks, and months seem to be clipping right along. Yet on the other hand, just the other day I was startled by the realization that it's actually only been 3 months since the whole quarantining and distance lifestyle thing began as a result of Covid-19. Just 3 months! We've not been meeting in our building, we've not been singing together in worship, we've been creating virtual worship services, we've been having an infinite number of Zoom encounters *only* for the last 3 months? It feels like much longer than that to me, which doesn't correlate well with my thinking that time is passing quickly. Those two things don't go together! My sense of time, even of what day of the week it is sometimes, is just out of whack. Maybe for you too?

Here's a slightly larger example of disorientation in regard to how the Coronavirus pandemic is going to play out in the future. Because not only do the guidelines of what is safe and acceptable change frequently, but different governmental and churchly agencies have *different* guidelines. We hear the situation is improving; no, we hear the virus is spiking again. We read there will be a second wave in the fall or the winter; no, we read that perhaps we will avoid a second wave. We hear an effective treatment is near at hand; no, actually that's a false hope. We learn a vaccine is shortly to

be developed; no, it may take months or a year or more. I mean talk about disorienting! How on earth does one plan? Plan for worshiping in-building together, or for taking a vacation to see family, or for even deciding if you should have a meal in a restaurant or not, now that maybe you can? Our sense of how the future will unfold is definitely jumbled and disorienting!

And yet here again is an even larger sense of disorientation, and that's in regards to our world view about race, justice, and law enforcement. The death of many black Americans, particularly that of George Floyd, and the resulting reactions, both peaceful and violent, have caused many of us to have to reorient our world view about things we thought we knew. Some of us-- at least some of us like me-- thought we lived in a nation that was reasonably equitable as to how those of different races experienced life. Some of us—again, like me-- assumed that the present system of law enforcement was completely adequate and impartial. Some of us—those like me-- thought that people in *Minnesota*, at least, are Minnesota nice and get along quite nicely, regardless of race or other differences. And all of us who thought that way—just like me--were egregiously mistaken. We were viewing everything through the lens of our mostly white, middle-class- or -above pair of eye-glasses, and we didn't even know it. And so the events of the past weeks, as they have unfolded, have shocked us, left us questioning some of our basic assumptions---with good reason---and have been definitely disorienting. Turns out the way we may see and experience the world *isn't* the way a good portion of the population does. Based on skin color. That is so *not* the vision of America that I have embraced that it has been utterly disorienting and bewildering.

If anything I am saying has made sense to you, then you can perhaps find the same sense of gratitude that I do for the psalm assigned from our lectionary for this morning. People at our Lectio Divina study last week assumed I'd picked this lesson as a reflection on current events, but no, it's just providentially an apt text for us right now. We're doing a three week series of psalms. Last week we looked at Psalm 100, a psalm of praise. This week's psalm, Psalm 69, is *not* primarily about praise or worship. It is instead generally classified as either a psalm of lament or a psalm of prayer for help. Certainly we can see the rationale for those classifications. The writer of this psalm, probably a Hebrew man living in exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, is giving voice to his anguish, his perplexity, and his need for God's help. It's as though he's repeatedly dialing 911 to God, describing his situation in a variety of colorful metaphors and pleading with God to help him---and to do so in an efficient and timely manner, please and thank you! He speaks of feeling that he's sinking into the mire or being swallowed up by flood waters. We still use idioms that are similar....we're up to our neck in problems or we're drowning in a seas of troubles or we're swamped by overwork or we're going down. While all of this definitely makes this psalm one of lament or of a prayer for help, I was intrigued that Prof. Rolf Jacobson classifies it *another* way: he describes it as a psalm of *disorientation*. Which certainly provides an intersection point between us and the text. We think *our* world view has turned upside down and inside out, but how much more so would that be true for our psalm writer? His beloved country has been overrun by a foreign power; the all-important temple, symbol of Hebrew faith and power, has been destroyed; and he, along with other leaders, has

been hauled off to live in Babylon, a country he despises, while his home and belongings are handed off to others. Talk about disorienting! But what I find to be balm for my soul is that our story and the many stories in Scripture coincide; people of faith for literally thousands of years have had to struggle with bewilderment and disorientation, and they have given voice to that struggle, and God has responded. Which is certainly the hope we find within this psalm. Even as the writer feels that they're being overwhelmed, they also affirm that God is good, that God's love is steadfast, that God's mercies are abundant, and that God will hear, answer, and help him. We may be bewildered and disoriented, but we are *still* within God's embrace.

In honor of Father's Day, I'd like to share a personal story of disorientation and embrace. I certainly know that Father's Day can mean different things to different people, both joyful and difficult things. I also understand that the primary image of Father as a way to relate to God can work well for some and not at all for others. I have been fortunate to have had a wonderful Dad, one who has always been a kind of hero for me. And I can remember a time that my Dad and I were walking around one of the busy, congested lakes in Minneapolis one summer evening when I was probably in my early teens. For whatever reason, bicyclists and walkers were on the same path, and those on bicycles were coming from both directions, carelessly flying through the crowds of pedestrians. "Watch out!" my Dad warned me, but I couldn't figure out from which way the greatest danger was coming and to which side of the path I should try to move. I was completely disoriented. I threw my Dad a panicked glance, and he responded by pulling me into his arms into the middle of the path, while bicyclists whizzed by us narrowly in

both directions. If we'd been struck, he would have taken the brunt of the collision. For me, this is a moving and exact image of God in this psalm. Hearing our cry for help, seeing our sense of disorientation, confusion, and fear; God responds---risking God's own self for our safety and well-being, as demonstrated by the cross of Christ. We are encircled and embraced by God. No matter how disoriented or bewildered we may feel, God hears our cries and responds to help and save. *That's* the good news in this psalm and in our lives.

But here's the thing. My Dad didn't cling to me forever; he released me, and on we walked. And I had learned a lesson about needing to be situationally aware of bicyclists on shared paths. And each of the situations of disorientation which have found us in the past months have something to teach us, likely something we needed to learn. Let me be clear; I am absolutely *not* suggesting that God caused coronavirus or racial injustice incidents to either punish us or teach us a lesson; God does not will evil. But I *am* suggesting that God's Spirit can move in mysterious and powerful ways to bring us *through* such disorienting experiences in ways that we can do some learning and growing. For example, God willing, we will never again take for granted the former ease with which we visited, shook hands, exchanged hugs, worshiped and sang together, shared food together, and moved through the world without fear of contagion. That was a gift most of us never even recognized or valued, and we should not be so unappreciative ever again. We can learn the true value of such interaction as a result of this disorientating quarantining and distancing. Furthermore, the pandemic has forced us as a *congregation* to do things we wouldn't otherwise have done, like create an online

worship option. If our viewing numbers are even close to correct, this online worship has been an unintentional outreach ministry, and probably one we should have been doing all along, and certainly one we will continue to do in the future, even when we return to our building for worship. The need to keep adapting to changing circumstances has been wearying, but God's Spirit has really built some resilience into us, individually and congregationally, and that's a gift. God can work through our times of disorientation to lead us to some new places or better practices.

Certainly we pray that is so in regards to racism and injustice. *It has been* disorienting to have our tidy worldview upset in regards to how racial injustice actually permeates our society, and how endemic racism is, even within ourselves---but that's a *necessary* disorientation. God loves the whole world, no exceptions, and God will be well served if we are taking some hard looks at ourselves, our state and our nation, our laws, our public safety systems, and so on. Out of tragedies and losses and disorientations, God can bring new creation. In fact, that's kind of God's specialty: resurrection and renewal. May we, in this time of disorientation, model ourselves on the writer of this psalm. May we cry out to God, may we trust God to help and embrace us, and may we be open to whatever God may teach us and where ever God may lead us moving forward. Amen.