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Rehearsing Hope

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Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 11:25-36, Matthew 16:13-20

As I look around our culture and our world today, I see a range of responses to the virus: fear, anxiety, anger, and some spreading conspiracy theories. People around the world are facing this struggle simultaneously. There have been online arguments over it, and some people have even gotten into public altercations. At the same time, there have also been some amazing responses of love and kindness and service to those in need.

How do we live in this moment? How do we love in this moment? Suffering is a predominant theme throughout Scripture. While sometimes people are suffering as a result of their own sin, there are other stories of the righteous plunged into the suffering of the world around them. David is hunted by a maniacal king. Jeremiah is attacked for his words of truth. Job is unexplainably plunged into physical and mental suffering.

Scripture is also filled with the cries of God's people in the midst of suffering. Some laments end with no hope in sight, but many times there is a restoration of hope even if the situation is still dire. This hope is rooted in the promise of God's grace that will soon appear.

Jurgen Moltmann reminds us, "Genuine hope is not blind optimism. It is hope with open eyes, which sees the suffering and yet believes in the future." As we read the Scriptures we are learning to trust God's faithfulness by rehearsing the past even as we look to God's future promise that will soon be unveiled.

Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy said that remembering the past and having hope toward the future can help us to understand what we need to do in this moment. This pattern is all through Scripture.

Consider the prophets. I used to think they were describing the future, particularly the end of time. The more I read the prophets, the more I realized how difficult it is to separate the past, present and future in their writings. Some of them write more like musicians than logicians. During the first part of Ezekiel, he is trying to convince the captives that the past is gone. They will not return to Jerusalem. Babylon is their home. Many of his actions and words convey a sense of hopelessness. But then the future begins to open. He describes a restoration of Israel. In his image of the future Temple, he draws upon images as far back as Eden to create an image of a reborn nation, a resurrected people. He connects the past and the future to give the captives hope and begin to act upon their calling in the present. This rhythm appears all through Scripture.

In a moment when so many people in our culture feel paralyzed with fear or anger, we need to draw upon the wisdom of Scripture and even church history to understand where God's people have walked before and where God is leading us in the days ahead. As I read through Psalm 138, I saw this common pattern of past and future. I want to a few moments to consider the special and temporal movement of the speaker in Psalm 138 even as we consider our own movement in this moment in time and space.

Verses one and two begin in the present. The psalmist is worshipping the Lord.

1 I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;  
2 I bow down toward your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,  
for you have exalted above all things  
your name and your word.

This opening brings to mind the Revelation. John is exiled to Patmos. His letters to the seven churches indicate that the people of God are facing a mighty struggle. Some are under persecution. Some are seduced by the cultures around them. Some have fallen into heresy. The people of God are in distress. How does John respond to the troubles all around him? He is worshipping the Lord of Glory. He is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. As he worships, he beholds the Ancient of Days in the face of Jesus Christ.

The psalmist is worshipping the Lord with his whole heart, or according to Deuteronomy 6:6, he has turned to the Lord with all his heart, all his soul, and all his might. Every week, we rehearse this same command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and with all our mind. Every week and in daily and evening prayer, we also repent for our failure to love. Obedience to this command integrates our whole person. We respond wholly to God in love and wholly to one another in love. Except that we don't. We fall short. We repeat the command, pray our confession, and seek to obey fully. At the same time, we trust that the Lord is conforming us to His image and making us lovers who love wholly and truly by the power of His Spirit.

How do we respond in the present moment? First, we love. We love God and one another.

Even as the psalmist turns toward the Lord, he turns away from the gods. Who are the gods in this verse? Are these angels. Possibly. Are these powers and principalities? Maybe. Are these humans? Once again, quite possibly.

This brings me back to Revelation and to Ephesians. In Revelation 4 and 5, we see the four living creatures, the elders, and all the myriad of angels worshipping the Lord with a loud voice. Every week as we approach the table of the Lord, we declare to the Lord,

We praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

The psalmist turns to the Lord in worship, and even as he turns there is a choir already turning, already sounding the praises of God. And this blessed worship is a wonder to all the powers and principalities. As the church joins into this eternal chorus, the glory of God is revealed in ways

we have yet to grasp. As Paul writes in Ephesians 3:10, “through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

For many centuries, the church continued to face East in worship. The church continued the pattern of facing the Temple or the place of the Temple, Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. There are medieval maps that show Jerusalem as the center of the world. We continue to look to Israel, to Jesus Christ, the final King of the Jews in worship. This is orientation.

Even as we are learning to love in this present moment whatever may come, we are also getting re-oriented. We turn from our own doubts and fears and anger and struggle and face the King of Kings and Lords of Lords, “Who is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.”

His word is sure and true and absolutely faithful.

In verse three, the psalmist looks back, remembers, and rehearses the God whose word is faithful and true. “On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.”

He looks back into his own life and even into the life of his people. For even as his forefathers were rescued from slavery, he counts that as his own rescue. He is the slave who has been made free. We are the slave who have been made free. We are the dead who have been brought back to life. We are those orphans who are far off, with no name and we have been brought near and given a name, “Royal Priesthood.” “Holy Unto the Lord.”

And the strength of our souls have increased. In a time of doubt and fear, we remember who we are in Jesus Christ. We find strength not in our word but in the word of His power who has raised from death to life.

Now the psalmist looks forward, anticipating various points in the future.

All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth,  
and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.  
For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,  
but the haughty he knows from afar. Ps 138:4–6.

The psalmist anticipates the day when the powerful, the kings of the land, the wealthy, those who stride above the earth as gods of the land, will humble themselves before the mighty of God. This has happened and will happen as Paul assures us in Philippians 2, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” They will not simply bow grudgingly but the psalmist declares, “and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.”

The high will be brought low. All humanity will be brought low before the good gracious and faithful one who is Lord of all and worthy of all praise.

Though the world so often looks like it is descending from one dark place to another, the movement of history is ultimately a movement to Mt. Zion, to the throne of the living God. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1,

<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>1</sup>

The psalmist now returns to the present with an eye toward the future.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve my life;  
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,  
and your right hand delivers me.  
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands. (7-8)

In this moment when I live, I do not strain for a past that is long gone or stretch toward a future that may never be. Rather, in this moment, I trust that the Lord is absolutely faithful, evening I walk in the midst of trouble. He is the one who preserves my life, defeats my enemies, delivers and fulfills His purposes in me. I trust in the steadfast love of the Lord. I know that he will not forsake me, and he will lead me step by step, day by day, moment by moment into the fullness of His love.

Even today, may we all go forth in the light of His love, bringing the word of His grace to a weary world in need of His Word.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 1:6–10.