

A Time of Disorientation – Lessons from the Psalms

Psalms 1, 88, and 30

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Sometimes music soothes my soul. Sometimes music lifts me and inspires me. And sometimes music takes me places I have not been before. That's how I felt when I went to a jazz concert many years ago. Bill Carter is a friend of mine. He is a Presbyterian pastor in Clarks Summit, PA. He is one of my favorite preachers. And he is an accomplished jazz pianist and jazz music composer and arranger. Years ago he put together a jazz band of professional musicians named Presbybop. I finally went to hear them. Let me offer a disclaimer. I have not listened to much jazz over the years.

Here is one of the main things I remember. They started playing the hymn "Be Thou My Vision." It was a wonderful arrangement of that familiar hymn. People were humming or singing along. It was comfortable and easy,

And then the song changed. The band started jamming and improvising on the melody. The improvisations continued until the melody was unrecognizable. There were many dissonant notes. A few times it felt even a little painful to my ears.

And then the sound, the music, the noise resolved into melody again, in a slightly different rhythm and maybe different key than the original. Similar but different. Uplifting, joyful, a slightly faster tempo.

Jazz bands like Bill's group do their own improvisations that at times play in this pattern and variations. You can go back to classical music from hundreds of years ago and see a long tradition of music that starts with a theme, a melody, improvises or plays with that melody in a middle section and then returns to the melody at the end. Mozart did it all the time.

The idea is orientation followed by disorientation followed by reorientation, a musical journey and a journey of life and spiritual formation.

In some ways childhood can be marked by feelings and thoughts that are open, unambiguous, a sense that the world works the way it is supposed to. Maybe a time of innocence.

But things happen in our lives that cause us to question our early innocence. We make mistakes. Choices we make take us into a time of upheaval and uncertainty and pain. Circumstances out of our control turn our world upside down. We see the brokenness of human institutions; we experience heartbreak. This time of the Covid 19 pandemic and protesting racial injustice and excessive force by police against black men and women has certainly been a time of disorientation personally, for communities and globally. We may be

wondering where is God. When will the virus be under control? How will people who are losing their jobs find employment and income? There is an uprising around the issues of racial justice and systemic racism. We become disoriented. The world that once had a melody becomes a mess of dissonance and noise that makes us want things to become normal again, predictable again.

But eventually something shifts. Hear notes of the melody again. We make some decisions. We move in a direction that offers hope. Importantly, though, we don't return to being the innocent and naïve selves we once were. It's not a return to the orientation we had before; it's a reorientation, a new orientation, one that appreciates where we've been and understands in a new way that we might not have arrived just yet at the end of our journey, but we're on our way home and we're yearning to get there.

Walter Brueggemann is a famous and respected biblical scholar. One of the things that put Brueggemann on the map as a scholar was an article and later a book he wrote back in the 1980s asserting that the Psalms can all be understood as either psalms of orientation, disorientation, or new orientation. (*The Message of the Psalms*, 1985)

These categories don't happen in any particular order, moving from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, but each of the psalms speaks to one of these three general ideas. Some express the idea that all is well in the world—good people prosper, evil people suffer, life is fair, and God's justice fills the earth. An example, Psalm 1, is a Psalm of orientation and it starts this way: "Blessed are those, who walk hand in hand, with goodness, for their delight is in the Spirit." It's good to do the right thing, things will work out. It's a psalm of orientation.

Other psalms express disorientation like Psalm 22. This is the psalm Jesus quoted from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you left me all alone and why are you so far from my cry and from my words of distress?"

Psalms of disorientation and lament are the words of a people who are just that—disoriented. Something has happened that is tragic or unexpected; life is painful. It does not make sense. Someone is suffering. No end in sight. Life is turned upside down, and the orientation is gone. How long? Psalm 88 is a Psalm of Disorientation and Lament. This is where we are in many ways in the Spring of 2020. I often feel the need to lament as I think about those who have died and the grief of so many.

Yet this is not the end of the story. Even out of the most tragic and difficult of circumstances somehow there is hope that in time, with help, we can emerge from disorientation and that's why there are psalms of new orientation. Psalm 30. God turns our mourning into dancing. It's not as if we haven't been disoriented, haven't been down to the pit, but we've been lifted out. God gives us a new vision and hope for the future.

While music and literature have always done well to describe this journey through the disorienting times in life, holding on to disorientation is something our culture and the church don't do very well. Some people seem to say - I want my life back. Maybe we don't take time to reflect what could be different or to have a deeper entering into re-orientation.

Brueggemann writes that disorientation "may not be fully experienced, embraced [or] acknowledged, unless it is brought to speech." That's what those psalms are for. Church can be a place where we cry, where we lament, where we honestly look at grief and loss, where we give words to these realities.

Naming disorientation for what it is is important, because unless we do that, we can't really understand reorientation with any kind of authenticity. We love reorientation. We love talking about what we've been through and how much we've learned and how naïve we once were, but we can't really have that talk until we've really been to the place of disorientation. And many times we don't do that; we allow ourselves to be prematurely reoriented. As yet one more of our efforts to smooth over our sense of disorientation, we tell ourselves and others that we have fully processed whatever difficulties we faced, even if we never really did.

Sometimes we need to read those psalms of disorientation, of honest lament. When one of our sons was very sick for months, I had many sleepless nights. I turned to those psalms. I needed to read and say those words. How long, O God? One night I decided to write my own psalm of lament. It was very cathartic. It was not for anyone else to see, but my own soul needed to find my voice and my words. Writing it freed something in me.

Are you finding this time of the pandemic and protest as a time of lament? I encourage you to read some of the psalms of lament. What are we lamenting? What are we missing about not being together in worship? Who are we missing? How do we remain open to what is next as a community of faith?

The time of reorientation is coming. And yet there may be yet another way we are moving through this season. Close with some images from an article I read this week by Deborah Wright. She is a Presbyterian pastor and church consultant. Here is the way she describes some of the tasks of this season of disorientation.

As I enter week 10 of SIP (Sheltering in Place) ... Stages of response matter. Our default switch as eager problem-solvers is to rush in and fix. It's a natural reflex. Four distinct serial stages our churches must go through as part of Disorientation of this coronavirus .

1. TRIAGE - *Assessing the immediate damage and danger. For the church in the middle of Lent this became, "How to get everybody through Easter!" or, as we joke, suddenly every pastor we know became a Televangelist!*

2. **FRAGILITY** - Where are the cracks? I live in earthquakes country. Immediately after initial triage, they start looking for cracks in the bridges, the overpasses, the buildings, power grids, systems, etc. In the church, our job is checking for the financial, mental, physical and spiritual 'cracks'. This is the stage we are in now. Helping people stay connected.Recognizing very real issue of Zoom Fatigue!

3. **NEW NORMAL** - Normal is our nemesis at this stage! As we approach this third stage it's all about re-entry, gathering again for in-person worship, etc. How will we do things differently? Notice I said 'regular' worship earlier. There may be no such thing as 'regular' again.....Technically, how do we do worship together safely - the offering plate, communion, passing the peace, a printed bulletin, seating, sanitizing, singing, coffee hour,This is decidedly NOT about RESTORATION! The temple may be in rubble- let's not necessarily rebuild it as it was!

4. **SORTING** - A time of deep discernment. Think of Phyllis Tickle's notion of the Rummage Sale that Christianity holds every 500 years. What is essential and what is fleeting? This stage is all about asking the WHO, the WHAT and the WHY - but not the HOW. Not yet! The HOW gets us stuck in technical fixes for adaptive problems. This is a time to experiment and fail - try new things, see what from our SIP time we may keep, like continuing with certain committee meetings on zoom, like a noontime zoom lunch with prayer, bible study or just fellowship. This can be a time of pulling out some real lay talent that has been dormant.

I will never again have to encourage a congregation to imagine WHO and WHAT they are without a church building! That used to be a tough exercise. No more. Hopefully we can deeply discern the WHO, WHAT, and WHY of Church with experiential imagination now, and we will be the stronger for it!

As Churchill said, "**Never let a good crisis go to waste!**" Experiment, celebrate successes and failures, and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit! This is KAIROS TIME!

So let's take time to lament and name the ways we feel disoriented. Let's continue to pray. Let's open ourselves to the Spirit and continue this journey of reorientation, imagining a new normal and what we need to hold onto and what we need to let go of. I hear that melody of holy love and hope and justice in a new key growing louder. Listen. Amen.

Walter Bruggemann, The Message of the Psalms, Fortress Press. 1985.

Rev. Adam H. Fronczek, "Disorientation . . . Reorientation," Fourth Presbyterian Church
https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2012/030412_4pm.html?print=true

Presbybop - <https://presbybop.com/>

Rev. Deborah Wright, "Adaptive Change During a Crisis – Kairos Time!" Center for Healthy Churches
<http://chchurches.org/adaptive-change-during-a-crisis-kairos-time/>

A Psalm of Orientation Psalm 1 (selected verses) from *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill

Blessed are those
 who walk hand in hand with goodness,
 who stand beside virtue,
 who sit in the seat of truth;
For their delight is in the Spirit
 and in Love's heart they dwell
 day and night.

Psalm of Disorientation Psalm 88 - (selected verses) New Revised Standard Version

1 O God of my salvation,
 when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
2 let my prayer come before you;
 incline your ear to my cry.
3 For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
4 I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
 I am like those who have no help,
14 O God, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?

A Psalm of Reorientation Psalm 30 (selected verses)) from *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill

All praise to You, O Beloved,
 for You have raised me up,
 and have not let my fears
 overwhelm me.
O Compassionate One, I cried
 for help, and You comforted me.
You, O Love, helped me release
 my soul from despair;
You gave me strength to face my fears;
 Now love is awakening in me.
In the evening we may weep,
 yet joy comes with the morning.
And You turned my mourning into dancing;
You set me free and clothed me with gladness.