

“Hit Songs, B.C.”-- Summer Sermon Series
Outdoor Worship
“Bold, Faithful Complaint”
by
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Texts: Psalm 13
Matthew 15:21-28

Preached: 8/18/19

This morning I pick back up with my summer sermon series featuring hit songs. Most of you know, by now, that you won't recognize these songs from any stations on SiriusXM Radio and they won't make their way onto Casey Casem's Top 40. The songs I've been covering are too old and the original tunes have long been lost. But they remain treasures of our faith – we're covering the Psalms, songs and prayers from the very earliest days of God's people – the biblical collection of 150 psalms make up the church's original songbook.

Today we highlight Psalm 13. My Bible subtitles this psalm “Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies,” but I have rewritten that to read: “Bold, Faithful Complaint.”

Psalm 13 is not one of those psalms you want to read when life is good, when things are going your way, or when you are in a mode of thanksgiving and praise. (There are lots of psalms for those times...I've already covered several earlier in the summer.) Rather, Psalm 13 is for a time when you feel forgotten by God...when you are in pain...or when you have “sorrow in your heart all day long”...or when you feel your enemy is exalting over you.

Again...if you are in a happy place, then you probably won't understand this psalm at all. It may even offend your sensibilities. However, if, and when, you are down in the dumps...feel ripped off...know that you are being ignored...or, somehow, feel far from God's presence...well, then, you might welcome such a song. It's not an everyday psalm, but it's one most of us need at some junctures in life...and it's comforting to know that faithful people can pray like this...can say to God what they really feel. I mean, we'd be fooling ourselves, right, if we imagined that we could trick

God by pretending we weren't frustrated with him, when, in truth, we were angry in our heart and felt like he had let us down.

Some imagine that we should keep saying only nice things, even when we are seething inside...but why? If we have a genuine relationship with God, then we ought to be able to speak freely, right? That's what the psalmist does.

But this kind of frank prayer is hard for many of us to swallow. It's not how we were brought up! Some of us, as children, remember a Sunday School teacher, or a respected elder, telling us that it was wrong to question God and a Christian shouldn't have doubts.

You might have asked as a young person, "Is God afraid of my questions and doubts?" Hopefully you have come to the realization that it wasn't God who was afraid, but rather your teacher!

Someone once said, "*The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.*"

Doubt and questioning, rather than being enemies of faith, can lead us deeper in our relationship with God. Writer Madeleine L'Engel said, "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly."

The best evidence for God being on our side, even in the worst of times, even when we share our heartfelt feelings, is Jesus Christ. If we want to know where God is in the midst of suffering, we need only point to the cross — Jesus' own words from the cross were another lament psalm, Psalm 22. Jesus, hanging on the cross, on the verge of despair, called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." The cross shows us God's definitive statement of "steadfast love" for us...God, giving up his only begotten son...Jesus, laying down his life.

But there are other stories that give us hope, that startle us out of our comfortable faith...that spur us on to a faith that is authentic, that can carry us through the rotten times, the times of loss, unfairness, injustice, pain in our souls. One such story is the one of Jesus' interaction with a Canaanite woman.

Jesus must be exhausted. He has, in the last few days, performed the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, walked on the water, healed many at Gennesaret and quarreled with the scribes and the Pharisees. After that, he had been teaching his disciples, who frustrated him because they did not understand his parables, to which he comments, "Are you still without understanding?"

Jesus is back on the road, in the region of Tyre and Sidon. A woman comes up to him with a heartfelt request. She uses appropriate respectful language, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David," and then pleads for the health of her daughter, who is tormented by a demon. Jesus, startlingly, first ignores her, but she persists so much that the disciples ask that Jesus send her away. And it seems Jesus does indeed try to put her off, refuses to help her...insinuates that she doesn't deserve his help, even! But she will not be deterred. She is like the psalmist – refusing to be dismissed, acting out that faithful question, "How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever...how long must my daughter bear pain in her soul?"

The woman's longsuffering...her bold, faithful complaint, directly to Jesus, does not earn her further scorn, but rather moves the Lord to compassion. Jesus does not send her away, ultimately, but rather keeps listening and says to her the astounding words, "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." And the text says, "Her daughter was healed instantly." The woman comes off as more "faithful" than Jesus' own disciples – as an outsider, a Canaanite!

For those times when life is hard, when it seems you have been cast off and forgotten by everyone, including God, when you are sick and tired of being sick and tired, you might just get real...and tell God how you really feel. God can take it. You might scare your Sunday School teacher or others, but you won't scare God!

John Calvin, writing in the 16th century, smack dab in the middle of the Protestant Reformation, embraced Psalm 13 and saw the faith of such a prayer. Calvin observed, *“It seemed to David (the assumed author of the Psalm)...that he was forsaken by God. At the same time, however, the eyes of his mind, guided by the light of faith, penetrated even to the grace of God, although it was hidden in darkness. When he saw not a single ray of good hope to whatever quarter he turned, so far as human reason could judge, constrained by grief, he cries out that God did not regard him; and yet, by this very complaint he gives evidence that faith enabled him to rise higher, and to conclude, contrary to the judgment of the flesh, that his welfare was secure in the hand of God. Had it been otherwise, how could he direct his groanings and prayers to him? Following this example, we must so wrestle against temptations to be assured by faith, even in the very midst of the conflict, that the calamities which urge us to despair must be overcome...”*

Calvin also helpfully points out that in concluding the psalm, David *“hastens with promptitude of soul to sing of God’s benefits before he had received them, places the deliverance, which was then apparently at a distance, immediately before his eyes.”*

So often, God’s presence, wisdom and action are really only understood in retrospect. In a sense, the culmination of the psalm is something like this: *“Because I remember what you have done in the past, O God, and in spite of all evidence that points to your current absence, I will trust you today, and tomorrow I will rejoice in your salvation.”* This is as good a definition of faith as you will find!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.