

When I Am in Deep Trouble

Psalm 138

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Sunday, June 10, 2018

LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/when-i-am-in-deep-trouble/>

As many of you are aware, May was the hottest May on record for Central Missouri. I blame all the people who complained about the long winter - which includes me

Memorial Day weekend was an exceptionally hot weekend. On that Monday – Memorial Day, we were headed out for our senior trip to North Carolina, so on Sunday, I wanted to get one final walk in. It was 95 degrees out and full sun, but I was determined to get it done.

One of my favorite places to walk is the Cole County Lake, not far from my home. There are a handful of shade spots along the path around the lake, but they pass quickly as you keep your pace. The geese were crankier than normal and no one else was at the lake – which told me either I'm the only individual in the community deeply dedicated to physical fitness (I can hardly say that without laughing) or I lack some basic cognitive skills.

On the third lap around, I began to question whether I would make it. The sun seemed hotter and the parking lot farther with each step. I was beginning to plot who I could call to come pick me up and drive me the remaining 300 feet without judgement. And then, I noticed a change almost instantly. A breeze picked up out of nowhere; the intensity of the sun lessened; and a shadow seemed to hover over me and the lake. With cautious hope, I looked toward the heavens and saw a small cloud crossing between me and the sun. It was glorious. And it moved slowly enough that it hid the sun until I got back to my car.



I took a picture of it that day because this sermon was on my mind and heart and I felt like I might want to share this moment with you today.

I was utterly grateful for a reprieve from the heat. It put a new song in my heart and spring in my step. Not enough spring for a fourth lap for I knew this was a small window of mercy.

I'm not going to say God put that cloud there. But I'm not going to say God didn't either. God does amazing things with clouds as Scripture teaches us. In the biblical text, clouds often represent the Divine presence. Was the cloud a gift from God or not? The answer is "yes".

Under the protection of the cloud, I did two things as I walked the rest of the journey:

1. I was grateful. I thanked God for the gift of the cloud, for the coolness of the breeze and the shelter of the shade. Grateful that I knew I could make it to the air conditioning of my car and my water bottle. Grateful for the beauty of the lake and the trees and the birds, which I was not able to notice or appreciate a few minutes earlier.

2. And I remembered. I remembered the times God had showed up for me on hard journeys in my past. Journeys where I wasn't sure I would make it. Roads where I wanted to collapse under a shade tree and never get back up, yet God was faithful.

When I think back on that walk two weeks ago, I don't think about how hot it was or how difficult the last lap was. It isn't that I don't remember, but rather, it isn't what stands out to me. When I think back on that day, I smile, grateful for a moment with God – a God who has always been faithful.

Psalm 138 is written by one who is looking back on a hard journey having come through it. Someone who was on lap three in the oppressive heat, not sure they can make it to the car, and a cloud appears, and they live to tell about it. It is a song of thanksgiving for deliverance and a testimony to what the Lord did to help them through it. This isn't a Psalm crying out, "where is God?" It is a psalm proclaiming, "God has been here all along!"

We don't know what exactly happened. The psalmist describes what he has been through as a day of trouble, a day of distress. Some really tough times. We don't know whether these were physical or emotional or spiritual. Whether it was caused by financial peril, military threat, or family issues. We don't know if it was an individual journey of hardship or a journey of hardship for a nation or community. We've all experienced or are experiencing our own unique day or month or years of trouble. The words of the psalmist are able to meet each of us wherever we have been, wherever we may find ourselves now, or wherever our journey may take us.

The psalmist now thinks of the dark valley through which he walked, no longer as the time of trouble, but as the time when he called out and when God answered. The time when "you increased my strength of soul." The psalmist's passage through the time of crisis had quite literally put a new song in his mouth.

Can we think of experiences or journeys we have been on in which – with hindsight and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit – we can see now how God was present? A day of trouble, that in the midst looked like it would never end, yet we are here today to testify that it did and that it was God who brought us through.

It has been twelve years since I walked a very dark and difficult journey through severe depression. It was a year or more of days of trouble, months of walking the third lap in oppressive heat where I was not sure I would make it. When you are in the midst, you can't see anything good. You can't believe that this will pass or that you can take another step. You have no song, no voice to sing. My cloud finally arrived in the form of a counselor and medication, both gifts from the Lord. After a lot of time and healing, I look back on that day of trouble as a time when, like the psalmist, I called out to God and God answered. A time when God and people who loved me were faithful and present with me on the journey even when I wasn't always aware of it.

Psalm 138 is my song from the other side of deep troubles. I shout along with the psalmist, "THANK YOU! Everything in me says "thank you"! In the moment I called out, you stepped in, God. Thank you!"

The beginning of Psalm 138 is completely devoted to gratitude – gratitude to God for his faithfulness when we are in deep trouble. Praise for answering us when we cry out. As

Professor Walter Brueggemann states: "...Liberation from crisis has a stunning effect on worship."

What crisis has God liberated you from? What trial or painful journey has God brought you through?

This morning I want each of us to answer three questions. I encourage you to write your thoughts in the notes section of the bulleting or in your notetaking app on your phone or in your head if you are opposed to conformity. There will be three things I want you to really consider this morning.

WRITE DOWN your response to this statement: A difficult journey God brought me through.

If you don't think or feel God has brought you through anything, you can write down a tough journey you've been on or are going through. Maybe in writing it out and being open this morning, God might show you where He was during that time. (We are now going to experience a rare moment when a pastor is quiet for a few seconds to give you time to think and write.)

In Psalm 138, the psalmist not only expresses gratitude for how he experienced God's help during a crisis. He also proclaims the character of God.

- Verse 2 – "Give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness"
- Verse 5 – "Great is the glory of the Lord"
- Verse 6 – "You regard the lowly"
- Verse 7 – "You preserve me against the wrath of enemies"
- Verse 8 – "Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever"

The day of trouble the psalmist experienced has either taught him or reminded him of the character of God. It is one thing to say God is steadfast in love. It is entirely different to experience God's steadfast love. Difficult moments in our lives because schools of learning. We learn about ourselves. We learn about our fears and weaknesses, our courage and strengths. But we also learn about God. We learn what it means to truly trust God with the unknown. We remember God is patient and faithful, tender and strong because we experience it firsthand. We have first-hand knowledge of, as the psalmist proclaims, God's love and faithfulness.

WRITE DOWN your response to this statement: What I learned about God's character during my difficult journey.

Having answered these two questions, you have the framework for your own Psalm 138. You hopefully have recalled a day of trouble that the Lord has brought you through and it fills your heart with gratitude. Perhaps it has taught you something about God's character. Let's look at the third and final statement for you to respond to.

The Hebrew word that is translated "give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart" in verse 1 of the NRSV is more accurately translated in this context "to cause someone else to know" or to confess. According to Old Testament professor Rolf Jacobson, "giving thanks" Old Testament-style, has less to do with some internal feeling of gratitude and more about sending a thank you note – confessing to another your gratitude. And the thank you note

God desires is to tell others what God has done. To tell your story over coffee. To share a post on Facebook. To share your story via video like Beth did. To sing a song. To weave your confession of gratitude into a conversation.

Thousands of years ago, an individual just like you and me went through dark days. He found the Lord faithful and steadfast in love when he was in deep trouble, and he created a new song in his heart – a song he shared – a song that would continue to bless for thousands of years. How can you confess your gratitude for God's faithfulness – for your benefit and for the benefit of others? What thank you note can you write to glorify God and to encourage others – just as Psalm 138 has done for us this morning?

**WRITE DOWN: How and to whom will I share the story of God's faithfulness to me?
#Psalm138**

There is another reason why it is important for us to tell these stories, to write them down, to remember God's faithfulness in our lives. Since that hot walk on Sunday two weeks ago, I've been on other really hot walks and no literal cloud appeared. I never believed I would have a personal cloud following me around for the rest of my days.

Author James Mead writes, "a realistic faith capitalizes on the so-called 'good times' by growing deep in the knowledge of the Triune God whose kingdom rule is sure. This growth prepares believers for the 'bad times' when doubts arise, and it is difficult to identify, much less rejoice in, what is praiseworthy."

We recall God's faithfulness in our past, we build mental and literal altars where we met God, so that we can return there one day when we are going through a new day of trouble. One day, because it's life, you'll be on the third lap again, wondering if you will make it, wondering if God cares, and this memory of God's faithfulness will help sustain you. Psalm 138 and the psalm you are writing today will be clouds for you in the hard days ahead.

And possibly clouds for people who need the encouragement as well. The power of sharing our stories, our confessions of God's faithfulness, is that God can use them to let someone know they aren't alone. Your thank you note to God that you proclaim to the world just might be the cloud God sends to someone struggling on their third lap.

After a lot of healing, I began to talk about my depression with others and share my story. I was amazed at how many people responded with, "you too?" I had no idea until I started talking about it how many people struggle with depression. Depression is a very lonely, lonely experience that's difficult to understand unless you've walked the journey. And because we don't talk about it much, it stays in the dark. When we share our stories, and confess God's faithfulness in those stories, we are bringing these things out into the light where healing can begin, and where we can walk together through days of trouble.

So, what if you are listening to this sermon and you are on the third lap, beaten down by the sun, and unsure of whether you can keep going? What if you haven't seen a cloud in days and you're beginning to doubt God will ever provide one?

This week we've been shocked by two celebrity suicides. A report was published this week that said suicides rates in 26 states have increased on average of more than 30% since 1999. 30%, folks. Suicides in Missouri rose by 36.4% over the past 17 years. People are hurting. In moments of hopelessness, people are quitting on the third lap because there is no cloud in sight and they are exhausted.

If that is you this morning or if you know of someone who is struggling to have hope that a time of trouble will one day give rise to a new day of hope, be encouraged this morning. May Psalm 138 become a cloud for you to help you get to the next step of help and healing. May our stories of God's steadfast love and faithfulness give you hope to believe that this same love and faithfulness is promised to you as well.

But if they don't today, it's okay. Some teach that the only solution to depression is more faith. That is an absolute lie. It is just one more weight of shame we tie around people's necks who have the weight of the world already on them. During my journey with depression, I am very grateful I never felt abandoned by God or judged by God. He was my faithful companion in the pit – steadfast in love and faithfulness. God led me to other resources to help my body heal – to a counselor who listened and guided me out one step at a time, to a doctor who listened and provided my body with medication to supplement necessary chemicals it was no longer producing. All clouds along my journey. I didn't lack faith and God wasn't punishing me. I was simply walking through a long day of trouble. A day that eventually gave way to a new morning.

I want to share two resources that everyone should write down this morning. Maybe it is for you, maybe it is for someone you know, Maybe it is for a time down the road. But please note these two numbers if you don't have them already:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Crisis Text Line – Text HOME to 741741 (*not only for suicide*)

If you are on the third lap this morning and not sure you can make it, may I ask you to do just one small thing? Let someone know you need some help. Call the lifeline. Text the crisis line. Call or text a friend or family member or one of us. Help us know you're tired and you need a little extra help right now to make it through this day of trouble. I know how hard that is. I remember when I finally decided to call a counselor. I called the number and the receptionist told me they weren't accepting any new patients. And I wept. Because I felt like it had taken everything I had just to make that one call. But the receptionist gave me another number to call. And I connected with a counselor who was the perfect fit for me. Let someone know you need some help.

God loves you and we love you.

We are here to share our stories of God's faithfulness just as the psalmist has done with us this morning. For our benefit. For the benefit of others. For the glory of God.

Remember your song, your story of a difficult journey God brought you through and what you learned about God. And then, share your love note of gratitude with the world!

I want to close by reading Psalm 138 again. May it be the confession of this family of faith as we remember God's faithfulness and steadfast love to us.

BENEDICTION:
Benediction
(based on Psalm 138)

Go with confidence into the days ahead,
trusting in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.
God will not abandon you,
for you are the work of His hands—His own creation—
and His love endures forever.
So go in joy to love and serve the Lord!