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As anyone who has taken the Old Testament class knows, the *Psalms* represent the response of the people to the acts and words of God. As such, the portrayal of God differs according to the setting and purpose of each psalm. And because psalms express human sentiments they are often filled with contradictions. You just heard Psalm 30, which features an invitation to give praise; a recounting of the distress from which deliverance came; and thanksgiving to God. Today, I will follow this tradition with a personal narrative of recovery and thanksgiving. As I was writing this and thinking about the past, I realized that different facets of my story were still not completely or cognitively reconciled. Therefore, this sermon will be more of a testimony, and not a prescription for anyone else. I've learned the hard way that each person has his or her own intrinsic timetable for how they address and understand the following issues.

First, a bit of background, I was an impressionable child, given to magical thinking and inspired pretending. A cast of characters encompassed me at all times. For instance, "Glinda, the good witch" functioned as my guardian angel and was accompanied by my brother Jesus, my Grandfather the Holy Spirit, and all the Saints. As relatives in my extended family died, they joined this ethereal host of hovering others. During this time I was in awe of God, he was the fearless leader of my makeshift crew. He was the man in the sky who saw everything, knew everything, and could do anything. Needless to say, I found this both exhilarating and terrifying.

But as I grew, and tried to comprehend these elusive connections between my father, my priest, and God as the father of Jesus and my heavenly father as well, semantics and truth became even more blurry and mystifying. This was not improved by the fact that my dad, through his own admission, was more invested in his career than his family and as his workaholicism turned to alcoholism the word "father" became even more tainted.

In verse 1 of Psalm 30 it says, "I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me." One of these "foes" developed into the mistaken belief that my dad's example was representative of God. That God would also follow the same template set forth by my own father. As I got older, I began to adhere to this fractured faith and since certain difficulties were not relieved through prayer, I interacted with both my father and with God by hating and blaming them. I didn't question God's existence, it was real and uncompromising, and it just started to seem like a fallacy that he was ever capable of being fair or caring or good. Over time, this led to my own addictions that stemmed from being entrenched in confusion and fear. I think the beginning of Rilke's poem; *The Presentation of Mary at the Temple* poetically describes this experience:

In order to grasp what she was like at that time,
You must first remember a place in yourself
Where pillars do their work; where you can sense
Stairways; where precarious arches

Span the abyss of a space
Which only remained in you because it was built up
From blocks that you can no longer lift
Out of yourself without toppling. *

I imagine many of you in this space have been affected by the weight of addiction in one of its various forms. And just because I could self-righteously refrain from the habit of drinking, I gradually realized, that I was dependent on some other pretty harsh substances. My drugs of choice were a combination of panic, hate, anger, and blame. Though originally, the strength of these emotions helped me survive, they did not continue to serve me well. In my refusal to forgive anyone for anything, these feelings became more powerful, I refused to “let them go,” because, if I let them go, it would mean that “those people” would get away with what they did. It was around this time I began writing with a vengeance. And at first, it came out as a confessional purge-fest. But in the long run writing became a new way of praying and the cry for help that brought me to the doorsill of forgiveness and healing.

At first I circled around these ideas like a hawk bidding its time. As I guardedly tried them out, what I found to be the most difficult was that I had to go back through the holes I had made to get out the first time. And I was often resentful of this effort. What eventually helped was this advice, “The best form of forgiveness is to get on with your life.” It took years, but once I stopped investing so much in the past, and constantly blaming and judging others for their limitations and their choices, I could begin to look at my own life and to realize that I was now responsible for it. And once I began to accept this, my relationships slowly transformed. Even with my father. Ten years ago, if one of you had said that I would ever talk to him, I would have laughed in your face. And even though we’ve managed to work something out for now, I can’t tell you, with any conviction, what the specifics were that made it happen or how long it will last. I like the way poet Carl Phillips expresses this, in the last section of his poem *The Little Dance Outside the Ruins of Unreason*, he writes:

Weakness, I think,
defined us most.

We all but made of it a country—

Let it fall.

Take my hand.

(Singing)
nothing unforgivable

(Singing)
everything to forgive...

Practicing forgiveness brought with it the gift of thanksgiving also known as gratitude. Verse 12 says, “so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” This doesn’t mean we should be thankful to God only when we get what we want, or that we are grateful because we think our circumstances are superior to someone else’s. In my case, I am mostly just appreciative that I did not fall into the abyss of my own destructive emotions. I think for all of us there are plenty of tunnels we have to pass through, some are longer and darker than others, but thus far there has always been a light at the end. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here today. Sometimes it’s a dim reprieve in the short distance between new tunnels, sometimes, it’s the shining gut of a firefly in a jar, held out by the hands of someone who cared about us more than we could care for ourselves.

I am eternally grateful to the compassion of others who have helped me envision what it’s like to be in the presence of a spirit that is all-knowing and still remains loving, despite all that it knows. I wonder if God sometimes functioned as a witness to all my unstructured and confrontational developments of faith; like Paul Celan says: “that someone can be there as your companion; knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: ‘I’ll be with you in the process of your losing me.’” For me, it seems my early concepts of God had to be dissected and reshaped. A process that Meister Eckert was also familiar with when he said, “(the) last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, one takes leave of God.”

So, how do I finally understand God? To address that question I would like to indulge a bit in mysticism and metaphor. For me there is no part of the world that is not God. Imagine this: that the water of God is also the well of God. When you notice rain falling into that deep well, you first notice them as separate drops of water but they join the contained body of water in a way that changes them in dimension but not in composition. It is still all water; there is no part of water that is not water. And if you stand at that well and look over that edge, you can see the wavering bottom but you can't touch it. In that liminal space between the picture the eye takes and the name the mind assigns, all of this too, the eye, the space, the water, the name, is all somehow God. The eye and the ear teach us that we can take something in without touching it and as it enters us without touching us we are somehow filled. I think Rilke says it better though, he ends the *Ninth Elegy* with these words:

“Oh believe me, you no longer
need your springtimes to win me over—one of them,
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first....

Look I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows any smaller.....Superabundant being
wells up in my heart.” **

In closing, I’ll return to the *Psalms*. Some *Psalms* seem to ask, “How do humans trust a God that causes suffering and then ask that same God to provide the means to lift them out of it?” I am not theologically equipped to answer that. But I will say, that for now, I am going to see what it’s like to NOT believe that we suffer because we are bad or

good, or suffer because we are special, or suffer because we must learn something, or suffer as a means to get closer to God. I wonder if we simply suffer because it's a part of the human condition to feel. That suffering is a valid and normal reaction to the sometimes difficult and painful situations that life will inevitably bring to all of us. The *Psalms* present this to us without always resolving it, they allow us to have trust in ourselves, and the many parts of which we are made, including those parts that believe in something more than ourselves.*** May the grace of God overwhelm you with all the love that you deserve. Amen.

* Translated by Franz Wright

**Translated by Stephen Mitchell

***This sentence is paraphrased from "No Rapture: The Psalms and Restiveness" in Carl Phillips book *Coin of the Realm*.