

Some stories are so universal that almost everybody understands them.  
Who has not felt like the Ugly Duckling or Cinderella?  
Who has not at times felt as alone as the Little Red Hen?  
And who has not tried to outsmart the big, bad wolves in our lives  
    who threaten to blow away our security with a huff and a puff?  
Who has not journeyed through the wilderness like God's people?  
Who has not yearned for a Messiah to come and set everything right?

Today I'd like us to look at a Psalm that tells a story.  
It is such a universal story that we recognize ourselves in it.

After sharing the ending of the story—vs. 1-5—  
    praising God for the happy ending—  
    the Psalmist begins setting the stage.  
For this person, things were going well.  
He or she felt on top of the mountain.  
Life was good and the future looked bright.  
Verse 6 says, "As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.'  
By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain."

And we can think of times like this in our lives.  
Our bodies are strong and feel alive. We have lots of energy.  
Our relationships are good.  
We feel loved and surrounded by many good and trustworthy friends.  
Our needs are met and then some.  
Our gardens grow, our jobs succeed, our dreams come true, and our children thrive.  
And we thank God.

But we discover in this Psalm that things changed for the Psalmist.  
We don't know what happened.  
But verse 7 records this lament,  
    "But then you hid your face, I was dismayed."  
Something happened that pulled the carpet out from under this person--  
    something that felt like God had taken everything away.  
Even God seems absent.  
The Psalmist is totally shocked, disoriented,  
    and unable to grasp what is happening.

And don't we know THIS part of the story, too?  
Change happens, and the future suddenly feels very shaky.  
It may be something very personal like depression or illness.  
It may be the death of a loved one.  
It may be the loss of a job or income.  
It could be on a more national scope, such as storms, epidemics, or war.

This experience of disorientation can even come  
    with the ordinary transitions of life--  
    graduation, a move, retirement, or children leaving home.

Everything that has made life secure, structured, safe, and predictable is gone.  
And most likely we can't even figure out where God is in the mix:  
it seems as if the ONE who created life and keeps it in orbit is hiding from us,  
perhaps even has it in for us.

It is easy at this point to give up, become passive, grow bitter,  
of become bogged down in self pity.  
Or one can try to bravely gut it out, work day and night, and ignore the loss.

But the Psalmist does neither.  
This person chooses to be honest with God--even dares to argue with God.  
Verses 8-10 read,  
"To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made my supplication:  
'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?  
Will the dust praise you?  
Will it tell of your faithfulness?  
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

If I were to paraphrase this I might say,  
"O Lord, everything is falling apart for me. And what good is that to you?  
Surely you don't want my life to stay in the pits.  
Surely you don't want me to stay in despair.  
What good would that be to you?  
How can I praise you when everything is this black?  
How can I talk about your faithfulness when my life is falling apart?  
Please, Lord, HELP!  
Have mercy on me and help me out of this dark hole!"

The Psalmist's choice to cry out to God is the one  
which very brave and noble people have chosen throughout the centuries.  
I think of Jesus on the cross crying out,  
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? HELP!"  
and then in an ultimate expression of trust he prayed,  
"OK, God, since this is my situation—into your hands I commit my life."

Or I think of the disciples out on the Lake of Galilee—  
having a good time until a terrible storm comes up.  
As the waves pound against the boat and wash over the deck,  
they are not only in danger of losing their boat but their lives as well.

I have a Rembrandt painting which illustrates so well the responses the disciples  
may well have had to the raging storm.  
One disciple has become seasick. He is hanging on to the side of the boat  
and throwing up into the churning water.  
Several others are frantically climbing up the bending mast,  
trying to bring down the sail and save the ship.  
And then there is the one who has gone to the back of the boat to wake up Jesus.

What DO we do when life's storms come and our ship is sinking?  
Who are YOU in this story?  
The one puking over the side of the boat?

The one frantically trying to save the ship?  
I must confess I have done both.  
But these stories as well as the Psalmist's invite us to try a third response:  
crying out to God to save us.  
That means we are honest with God about what we are experiencing  
and daring to hope that God sees and hears us.

We know the end of these Biblical stories:  
God answered Jesus' cry from the cross and raised him from annihilation,  
Jesus stilled the raging storm and the disciples returned safely to shore.  
But I'm absolutely certain you could tell more recent stories.  
I've seen friends pick up the pieces of their lives after divorce.  
I've seen relatives rebuild their lives after financial disaster.  
I've seen families celebrate life after the death of a child.  
I've seen people live with meaning after a debilitating illness.  
I've seen children make new friends after a cross-country move.

But the new life is never the same as the previous one.  
There is always a "before the event" and an "after the event."  
The new life has grown out of the ashes of the old.  
The two lives are not disconnected, but they ARE different.

This journey from mountain-top security to chaos and pit  
and then on to a new life, is one we all take in one way or another.  
Knowing that others have gone this way before us helps us when we feel alone.  
Holding on to the promise of new life is the basis of hope.  
Frequently that is all we have to hang on to when the mountain collapses.  
But hope is no small thing.

It's interesting how the psalmist's perspective changes  
when he or she stands on the other side of a difficult situation.  
Looking back this person can say,  
"For God's absence is but for a moment, but God's favor is for a lifetime;  
weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

That's something one can say only after the morning has come.  
During the night of weeping, one has the feeling that it will never end.  
Only in hindsight can we see how our dark night fits into the pattern of our life.  
Looking back we can praise God for hearing our prayers and giving us new life.

Often we don't recognize and name this spiritual progression in our lives.  
We stay spiritually unconscious, unaware that this cycle of security, disorientation,  
and new orientation is a spiritual journey of transformation.  
Difficulties can deepen us, help us sort out what is important,  
lead us to newer understandings of our humanness,  
make us keenly aware of our need for a higher power.

This week you may want to do some reflecting.  
What secure mountains have not been as solid as you thought?  
What did it feel like when that security was gone?  
How has God given you a new life?

Or perhaps you can ask yourself the question,

“Where AM I in this cycle?”

Am I presently in the pit, having fallen off of a secure place?

Am I able to hope that something new will emerge?

Do I get impatient for that to happen?

Have I gotten stuck in ways which do not allow me

to move on to the new place God has for me?

Do I find myself praising God that I have arrived at a new place?

These are important questions.

Questions to ask yourself, God, and explore with each other.

May God be with you on your journey to new life.

May your mourning be turned into dancing, and your weeping into joy.