

“Hope in the Night”

Ephesians 4:25—5:2; Psalm 130 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find rest and hope in your redeeming power. In Jesus' name, Amen.

“More than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” There are a lot of evocative lines of scripture in the Bible, and the Psalms contain many of them. These repeated words are some of the ones that have stuck with me the most over the years. Even if you’ve never been up all night, just waiting for the sun to come up, to prove to you it will, it’s not hard to imagine how long it must feel like it takes. And once dawn has come, it’s often almost impossible to remember that you weren’t entirely convinced it would, because there it is, right on time, as always. It is an apt description for a relationship with God.

It's not clear what the cause of the psalmist's distress is in this psalm, but that's not really important. There are lots of things that may push us down into “the depths,” where we're unsure God can still hear us. There are plenty of things to keep us awake all night, from anxieties about tomorrow to re-hashing yesterday to simple physical pain. Whether it's anxiety or anger, our rest is easily stolen. What can we do to transform those dark moments from bitterness and worry into waiting and hope? Unlike the psalmist, we have the blessing of turning to passages like this psalm, and they can help us remember and believe that dawn will come.

One of the beautiful things about the psalm is they have this habit of turning around, of rallying at the end with a defiant declaration of hope. It doesn't happen in every psalm, but we see it here in Psalm 130. It starts out crying "out of the depths" but it finishes up by calling all of Israel to "hope in the Lord," because God has "great power to redeem." Does this imply that the psalm was written long after the writer was in the depths, and they're remembering how they were eventually pulled out by God's steadfast love? Or is the psalmist talking to themselves, in the moment, having finally remembered that they're not alone and that God is faithful? Does comparing yourself to "those who watch for the morning" help you remember that just as the sun really does come up every single day, God will always answer those who await the Divine? Whatever it is, the shift happens, and hope is restored and even proclaimed.

Is it harder to live in hope in the middle of the night? What if you, as Paul warns against, let the sun go down on your anger? Whether the depths you're caught up in are formed by anxiety or bitterness, hope can be hard to find in the dark. It can seem as if nothing will ever change, and we'll be trapped in the darkest time line forever. What does the psalmist tell us? With God there is "great power to redeem." Do you believe that? We know that despair is the opposite of hope, but is it possible that cynicism is also an opposite of hope? Paul speaks of falsehood and evil talk; there's a lot of that abroad in our midst these days. Do we believe God can redeem that? There are so many people whose actions seem motivated by anger and bitterness. Do we believe God can redeem that?

Paul believes in it. Paul trusts in God's power to redeem. Do you know how I know that? Just listen again to what he says to the church in Ephesus. Now keep in mind that we don't know exactly who was part of this congregation, but listen to verse 28: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy." He's talking to people known to be thieves, as if they are part of the congregation. It's surprising, isn't it? Does everyone in that church know who he's talking to? Has it ever occurred to them that those people might change? Because Paul thinks they can. What does he say to them? Not just "stop stealing," but "start sharing!" Now why would he say that if he didn't believe in God's power to redeem?

Now, since most of us aren't thieves, we might be more likely to look at this from the perspective of the other folks in the church in Ephesus, the ones who weren't thieves. Do you think they thought those folks would repent and change their lifestyles and start giving money to the poor? I have my doubts. But more importantly, do you think the thieves believed it? When Paul told them to quit stealing and get an honest job, do you think they thought they could? Did they believe in God's power to redeem? Did hearing Paul's assurance make it easier to believe?

There are many things that keep us up at night. Whether it's anxiety about the challenges of our personal lives, or bitterness about the falsehoods running rampant in our communities, or anger that keeps us from forgiving another, we need to ask

ourselves if we believe in God's power to redeem. Do we believe that God can transform what is broken and evil and wrong, or have we been living with an unspoken assumption that what is bad is just going to stay bad? Cynicism can keep us from hope just as surely as despair. But the sun is coming up tomorrow, whether we believe in it or not.

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,” Paul writes, and we might assume this is an admonition against bad behavior. But what if it's also about our understanding of God's power to redeem? Do we believe people can recover from being trapped by falsehoods? Do we believe people who seem to love being angry can find their way to tenderheartedness? Do we believe that the vise-grip anxiety seems to have on us in the middle of the night can be loosened in the light of day? Can we proclaim this hope to one another? It is God who will redeem us from our iniquities. Say it with me: It is God who will redeem us from our iniquities. It is God who will redeem. This is what it means to live in hope. Not that we're assuming we can fix all our problems, but that we hold onto our trust that God can redeem, that we rely on it the same we rely on the knowledge that the sun will come up tomorrow.

If a thief can give up stealing, can we give up our cynicism? Can we entertain the possibility that God can change the world? Indeed, that God is changing the world, often right in front of our eyes? Can we stop stealing our own hope and start sharing? Even if we're not sure, let us wait on the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. Hallelujah and Amen!