

“Temptations in the Wilderness: Toxic Positivity”

Psalm 13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 – Tesa Hauser
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 27, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be reminded of your consolation in times of hardship. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Have you ever seen those signs meant to have encouraging sayings? There is one that someone posted about on the internet recently that says, “Be. Happy. Always.” The person who posted the sign mentioned that it felt a little threatening. Besides being a little threatening, especially with that punctuation, it suggests a never-ending positivity, which I would say is impossible. It’s a nice sentiment, but it doesn’t allow room for other feelings like love, joy, hope, or empathy. It doesn’t acknowledge the hardships of life, the nuance of life, or the complexity of our humanness. We can feel multiple emotions at once, as we heard in the passages read this morning.

We begin with the short passage of Psalm 13, seen as the textbook example of an individual lament or complaint. The first two verses begin with the complaint in question form, "How Long?" With each "How Long?" you can hear the impatience and desperation of the author. At first, it feels like God has forgotten about the psalmist, but then it feels like God has turned away. The situation is dire, as we see in verses 3 and 4; it is a matter of life and death. However, we aren't giving a specific situation or many details. Instead, we move on to the petition to

reverse the action of hiding God's faith and the request for God to answer, of God to provide strength confronting the affliction.

Then an abrupt change of course in verses 5 and 6; we don't know if the circumstance changed or if it's what the psalmist intended all along. The last two verses talk about trust in God and praising God for what God has done. The passage is a wonderful example of both/and; the praise and complaint are simultaneous rather than separate moments. The psalm accurately displays the ambiguity and complexity of the life of faith; in the same breath, we ask, "How Long?" we praise God for what God has already done.

Although the ending changes, there isn't a hint of toxic positivity in the passage. This term, toxic positivity, can be described as an "obsession with positive thinking," putting a "positive spin on all experiences," even tragic ones to dismiss negative emotions or distress with "false reassurances rather than empathy." Although not so intense each time, amid hardships, it can be like responding, "Be. Happy. Always." Saying that during the hardships of life is meaningless and negates vulnerability, comfort, and care.

Toxic positivity does not leave room for God's consolation in the face of affliction and distress because it decides not to acknowledge any affliction or distress. Toxic positivity does not allow for vulnerability in all its beauty and openness. It builds a wall and doesn't allow people to enter, for the truth in your

heart and mind to be shared. For many, the fear that causes people to respond with toxic positivity varies, depending on the person and situation. Being vulnerable all the time to everyone isn't safe; that is true. However, negating reality and its hardships by putting a positive spin on it also does no good. So, what is the best response when we are tempted to respond with toxic positivity?

One way is by responding just like the psalmist, sharing what is going on, and blessing God. You may be wondering, how does one go about blessing God? Paul begins the letter with this blessing, a practice a part of Jewish congregational practice, blessing the God of consolation. In one commentary I read it said, blessing God "is thankful appreciation of God's faithfulness, of God's steadfastness in making good on what God has promised." Paul shares over and over that God comforts or consoles the afflicted. It is more than just soothing feelings but is the act of God giving strength and encouragement to endure trouble.

After reading this passage, I could not help thinking about the complex life of Paul. We first meet Paul as Saul, and a person who was causing harm and a great deal of suffering, especially to the Christ-following community. He then encounters the resurrected Christ, repents, and changes course entirely. The rest of his life is towards sharing the good news, his ideas changing and expanding throughout his life. He deals with suffering and hardship often. Paul doesn't think Christians are meant to live miserable lives but shares that following Jesus is filled

with affliction and opposition and sees that suffering and affliction are a part of normal life as finite human beings. Still, he makes it clear that we aren't alone in our hardships; we have the God of consolation.

Paul shares his story of hardship in Asia as an example or reason for blessing God. He says I talk about the God of consolation and comfort because I have seen it. Paul is incredibly vulnerable, not so that they would be sorry for him, but to say he believes what he is telling them. He believes God is the God of deliverance, of rescue, of comfort, and consolation, and this is why. When you too are in this situation, remember my words, remember what has happened to me, and how God responded. There is no false hope Paul put his trust in; there is nothing he says that ignores reality and its hardships. There is no quick fix or saying to promise everything will be okay because he doesn't know if that is true. Paul knows of the God who, out of compassion, delivers and saves. I imagine Psalm 13 constantly on Paul's lips.

Positivity isn't bad, and it's not that you can't be positive amid hardships and afflictions. Again, life is filled with nuance, and we can feel multiple emotions at once. The issue with toxic positivity is it tries to use the power of positive thinking to deny taking up one's cross. I don't think Christians are meant to suffer, but we know that the life and ministry of Jesus were filled with hardships, and we know that it was in constant opposition to the ways of the world. Taking up one's cross

can include suffering, but at the same time requires sacrificial love and not always doing the positive thing. Jesus sat and ate with tax collectors, the outcast, the disenfranchised, and was constantly questioned about it and threatened for trying to disrupt the status quo.

We may think that since the gospel is good news, life will be positive and easy, but we know that isn't always the case. Responding with positivity is a normal human reaction to want the good and not the bad. As the hands and feet of God, we rejoice with people, but sometimes it means leaning into the hard with people. We might not always get it right, and that's okay because we are given God's encouragement and grace! Toxic positivity doesn't allow room for abundance grace since nothing is wrong. God provides consolation to us, but it is not ours to own; we are now the channels by which others get to experience God's consolation. We give each other permission to ask, "How Long, O God?" and stand together singing be blessed, God. Alleluia and amen.