Today’s Old Testament lesson is Psalm 130, sometimes referred to by the psalm’s opening words in the Latin translation, De Profundis. Countless persons—musicians, poets, ordinary people—have heard their own deepest emotions and heartfelt prayers voiced in this psalm throughout the centuries. St. Augustine is said to have inscribed the psalm on the walls of his chamber during his last illness so that he could pray them as his own. John Wesley heard the words of Psalm 130 sung as an anthem at St. Paul’s Cathedral on the afternoon of the same day that brought him in the evening to the room at Aldersgate where, as he described it, he found his heart “strangely warmed.” (1) When those who designed the Protestant chapel at Dachau reached for words to inscribe on the wall in that place where some of the most horrible atrocities ever committed on the planet occurred, it was Psalm 130 that was deemed most fitting. (2)

What does one say to someone who is moaning, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”?

What do you say to someone who finds himself in a crisis of faith? If you had asked the person the day before if he were a candidate for a “crisis of faith,” he would have said, “No way!” Born in the church, raised in the church, going to church the fulcrum of his every week, his faith was rock solid. Or so he thought. But then it happened…the death of a loved one…the grinding poverty he witnessed on a mission trip…the deadened eyes of a malnourished Congolese child pleading from the TV screen. Where once there was certainty, now there is doubt. Or worse. There is nothing. Emptiness. “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord,” he prays, not knowing if he is praying to one who exists at all.

What does one say to him?

What do you say to someone who is carrying around a bucket load of guilt for something that no amount of repeated reassurance of forgiveness can tip and empty out? She spread a false rumor around school about her best friend, her soul mate since kindergarten. Why she did it, she doesn’t even know. But she did. And her lie split her group of friends right down the middle. With summer and everybody’s comings and goings, she has been able to shift her consciousness of what she has done off to the side, but school will soon be starting. She has apologized, but she doubts her friend will ever trust her again. In her own mind, she harbors doubts, frankly, that if the roles were reversed, she would be willing to forgive. She feels ashamed…and lonely. Lying in her bed at night, she prays, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord!”
What does one say to her?

What do you say to someone who feels that every day brings one more thing to add to the heavy weight that is pressing down on his chest, making it difficult to breathe? Uncertainty and low morale at work, stresses at home, frightening political division in the nation, decisions which loom large at every turn. Hearing a prayer of lament read in church, “I’m bent from the weight of my tears…Save me, O God, from drowning!” (3), he considers that the words, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord!”, though ancient, could not be more current for him.

What does one say to him?

When the Psalmist himself prays, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”, he then moves to say to and for himself, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God’s word, I hope; my soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.”

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait for the Lord…this is what the Psalmist says in response to the prayer, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.”

In truth, it must be said, that “wait” is not the faithful response for every cry. It is most often the case that when people cry out to God from the depths of a situation of injustice, God calls people of faith to action, not to waiting. Dr. Martin Luther King’s letter from the Birmingham jail to fellow clergy who called his activities “unwise and untimely” is a pointed reminder of this. “For years I have heard the word Wait!” he wrote. “It rings…with piercing familiarity. The ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

In situations calling for the transformation of injustice to justice, God’s call is more often than not a call to action. In many other situations, however, the Psalmist invites us into prayer for the patience to wait. Our ability to so wait lies not in ourselves, but in the character of God. God’s character is not bent against us nor is it neutral, but rather it is bent toward us in grace and mercy. (4) This provides the ground in which our ability to wait is rooted. Even in a culture whose hallmark is not waiting or patience, but immediate gratification…or perhaps especially in a culture whose hallmark is getting what we want now…the promise is that as we pray in hope and in the faith of God’s power to redeem, God, in God’s great love for us, will open us up to deep truth and gracious blessing.
And if we find that we are unable to pray, well, that is okay. It is okay because one of the greatest of gifts that God gives to us is a community of faith. And if we ourselves are not able to wait or to pray or to have faith, there is someone beside us who prays for us. There is someone beside us who holds our faith for us, who embraces our faith in safekeeping until, in God’s good time, we pick it up once again, and even perhaps hold it in safekeeping for someone else.

This past week, I, along with many others, was privileged to witness a visual parable of Psalm 130. I was getting ready to come to work on Wednesday morning. The television was on as I ate my breakfast yogurt, and I was drawn into the drama of the release of Laura Ling and Euna Lee and their return to American soil after five months of being held captive in North Korea. Perhaps I was emotionally drawn into the scene because some of my closest friends are journalists, and I know of numerous situations where they have been far braver than I as they have endured great risk in order to be faithful to their vocational calling to shine light by bearing witness to the truth of what they have seen and experienced in dark places.

One could choose to be cynical about what happened in the release of the two journalists this past week. Some late night comedians and political commentators have been. But as I watched the images of the two women as they disembarked from the plane, their husbands, the precious four-year-old daughter of one of them, the other members of their families…as I reflected upon their waiting, waiting, waiting, and then, their release…it seemed to me a visual depiction of the hope that is portrayed in Psalm 130. One could choose to be cynical, but I can only choose to view this as testimony to the power of God’s Spirit to work even in and among and through less than pure political motives and powerful ambitious egos to accomplish good. One could choose to be cynical, but might this rather be an encouragement to all of us for all the times that we moan, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord!”?

Psalm 130 promises us that with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God there is great power to redeem. Steadied in this knowledge, we then hope. We trust. We wait.

4. Miller, 179.