

Waiting of Consequence

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Psalm 130

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

² Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³ If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵ I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Hope has never been an *easy practice* for me. As a youth pastor who grew up in a whole family full of other youth pastors, I often come across as peppy and cheerful most of the time, but believe it or not, I'm pretty cynical and pessimistic.

I realize a profound comfort comes from this attitude, from being a cynic, a critic. You get to be right most of the time. You're not disappointed as much. My sister-in-law always says, "the secret to life is low expectations." Let's be honest. It's depressingly accurate.

I think Psalm 130 is especially pertinent to my somewhat cynical faith and pessimistic worldview. Our Psalm today begins—"from of the depths I cry out to you! God, listen to me!" The Psalmist cries out to God from the shadow of despair, begging for God to *listen*.

I get that. I'm sure you do too. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it, "Dear Child of God, I am sorry to say that suffering is not optional." I don't care who you are; you've gone through difficulty - not least of all during the last year and a half. You've experienced hardship, been heartbroken, betrayed, hurt, lost. In this first verse, the Psalmist says what so many of us have felt, "I'm not okay."

I see in this verse the cry of one who longs to be understood, to be seen. The cry of someone who knows their imperfection, that they have made flawed choices, and that they need help navigating the resulting mess in which they find themselves.

The Psalmist continues, "God, if you should list the iniquities of every person—who could stand?"

The word translated to "iniquities" in that verse is the Hebrew word *avon* (pronounced "avone"), often rendered guilt, wickedness or sin. This word comes from the Hebrew root *avah*, meaning to bend or make crooked, to twist or distort. In Isaiah 59 *this word* is used to communicate the corruption of the people in power, how they oppress and take advantage of the poor. And in Psalm 36 the psalmist writes that his back is *avah*-d, bent over in pain. In lamentations a road that isn't straight is one that *avah*-s, that is it's twisty and crooked.

Avon also specifically relates to the consequences of or effects of sin—the hurt people, the fragmented relationships, the cycles of violence. When we read the

English word "punish" in the Old Testament, it's often translating the word *avon*. I always read this as God, you know, sending retribution upon someone who didn't do what God wanted. That's not actually what it means.

In actuality, *avon* conveys the idea of being in the mess that the bad choices brought on, the effects of sin. The direct translations will sometimes say, "to visit someone's *avon*" upon them. So "punishment" isn't an eye for an eye or slap on the hand because you did something inappropriate. No, *avon* is when you exist in the inevitable consequences of warped choices, sin, living in the disfigured world of our own making. Sitting in our mess.

We talked about this understanding of sin as distortion, the word *avon*, a bit in Confirmation. We specifically used pictures of models—comparing the ones that were the actual picture of the model and then the ones that were photoshopped (and used for the advertisement). The images of these models, people who advertisers have decided are the most attractive people on the planet; those photos are then edited, distorted to make them even more inhumanly beautiful.

If photos of the most attractive people on the planet have to be photoshopped before we see them, where does that leave the rest of us? The not most attractive people on the planet?

It leaves us comparing ourselves and trying to reach a literal unattainable beauty—something that happens to be really helpful because it means we buy stuff. And in that comparison, we can't help but then find ourselves wanting, can't help but judge our skin and hair and bodies, in genuinely cruel ways. Likewise, we can't help but judge our friends' skin and hair, and bodies in the same way. And then, when folks fall short of that unattainable beauty, it's a reason to ridicule them or like or value them less.

That visual distortion of natural bodies and faces distorts the way people think they can or should look. Barbara McAneney, a spokeswoman for the American Medical Association said about the issue, "Extremely altered models... create unrealistic expectations of appropriate body image," leading to eating disorders and other child and adolescent health problems. In fact, one in fifty Americans today struggle with Body Dysmorphic Disorder, a mental health disorder in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance — a flaw that is often minor or can't even be seen by others. Folks with BDD may

feel so embarrassed, ashamed, and anxious that they avoid social situations, avoid community. And the onset of BDD is usually in adolescence.

Dr. Isabelle Coy-Dibly posits that “Advances in image technology have arguably further enabled and intensified this socially dysmorphic perception of female bodies through the way in which the digitally modified image has so greatly infiltrated fashion and advertising imagery, so that social perceptions of women’s bodies are no longer truly based on natural (digitally unmodified, un-tampered) bodies. Nowadays, women not only feel pressured to bodily compete with socially generated beauty standards, but to compete with their own image too.” She says, “Not only do we critique our bodies in mirrors, but now we can digitize our dysmorphia by virtually modifying what we dislike, creating “perfect” selves instead.” And while Dr. Coy-Dibly’s research largely revolves around women, these issues are faced at nearly equal rates by other genders navigating similar digitized dysmorphia.

The folks living with this culturally-induced shame inherited the systems given to them by generations before—systems that define someone's worth by what they look like, by their weight, by their success, by what other people think of them. Like the paintings of royalty from centuries ago, when artists were asked to make their subjects more attractive so so-and-so prince or princess would acquiesce to marrying them. Now, we can just do it faster. We participate in this practice, trying to present the most acceptable, what we’ve come to understand as the most lovable, version of ourselves.

I see this editing and profound anxiety about appearance as a microcosm of *avon* (avone). The common usage of photo-editing by companies attempting to get us to consume something has resulted in people of all ages experiencing body dysmorphic disorders, self-hatred, and shame. It is a natural, nigh undeniable consequence. We live in the hole we dug ourselves.

Growing up, I thought that sin was a primarily personal issue. But now, I've come to understand that we must view sin as a communal problem—the sin of peoples hundreds of years ago impacting generations. For example, the sins of white supremacy from centuries ago leading to the current oppression of black and brown people. The sins of largely Western anthropocentrism resulting in our current climate crisis. The word *avon* recognizes the massive ripple effects of sin that never

just hurts one person. The harm spreads out, infecting systems we interact with daily, participate in daily.

I have a seminary friend who is now a pastor. We used to debate regularly about different theological concepts. We would talk about sin, the God of the Bible, and how God could be good when they killed so many people. We would talk about repentance and atonement, and violence and what those words meant when it came to following Jesus. She was a firm believer in Total Depravity—the idea that human nature is thoroughly corrupt and sinful. I was not, am not—I would argue it's our humanity that brings us to God, not the opposite. We'd talk about these ideas for hours, going round and round, never agreeing on who was precisely to blame for sin.

I wonder if we had paid more attention in our Ancient Hebrew class if we could have avoided a significant number of those disagreements. This word *avon*, translated to iniquity, radically changes my understanding of "punishment" or "the consequences of sin." It's not that we sin and God sends down plagues upon us (though I could understand why you'd think that after this year). Instead, we live in a world with minds, systems distorted by sin. We live in the mess of sin instigated generations ago, in which we still participate, continuing to hurt ourselves, the earth, those we interact with, not to mention God.

Theologian and author Deborah Anne Meister once said, "Any fool can see evidence of sin in our world, but only through the eyes of faith can we begin to see signs of redemption."

Like I said, hope isn't easy for me. Growing up when I did, I am no stranger to disillusionment. I attended an elementary school where I was taught that we had fixed racism. It started with slavery in America. Then we had the civil war, and Abe Lincoln signed the emancipation proclamation. Then there was the civil rights movement, and now everything was good; everything was just and equal and fair. I learned that racism was a thing of the past. I didn't realize the hypocrisy of my private elementary school, with zero black students, saying racism was fixed.

I never learned about the Trail of Tears, the Tulsa Race Massacre, internment camps for Americans of Japanese descent, or the cultural erasure of so many native peoples. Instead, I learned a version of history where the people who looked like me were almost always the heroes. Come to find out, after way more education and

relationships with folks who do not look like me, that's not true. Once I hit college, I experienced waves of disillusionment about what it meant to be a white person in the US.

A model for my education became the necessary deconstruction of lies I learned as a kid. But, inevitably, for me, that has led to cynicism.

The Psalmist writes in verse 5, "I wait upon the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope, more than the night watch, who hope and search for the first light of morning."

While my trouble with hope might surprise you, my lack of patience likely won't. When I think about waiting, I think of long lines at Disney world or waiting on an acceptance letter from schools. And in both of those instances, I have never been patient. Instead, I would hop up and down on one foot, trying to see how much further the line was for the ride. I would hover over emails and mailboxes, waiting for those acceptance notices from schools.

In recognition of my own and the world's iniquity, my *avon* and the *avon* of all humanity, both the guilt itself and the consequences of those distortions, what does it mean to wait upon the Lord? What does it mean to wait and hope in the word of God?

(45 seconds of silence)

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits. You just waited 45 seconds for me to keep preaching. And I don't know about you, but it was uncomfortable! Waiting is awkward. It's uncomfortable. Yet, it's what the Psalmist does. Wait and hope. Wait and hope.

There are two different words for hope in this passage: *qavah*, a verb that means a tense stretching and enduring (like in a stringed instrument, the active tension that keeps it in tune), and *yakhal*, which means an expectant hope. Both of these terms denote action rather than passivity. But, especially *qavah*, this verb represents to me movement, an effort, a tension towards making that which is hoped for reality. *Qavah* doesn't mean sitting and wishing – *qavah* means actively seeking to bring about the hoped for reality.

In verse 7, we read, "O Israel, hope in God for with God there is steadfast love and with God there is great power to redeem." The Psalmist writes this, inviting listeners to think back to the times that God used that power to redeem—bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, guiding them through the desert to the promised land. This Biblical hope looks forward to that which is better, healed, whole and redeemed, by first, looking backward at what God has already done.

I'm a bit of a pessimist. And, while my default is to assume that "nothing ever really gets better," I also have to recognize that it only became legal for me to marry my wife six years ago, six years ago.

I remember the day--June 26, 2015--when the decision on marriage equality came down from the supreme court. On that day, I didn't have a ton of hope that LGBTQ+ folks would finally gain the same rights as heterosexual couples. But it happened. Because of the work of thousands of brave, determined, tensely-*qavah*-hopeful people, and generations who came before us, I got to marry my wife four years later. My wife gets to have my health insurance. If I get sick, my wife can come to see me in the hospital. If I die, my wife is the one supported by my life insurance. My life has been directly impacted by the difficult, painful, tense effort-full *qavah* hope of LGBTQ+ folks and allies before me. It's because of them, of their *qavah*-struggle-hope that I get to do this work.

In verse 8, the Psalmist writes, "With God there is merciful lovingkindness, it is God who will save Israel from all the effects of all its mistakes."

I think the intensive labor of *qavah* hope that God invites us into is no small thing. Unfortunately, it's more like a marathon than a sprint, more like digging a tunnel through rock with a pickaxe than using dynamite to blow it up, more like keeping a guitar string in tune by constant re-tuning rather than a computerized note that's always the same.

There is no freedom without the birth pangs of revolution, without the discomfort of deconstruction. There is no Pride without Stonewall. There is no Easter without Good Friday. There is no redemption without the work of *qavah* hope.

While recognizing the consequences of the *avon* guilt on our world is a painful process, it is one we must complete. And from that place of understanding,

we are invited to participate in tense waiting *qavah* hope. We join in with the work God is already doing, bringing about the restoration and redemption of all Creation.

Amen.