

## The Three R's: Reorientation

September 18, 2022 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

For the next three weeks here at Langford we are going to be looking at the 3Rs. No, not reading, writing and arithmetic but instead reorientation, reintegration and renewal. As the dust of COVID-19 settles around us, it struck me that we should spend some time thinking about where we've been as a church and where we're going. And I think that this series on the 3Rs I hope will help us to do that.

Next week we'll talk about coming back together for the cause of the Gospel - that's the reintegration part - and the week after that we'll talk about renewal - fanning our faith back into flame - but today we're going to start off by talking about reorientation.

Now, this language of reorientation comes from an OT scholar named Walter Brueggemann. I was first introduced to Walter Brueggemann in seminary and I've read his stuff ever since because it's very helpful. Brueggemann believes – quite rightly, I think – that life is constantly moving through a constant cycle of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.<sup>1</sup>

When it's a time of orientation, everything is good. Life is good. Your relationship with God is good. There is stability and prosperity and peace.

But then, something happens to disrupt that stability. All of a sudden, the world seems more unknown, dangerous even. You're thrown for a loop and holding on for dear life. That's a time of disorientation.

But then, when all seems lost, God steps in and brings you out of the turmoil and into a brand new place of reorientation. You can never go back to what was before, but by the grace of God He brings us into something new and sets our feet on solid ground and I would argue we become even more confident than before, knowing from experience that even if our 'orientation' gets 'disoriented,' God can and will bring us back to a place of new orientation, or reorientation.

Can you identify with that? I certainly can. And the ancient Israelites did too. Brueggemann argues that they actually wrote prayers to help them through the cycle. And those prayers are our psalms.

There are psalms of orientation – where everything's good. Psalm 23 – The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters. That's orientation par excellence. Life is good, God is good.

There are also psalms of disorientation – when something comes along and turns your life upside down. Think of Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from the Cross: 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' That reflects a disoriented world, where God seems far away and danger close at hand. Psalm 13's 'How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?' (Psa 13:1 NIV). Psalms of disorientation reflect the chaos of life where nothing is as it should be.

But even though these psalms ask – 'God, where are you in this difficult time?' – they are founded on the utter conviction that God is good and God will answer prayer. In fact, Psalm 13 starts 'How long, oh Lord, will You forget me forever?' but it ends by reaffirming faith in God - 5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me. (Psa 13:5-6 NIV).

Disoriented as we may be, we don't lose faith in God because we know He will act. That's a standard characteristic of psalms of disorientation.

And then, what do you know, in His time and wisdom, God does act! He delivers us out of the period of disorientation and into a period of reorientation. Psalm 40 puts it famously like this:

- 1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.
- 2 He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
- 3 He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God (Psa 40:1-3 NIV).

That's reorientation, in a nutshell right there.

So the psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation reflect the experience of life, moving from orientation to disorientation to reorientation.

Now, relative to what we've been through in the last few years, where do you think we are now? A period of... what? Reorientation. (It's the only one that starts with R). I think that we are living in a period of reorientation and we are going to use a psalm of reorientation to think together about how God has been at work through this time of COVID-19. What I want to do with morning is map our experience of COVID-19 onto a psalm of reorientation to think with you about where we've been and how God has worked in our midst and what that means for our future faith in Him.

So turn with me to Psalm 66. Psalm 66 is a prayer of re-orientation. It reflects an experience where the psalmist has been through a disorienting time and God has delivered him from it. The opening verses were our call to worship this morning and what a call to worship it is.

- 1 Shout with joy to God, all the earth!
- 2 Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!
- 3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you.
- 4 All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name."

This is how you talk when you've just been delivered from disorientation to reorientation. You can't help but overflow with thanksgiving to the God who delivered them. 'How awesome are Your deeds, oh God!'

This is going back a bit, but just think back to that home run that Joe Carter hit to win the World Series for the Blue Jays. Bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Jays were down 6-5 and Joe Carter had two strikes against him. The crowd was excited but tense – would this go down as a loss or could they come from behind? Mitch Williams threw the ball and crack – Carter hit it out of the park. The crowd went wild, players poured out onto the field and Joe galloped around the bases. It was exuberant joy!

That's this here in Psalm 66. And God didn't just hit a home run, God delivered His people out of slavery. Verses 5-7.

- 5 Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf!
- 6 He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot-- come, let us rejoice in him.

7 He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations-- let not the rebellious rise up against him. Selah (Psa 66:5-7 NIV).

The psalmist calls us to think back to the defining event in the life of Israel, the origin story for the people of God. This was the big paradigmatic act of deliverance that God has accomplished for the people of Israel (kind of like the Cross for us) but God didn't just do the Exodus and then sit back in his Lazy Boy. No, God continued and continues to exercise his saving power and the psalmist bears witness to God's saving power in his life.

This is an important dynamic for us to consider too. Yes, the Exodus and the Cross are crucial. They are foundational. They are the only reason that we have any right to be here and they are the only reason that we have hope for eternity. But we can't just think of them as far off expressions of God's grace that have nothing to do with us; no we need to experience God's saving power for ourselves. To personalize it. To be redeemed at the Cross and then be aware of God's continuing redemption throughout our lives. That what the psalmist does here.

Verse 8 –

8 Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; [why??]

9 he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

10 For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

12 You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance (Psa 66:8-12 NIV).

Now this is where I want to stop and really dig down into our experience through COVID-19. Think back over the last couple of years and where we've been.

What were you doing when they announced the first shut-down? We went out for supper for Julie's birthday the Friday before everything closed and then didn't eat out for a year. Businesses closed, some for good; schools closed and went online. We cobbled something together and met online through this thing called Zoom – remember that first Sunday when we did a check in together online and then I said – 'go watch my sermon on YouTube.' What a time. And I do remember, quite clearly, having this thought, cooking supper one night. What if Julie gets sick? What if I get sick? What if one of us is hospitalized or worse?

And yet, verse 9 – God preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. He kept us safe and even when we were sick, He preserved our lives. He showed us new ways of doing things and gave us new opportunities to serve our community. Think of the meals we supplied, the flowers and goodies you took to neighbours; God kept our feet from slipping.

But that didn't mean it was all sunshine and rainbows did it? No, it was tough sometimes. And I think that verse 10 helps us to understand it.

10 For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

COVID-19 was not a surprise to God. He knew it was coming. He allowed it to happen. And He used the trials of COVID-19 to temper us and to refine us. I think that COVID-19 has really given us the

opportunity to think about what's really important in life and in ministry. I think it gives us the opportunity to think about what we're doing as a church. Personally, I feel as though God has sloughed off a lot of complacency on my part and helped me to see the world through new eyes. God used this time to refine us like silver.

But even then – v 11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. 12 You let men ride over our heads. We were stuck inside, unable to meet in large groups, even as family. We had to mourn loved ones in little groups, if at all. We had to wear masks and PPE and line up for groceries. Some would even say that our governments exercised too much power – 'men rode over our heads.'

But, the rest of verse 12 pulls it all together – we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance (Psa 66:12 NIV). What do you think? Pretty accurate right?

And there's actually a verse over in Isaiah that brings out even deeper meaning here. It's Isaiah 43:2. I remember when I was in Paris camping out at that American businessman's place; I think he knew I was having a hard time processing everything and so he read me this verse – Isaiah 43:2 –

2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze... because... verse 4 says... 'you are precious to me.'

That means that not only did God bring us through fire and water, He walked through it with us, every step of the way. He walked with us through fire and water and brought us into a place of abundance. And He's with us even now, in a place of reorientation.

Now that knowledge, that you are precious to God, that He is with you through fire and flood, that He is even using those trials to refine you!, that's incredible. What a privilege to be loved like that by the God of the universe! The question then is – how do you respond to that?! How do you respond to such a blessing?

Well, the first thing that comes to mind for the psalmist is sacrifice – verse 13 –

13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you--  
14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.  
15 I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats. Selah  
(Psa 66:13-15 NIV).

And that's great, but I wonder if the psalmist catches himself and says 'wait.' 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' That's 1 Samuel 15:22. ~~Psalm 51:17 – 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psa 51:17 NIV).~~ 3 To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. (Proverbs 21:3 NIV). 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and [I want you to KNOW Me more than I want burnt offerings]' (literally: acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings) (Hos 6:6 NIV).

Anybody can make an outward sacrifice, but God's looking at the heart.

So I think the psalmist backs up and tries again – verse 18 –

16 Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.  
17 I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.  
18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;  
19 but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.  
20 Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me! (Psa 66:16-20 NIV).

This, is what you would call (in the language of today) 'shouts out and prayers up.' Do you know those expressions? Shout out? Prayers up? Do you know what a shout out is? If someone has done something good or beneficial for you or someone else, you shout them out. Just a quick search on Facebook found thousands of shout outs – like a chiropractor who did some work for a soccer team – “Big shout out to Dr. Edger for stepping up to help out the Puerto Rico U-17 Soccer National Team last week” and a cat stuck in a tree – “Shout out to Kravitz Tree service for offering to send someone over to help.”

A shout out is a contemporary way of praising someone for what they've done – these verses are a shout out to God – 'shout out to God, who has not rejected my prayer.' 'Shout out to God who has not withheld His love from me.'

And implicit in the idea of a shout out is the idea of 'look how great these people are!' I'm sure Dr. Edgar and Kravitz tree supply appreciated the free publicity. That's v. 16 – Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done. The psalmist doesn't just want to thank God for what He's done, He wants to thank God publically for what He has done so that other people can experience His grace too. And that's important for us to do too.

So shout out – and prayers up. That's what it sounds like – an encouragement to pray. And I think that's implicit in these final verses – v. 19 - 19 but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. That's a shout out but it's an encouragement to pray too. The psalmist is telling us that God does not reject prayer but listens intently to prayer and so he encourages us in difficult times TO PRAY.

Shouts out, prayers up. Fitting ways to respond to God's saving power in the psalmist's life and in our own.

So let's change gears for a minute here and think broadly about how we live in a period of reorientation. I think Psalm 66 helps us think about how God brought us out of a time of disorientation and into a time of reorientation. But now that we're here, what do we do? What does it mean to live in a period of reorientation?

Well first, I think it means giving thanks for what God has done to bring us through fire and water and into this place of new abundance. It means shouts out and prayers up, giving thanks and giving thanks publically for what God has done. It means intentionally reorienting our hearts away from the unknowns of this world and into the confidence and certainty that comes from knowing and being children of the redeemer God. Living in a time of reorientation means living ever more confidently in the abundant life that God has given.

But it also means recognizing that this time of reorientation is our new period of orientation. And what it normal and stable now will probably get disoriented again. It may not be another pandemic; it could be personally for you a fall or an unwanted diagnosis or a loss of some kind, but what that happens, let's be prepared to take it on with the confidence that we've gained from God's faithfulness to us through

COVID. When disorientation strikes, respond to it with the confidence you've gained firsthand seeing God bring you through COVID.

I think that this is really well exemplified by something Nelly Palmers said to me about COVID. She was thinking about her experience in Holland in the Second World War and she said – God got us through that; He'll get us through this. You see what she's doing? Her experience of God's saving power through the period of disorientation that was WW2 is shaping the way she saw the current disorientation of COVID-19. And I'm sure that you can all look to different periods of disorientation that God has delivered you from – carry that confidence in deliverance forward and apply it next time a period of disorientation comes along.

God has walked with us through fire and water and brought us into a place of new stability; have confidence knowing that He'll do it again.

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful summary of the psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation is available here: <https://stjamestheapostleregina.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/psalms-and-rhythm-of-life.pdf>