

Brutal honesty and deep hope (Psalm 130; John 11:1-45)

Psalm 130 fits so many ways.

by [Lynn Jost](#)

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Psalm 130 fits like a jewel. It's like pearls that look resplendent whether with jeans and a T-shirt or with a velvet evening gown. It just fits.

Psalm 130 is perfectly matched with the raising of Lazarus this week. One can imagine Jesus and the disciples reciting this song of ascents as they move from Jericho to Bethany to meet Martha and Mary. Mary and her Jewish comforters would likely have been chanting Psalm 130. When "Jesus wept," we can almost hear the strains, "Out of the depths I cried to you."

Little wonder that this psalm fits so many ways. Psalm 130 is one of the seven psalms identified as "penitential." "Forgiveness is your habit," translates Eugene Peterson in *The Message*. God keeps no records! (That's grace.) God redeems—from sin, from guilt, from slavery. The one who sings this song in confession of sin knows the depths of shame but keeps hope because God forgives.

Psalm 130 is the tenth of 15 songs of ascents. These are the songs of pilgrims, gathered as a set used by the exiles returned from Babylon. Having known the depths of despair as they fled Jerusalem in flames, they chant with hope, recalling the long night of despair. In Jesus' day the faithful Jews approaching Jerusalem for the festivals are still watching for freedom, for redemption.

The common lectionary uses Psalm 130 on four different Sundays. Since 530 CE those who follow the Rule of St. Benedict have used Psalm 130 to start Tuesday

vespers. Jews chant Psalm 130 before opening the torah ark during the high holidays, the ten days connecting Rosh Hashanah with Yom Kippur. According to the *Rituale Romanum* the recitation of Psalm 130 is used as the blessing of a new church bell; the tolling of a church bell signifies a transition through death to life beyond.

Psalm 130 has inspired the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and C. S. Lewis, among many others. Frequently set to music under the Latin incipit *De Profundis*, Psalm 130 is commonly funeral music.

What is it about Psalm 130 that makes it fit so well in these many settings? As Eugene Peterson has noted in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Psalm 130 is brutally honest about suffering. There are no empty assurances, no shortcuts around the valley of the shadow of death, no avoidance of grief, pain, and sorrow.

Yet honest as this psalm is in lament, it is grounded in hope. Peterson counts ten times that the word *God* appears in Psalm 130. Though the psalm is composed and sung from the deepest reality in the human experience, the bottom line is that God is the foundation even in the depths.

The psalm is a prayer with a single imperative for the human audience: they are called to watch and wait like a night watchman. The word of hope is particularly apt when society opines in polls and surveys that things are bad and getting worse in our culture. Psalm 130 calls worshipers to note signs of God's redemptive work in the ordinary events of life. Jesus is resurrection and life for those who live with hope.

We get a glimpse of it when American Red Cross volunteers tearfully praise survivors of major flooding for showing unexpected love by sharing meager resources. We catch sight of redeeming resurrection when Gary admits his addictions, describes being involuntarily held in a psychiatric hospital, then renews his engagement with his previously estranged congregation. We see the spark when our friends' autistic young adult child Michael embraces residential home placement—ending a seemingly endless cycle of emergency room visits.

The God of the depths becomes for us the resurrection and the life.