

**“Waiting on the Lord Alone to Be Made Whole” based on Psalm 13 and Matthew 11:40-42  
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, July 2, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

While my family and I were still up in New Jersey three years ago, this text came up in the lectionary, and we were in the third month of the COVID lockdown and asking, “How long, O Lord?” I remember when we made the decision to shut down for two weeks at first, just two weeks.

After that, it was too late to cancel our order for palms, which came in late March, so, we put them in the refrigerator to keep them fresh. Our plan was to do Palm Sunday and Easter all over again, in May or June or July even, whenever the Pandemic was over. But then, like our hope and our plans, the palms shriveled anyway, and we threw them all away.

How long, O Lord? We asked, and when it all seemed to finally slow down, everything had changed. My family and I had moved to Shelby and now are here with you. My former church is still without a pastor to replace me. For all that confirms this as the place God called us to be and minister, I still grieve for them, and their waiting, their searching.

We live in a world of new opportunities, of stability, of pleasure, of faith and joyful experiences. We have our communities in which we are loved. We have the laughter of loved ones. We have stretches where it seems things are going right.

We also live in a world that is full of uncertainty, of change, of suffering, of doubt and trials. We also have experienced isolation from communities we sought to join and rejection from communities we had to leave. Death claims those we love most, and so often, things just go wrong, a lot.

While I believe we can't really know joy, without enduring through the trials that hurt so much, there are times that I want to say to God, “Ok, Lord, I've had enough for contrast, can we just have smooth sailing now? I promise I'll appreciate it all.”

And yet, I say this knowing full well, that on the whole, my life has been pretty good. I can always sit back and say, ‘there's always someone who has it worse,’ but is that consolation? Why does someone else's life, better or worse, have to be the measure of mine? Why do we fall into that trap of comparing ourselves to others, either in ways that bring us down and make us feel inferior, or in the ways we lift ourselves up, saying, ‘at least I'm not them’?

But even acknowledging our fortune, we still see suffering. How long for all the people enduring poverty? How long for those suffering great losses right now? How long for all the people battling illness? For this world and all its injustice, How long, O Lord? How long? Show your face God.

Yet, when you consider the self-help books that are published, we live in an age that tells everyone, don't worry, you just need to do X, Y, and Z! Look at her, she is living her life to the fullest. Look at him, he's living his best life right now! Oh, boy, just look at their Facebook pictures! What a great life they've got on Instagram! All of that could be yours too, if you just, if you just, if you just...

We live in a world where we think we are in control of everything, that humanity is perfectible, because science will discover every cure for anything. And if we just put in the hard work, have the right mindset, we can just pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. Then we can have all our dreams come true. Yes, we let Disney tell our kids, that if you wish upon a star, it makes no difference who you are, anything your heart desires will come to you!

We tell each other that if you just believe in yourself, follow your heart, have enough faith, set aside the negativity, try this new invention (it's the best!), do crossfit, choose this diet or that, and take control of your life, then tomorrow is another day, and you can do it all. Yes, we say that you can be whatever you want to be. Just name it and claim it. Start that new routine, and just live into your own truth, let it manifest, because you can be your best you.

But then...there are shattered dreams, wishes that never come true, limits we can't possibly escape. There's cancer, addiction, poverty, hard work that doesn't pay off, scandals and wars. There's also death and pandemics, weight that just won't come off, routines that never seem to solve the constant feeling that time is short, and everything I do, everything I strive to do, well, it isn't enough. We forget that humanity is not a robot to perfect, that being human is not a video game to reset, and some people do everything right, it seems and still end up a mess, falling apart.

This is human life, what the writer of Ecclesiastes called a vapor, a gust of air, just vanity. As the Christian writer and scholar Kate Bowler put it well in the title of her memoir, "There Is No Cure for Being Human." This is a truth we often forget. The world sells us manipulation, preys on our self-doubt, and our fears, and somehow our vulnerability becomes something to hide, because what we buy, what we do, how we pray even, will take away those vulnerabilities and make us more, more than human – it will make us like gods.

Yet the beauty of Psalm 13 is vulnerability, a boldness to be vulnerable with God, who alone can make us whole. A historian, Bowler specializes in studying mega churches, particularly the prosperity gospel and her incredible dissertation ties the movement back to modernity's great claim – that humanity can conquer anything, that we can save ourselves.

The aforementioned memoir and another titled, "Everything Happens for a Reason & Other Lies I've Loved," are rooted in her experiences beginning at age 35 in 2015, when, shortly after the birth of her son, she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer, and given a 14% chance to live two years. Yet now, she is still teaching today at Duke, more than 8 years later.

Bowler's story is miraculous, but she does not present a message of "I did it, so can you." Her message is one of complete and utter dependence on God, regardless of outcome. The reality is that many wishes do not come true, many prayers feel unanswered, but we do not need to make it worse with the burden of perfectibility. Wholeness and salvation are not the healing of a disease, nor even the quick ticket to heaven if and when we die, but the peace of knowing that no matter what, God loves you, and you're good enough, just the way you are.

Indeed, you're a human being, made in the image of God. Now, by no means is she a fatalist, claiming that nothing is worth doing because we all die anyway. Rather, she shuts down the idea of worldly transformation – living your best life – and picks up the concept of biblical transformation, letting God lead the change, as we trust in the love of the Lord and do the best that we can each day. We do this knowing that success and failure are not our doing, nor our own fault. Yet in both, the grace of God remains with us, and for us. We can set down the burden of positivity and be vulnerable before God and one another.

Indeed, the message of scripture is that we do not transform ourselves, but God transforms us. The more we think we can save ourselves, and the more act as if we can never be vulnerable – as if we must project power – then all the more we turn away from the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

After all, in Christ, the eternal Son of God humbly shared in our humanity, to reveal what it is to be fully human. This did not involve a show of power over the world, but a show of love, by dying on that Roman cross for us, letting all the power of sin and death come upon him, so that he might defeat it, rising again for us. For it is by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension that we are temples of the Holy Spirit lives, in us, and among us.

My sisters and brothers, the writer of this Psalm is frustrated with God. How many things in your life, in the world that you observe, frustrate you? The writer of the Psalm is worried about his enemies, those hostile toward him, and concerned that they might be lifted up, exalted over them, or that they will think they have defeated him, rejoicing in his fall. Surely, you don't have anyone like this you're concerned about. I'm sure there is no one you fear would be hostile to you, and no one toward whom you would be hostile.

I joke because in our increasingly antagonistic world, it's hard not to feel the hostility around us, especially when we think that in certain company, we can't say what we really feel, or that to be vulnerable and honest would result in our being outcast. In truth, there are many things, I'm sure, that make all of us want to cry out, "How long?" But are we willing, like the Psalmist, to express this to God, to openly complain and even yell at God to ask for change. Trust me, if God created all things, entered creation, and let creation kill him, only to rise again, then God can handle anything we say. Trust in God's merciful, faithful love. Rejoice in your salvation.

Look at where the vulnerability in lament leads the Psalmist – from anxiety to wholeness. The word translated in the last verse of Psalm 13 as "whole" in what we read today, is often translated as "dealt bountifully." The word is one that describes being given what is due, and so dealt bountifully, as we find it in the King James Version was likely chosen as a humble acknowledgement that whatever God gives is a bounty. But this also leads people to create worldly expectations.

This Psalm is not a formula that will fix our bad days, but it shows we are so loved. We do not need to manipulate God, let alone jockey for power in this world. All we need is to accept that we are loved and do the best we can with that, which sometimes, can be simply giving a cup of cold water, to the little ones, the vulnerable. Then in doing so, we give in the name or identity of a disciple.

This does not mean we say, "In Peter's name I give this drink," but that we give our gifts in the identity of one who believes in and follows Christ, our identity as one who knows God's love, and knows that the reward has already been given. Therefore, we will not lose it. Amen.