

Paula D'Arcy is a former psychotherapist who is now a spiritual retreat leader, author and speaker. She spoke at our Nebraska Synod theological conference several years ago. I was reminded of her this week when she was quoted in one of my devotional readings.

In 1975, she was married with one daughter and pregnant with her second child. On their way home from a visit to family, a drunk driver crossed a highway median and slammed into their car.

Her husband and daughter suffered fatal injuries and died a few days after the accident. She was not seriously injured. She went on to give birth to a healthy daughter six months later.

In one of her books, *Gift of the Red Bird*, she shares her experiences after the accident. One of the things she wrote was strikingly similar to what the Psalmist wrote here: I lie in my hospital room and moan. A tidal wave has swept over me and I am trying to hold it back with my bare hand. I cry from so deep inside of me. I cry because my hand is so small and the wave so powerful.

From there the book accounts her healing process and her experience of God, ultimately as a deep abiding presence that was with her in the depths of her grief.

The quote I encountered in my devotional reading this week was this: God comes to you disguised as your life.

God comes to you disguised as your life. And that life is not always pretty. Sometimes that life is the stuff of lament Psalms.

Over the years of ministry, I've often asked people, where have you seen God lately? It's a common question meant to lead into contemplation and a willingness to see God's presence in our everyday lives.

The answers are often positive things – I see God in a beautiful sunset or sunrise, the trees and streams and creatures encountered on a hike through the woods. Or maybe we'll see God's presence in someone who is willing to help a stranger. Or on a mission trip to a poor country, the answer will often be that they see God in the faith of those who barely have enough to survive.

Rarely is the answer something like I saw God in those awful days after my husband and child were killed. Or I saw God when I was so depressed I didn't want to live any more. Or I saw God when I was lying in a hospital bed, not sure if I would live or die.

And yet, if the Psalmist is to be believed...if the quote about God's disguise is true...we can see God there, in those places where God comes, disguised as our lives, even in its most painful.

When I say God comes to us disguised as our life, I'm in no way saying God causes the bad stuff that happens. It's more like life happens, good and bad. And God meets us right in the middle of it.

When you talk to people who have been through times of deep grief, depression, and pain, they can often describe, like Paula D'Arcy does, a deep presence...a mysterious presence at first difficult to name, but somehow comforting. That presence comes to be understood as God.

This Psalm is the cry of someone who is overwhelmed by whatever has happened.

We can mostly not do anything but guess at the specific situation the author of any of the Psalms was facing. This is a Psalm whose heading says it's a Psalm of David. But most scholars believe many of those weren't in fact written by David, but were a Psalm in David's honor or a Psalm dedicated to David.

This Psalm is sort of like those cryptic Facebook posts where somebody posts an agonizing lament but never says what happened.

But what makes the Psalms timeless is that we don't have to know what happened to not only hear but maybe even feel this person's pain.

A tidal wave of trouble threatens to destroy. There seem to be enemies who hate the author without reason. But then he or she starts wondering, maybe it was something I did or said. I've tried to be faithful, and I'm still trying. Zeal for your house consumes me God! In fact people are insulting me and making fun of me for your sake.

I am weary from crying. My throat is parched.

I'm waiting God. I'm waiting for you to hear me. And waiting...and waiting.

In our orientation, disorientation, reorientation scheme for reading the Psalms, this is clearly a disorientation Psalm. A Psalm for when the bottom has dropped out and nothing makes sense.

When the bottom falls out of our lives, the lament Psalms assure us that God can handle whatever emotions we need to express – grief, despair, anger, futility. God can take our complaints and anger.

As prayer, lament strips away all the pretentiousness of some prayers...it removes the layer of trying to impress with our eloquence. It strips us of our defenses...and sometimes what it strips turns out to be our own idols. It strips our prayers down to the most honest human emotions in those times when we simply have nothing else left.

But the lament Psalms also offer us the gift that sinking our roots deeply into God's word brings. When we sink our roots into God's word, we've heard over and over of God's faithfulness...God's steadfast love...God's abundant mercy. Those words have sunk in and created a trust that withstands the crises of life.

This Psalmist has been around the block a few times. They've maybe experienced other cycles of disorientation and reorientation. Out of that experience is born the kind of trust that enables them to say to God in this moment, answer me for I know your steadfast love is good.

It's like they want to remind themselves...and even God what God is like. The Psalmist says, remember God that you are steadfast and abundantly merciful. I trust that steadfast love and mercy, even when I'm feeling overwhelmed and alone.

That's a trust borne out of the past experience of God's steadfast love.

Often the message of religion is about being relentlessly strong. Bible verses can even be used out of context and turned into platitudes about strength – I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me or God won't give us more than we can handle. Those are a couple that come to mind.

The message that we just need to have strong faith and buck up and all that just pours salt on the wounds. It's a message that says feeling weak and vulnerable is somehow wrong.

But the lament Psalms say otherwise. They portray faith at its most honest and gritty. To lament is to admit I don't got this and I'm drowning. The lament Psalms do not let us too quickly move to platitudes.

The lament Psalms make us take grief seriously in a society that just wants the grieving to hurry up and get back to normal.

The lament Psalms help us to say that anger and sorrow are not a reflection of losing faith, but rather may be the most honest expression of faith we can make. It's a confession that in a particular moment, life sucks and we feel abandoned. But at the same time it's an expression of trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness God has shown us before, and the trust that God will again.

It means recognizing that God is sitting with us in the midst of our lives, even when they're shattered. And God may be silent. But many times, in the midst of that silence there still comes that trust that God is there...that God has not abandoned us.

Lament Psalms remind us that there will forever be a before and after...a time before what's happened and a time after. The pattern of death and resurrection is everywhere in the Bible, including the Old Testament. It is of course manifested ultimately and completely in Jesus and the cross.

But In between death and resurrection is the getting through. In a process that doesn't move in a straight line, with the help of God and those who love us, we move into that after. We let go of what we thought life would be. Only then are we able to embrace the moments of beauty and joy in what comes after.