

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, June 26, 2016**

HOW LONG, O LORD?

Psalm 13:1-6

This week at General Assembly I met an extraordinary person with an extraordinary story and an extraordinary mission. Her name is Julianna Taimoorazy and she is the founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, which is what is on the band that I wear around my wrist. She is the descendant of a people with a very, very long history. She is an Assyrian, descendant of the people who ruled the Middle East over 3,000 years ago, who ruled it again in the first millennium BC until their empire was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 7th century BC. Since that time they have been stateless, but not homeless. They continue to live in the Nineveh plains in northern Iraq, though some of them are scattered now and that's where Julianna's story picks up.

She was born in Iran, where members of her family fled after the genocide of 1915, which is usually referred to as the Armenian Genocide. But in fact the Ottoman Turks took at that time to slaughtering not only Armenian Christians but also Assyrian Christians and Greek Christians. And some of the Assyrians found their way to Iran. She was born there in the 1970s before the Islamist revolution. In 1988 her family, looking at the future that an Assyrian Christian woman might have in a place like Iran, decided to get her out of the country, not an easy thing to do. She was smuggled across the border to Switzerland, where she hid in a safe house for a week. She went on from there to London and eventually found her way to the United States. She completed her education here, she went to work here, and she found her heart and life touched when she heard about the atrocities being carried out in Iraq during the period of the United States occupation, beginning in 2003, against the Assyrians in the northern part of the country. It was at that time that she founded the Iraqi Christian Relief Council and for the last nine years she has been working on behalf of one of the most afflicted people on earth, a people who first were dealing with Al Qaeda and then after that group morphed into what we now call ISIS, found themselves being not just persecuted but slaughtered by the thousands. Many have left the country. The Christian population of Iraq, which is mostly Assyrian, constituted 20% of the population in 1995. At this point, barely 200,000 of them remain.

Earlier this year Secretary John Kerry referred to what has happened to the Christians of Iraq and Assyria as a genocide. And that was a step forward. But even after that, what's happening to the Christians of the Middle East remains a story vastly unreported. And my new friend Julianna, with whom I had the privilege of spending an hour and a half on Friday, discussing what we can do to help, she has spent nine years seeking to bring the news of what is happening, the story of what is happening to her people and our brothers and sisters, to the world. One of the ways in which that has been done has been through a series of short films, one of which she showed several clips from during her presentation at General Assembly on Thursday morning. I'd like to show you about a minute's worth of what she showed us during her hour and fifteen minute presentation.

How long will you hide your face from me, O Lord? I'd planned on preaching on Psalm 13 before going to General Assembly. After I heard her presentation on Thursday morning I realized how providential that was. The people in that clip, part of a movie you can see in its entirety on YouTube called *The Last Plight*, those people are asking that question: "How long, O Lord?" The lady in the clip who found it so incomprehensible that people would come and record them and seemingly do nothing afterwards. That they had been in refugee camps for two months at that point. That was well more than a year ago. No doubt they're still there. And having gotten to those refugee camps, they were the lucky ones. They were the ones who had not been executed by ISIS in a dozen different, horrible ways. They were the ones who had not had to flee from their homes on literally minutes' notice. They were the ones who had gotten away with nothing but their lives. And here they were now in refugee camps in Jordan and elsewhere and they're asking, "When can we go home? When will the persecution stop? When will we be safe?" That's a hard question.

As Julianna and I talked I realized I don't have an answer. God alone knows what the answers to those questions are. But something that I do know is that while we don't know the answers to those questions we do have an idea of what can come between now and when those answers finally come, which is that we can raise our voices and we can offer our aid. And I'll be telling you more about that in the days and week and months and, God forbid, years to come. However, one of the things that I would tell our Assyrian brothers and sisters is that as awful as life is now, this is not all that there is.

As we take a look at Psalm 13 we see a movement, a movement from hopelessness to hopefulness. A movement from despair to trust. We begin in verses 1-2 with the question that our Assyrian brothers and sisters must ask themselves and that we ask ourselves on occasion as well. We ask ourselves this question, the critical question: "How long, O Lord?" And we don't know what the specific circumstances were that prompted David's cry. We're only given a couple of hints. The first of those hints is in verse 2b, "How long will my enemy triumph over me?" Which suggests a political or military situation. Somehow or another, and of course we know that David found himself in this place many times in the course of his life, someone was coming against him, someone who at that time was holding the upper hand. And whoever it was, perhaps his own son Absalom, but whoever it was, he wondered, how long will this situation go on that your people are oppressed, that your enemy and mine seems to triumph.

The second hint that we're given is in verse 4, in the second half of that verse: "My foes will rejoice when I fall." Which again points to a king's problem, a problem of a ruler who has to deal with those who want to take his place or who want to rule his people. But of course, regardless of the specifics of the circumstance, the real problem that David points to is the seeming absence of God. "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" This is the cry of a man who feels abandoned. And it's a cry that I suspect all of us in one way or another to some degree or another can relate to. There have been times when we felt that God was nowhere to be found. We've felt in the midst of a problem that seemed insoluble, in the midst of a sin that we could not turn from, in the midst of bearing the hatred of those who knew that we were God's people

and could not bear the thought, we wondered, where is God and why am I left alone with this unbearable situation?

Sometimes it's not even a matter of terrible things are happening to us, simply that we don't know where He is. The story has been told by her biographers of Mother Theresa, one of the most celebrated women of the 20th century, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, a woman known throughout the world, a woman who now is called "saint" by the Roman Catholic Church, but who for over 50 years wandered about in what John of the Cross, medieval spiritual writer, called the dark night of the soul. In which even as she was being celebrated by the world and even as she was giving her life in service to the poor of Calcutta, even as she was speaking before presidents and prime ministers and cameras around the world, even as people hung on her every word, she felt that God was nowhere to be found. We don't think of people like that, among the Christian community, as being people who don't experience the love and grace and mercy of God on a daily basis and yet, for over 50 years, virtually her entire adult life, Mother Theresa wandered in the darkness. She knew that God was there but she experienced Him as absence.

We've experienced Him as absence, all of us at some time or another. And in the midst of that absence, David says, it is hard to be me. It's hard to be you. It's hard for any of us to be children of God in the midst of that absence. He asks, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" "Wrestle with my thoughts" has the connotation of worry or anxiety or doubt. He doesn't know what's happening. God isn't speaking, those around him want his head and he has no clue what to do. And "sorrow in my heart," we all know what that feels like. It has to do with the dejection that he feels in God's absence. He's abandoned. He's alone. And, God said right at the beginning, it is not good for man to be alone. And the worst kind of loneliness is that which we feel when we believe that God has abandoned us. Even though we may know intellectually, theologically, that He hasn't, we still feel that and we feel that at our very core. It's the opposite of Psalm 23, which we're all so familiar with. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art *not* with me." That's what this feels like. It comes when we feel that God has abandoned us to our circumstances as if our prayer is not being heard and is being poured into the air. Or as if the words of the Bible are nothing more than blotches of ink on paper.

This is the feeling that overwhelms our brother in Iraq and in Jordan and in Syria every single day. And they find themselves asking, "How long, O Lord?" It's a feeling that afflicted Jews repeatedly throughout the years of the Holocaust and they, too, asked, "How long, O Lord, will you forget us forever?" In the face of the circumstances that we face in life and for some of us circumstances that we face every single day, the critical question is, "How long, O Lord?"

Next we have the crucial petition. In verse 3 David says, "Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes." In the face of God's absence, David prays for understanding. He prays for wisdom. He prays for knowledge. He asks God to look at him, in contrast to the statement in verse 1, "How long will you hide your face from me?" he asks God to look at him, to see his circumstances, knowing full well that God does

that at every single moment. Nevertheless, his prayer is, “God look at me.” And he asks God to answer his prayer or as the New King James Version has it, to hear it. Not by showing Himself, just to hear. He asks God to give light to his eyes, to enlighten him, to enable him to understand what is going on here. The woman in the clip asks the question, “What’s the point? What’s the point of what we’re going through?” And you can well understand why she asks that question. We all know that the Christian life involves suffering. Jesus warned us that that would be the case. And our Assyrian brothers and sisters know full well that that’s part of the Christian life. They look upon what is happening to them and they look at the way the world has seemingly turned its back on them and they can’t help but ask, “What’s the point?” And at that moment they’re praying David’s prayer. They’re turning to God and they’re asking Him to look at them and to answer why, why O Lord?

But the interesting thing about David’s prayer is that he doesn’t demand that God show Himself, only that He look upon David’s affliction. He doesn’t demand a miracle. He doesn’t, at least in this psalm, even ask for victory over his enemies. He doesn’t insist that God has to play by his rules. Instead he asks only to understand his situation in order to be able to deal with it faithfully. And this again is what we ask when times are tough, when spouses are arguing, when employment is dull and meaningless, when children are unruly, when unemployment is a reality. We ask, “God, show me why this is happening. Or even if not why, show me how to deal with it in a way that’s faithful to You.”

And this is one of the most important aspects of our congregational life and care. Because when those times happen, when we lose a spouse, when we’re faced with unemployment, when a child is dealing with addiction, when a parent has cancer, we are not alone. And not only is that the case theologically, in that we know that God is with us even if we don’t feel that He is present with us, but in fact, we are not alone because we have brothers and sisters on whom we can rely.

Just as David relied upon, at times, a very small handful of men who walked with him and helped bring him through his difficult days, we do not walk alone in this world. Look around this sanctuary, brothers and sisters. Look around and know you are never alone. There are always people to stand by you and if need be to carry you, if things get that bad. And that was, to the extent that I had anything to say to her, the message that I gave to Julianna Taimoorazy, because just at that moment it felt for all the world like she needed to hear it. She had just gotten through saying that after nine years it seemed like things were only worse. And she didn’t know whether she had accomplished anything at all. And I told her by virtue of an extraordinary presentation, a life-changing presentation that she made on Thursday morning to a thousand or more members of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church that there was no question that she had accomplished something and that she had reaffirmed a central truth of our reality which is that she and her people are not alone. We walk with them. And through us God walks with them. Without this, David says in verses 3-5, all would be lost. “Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. My enemy says, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall.” If we do not lean on one another even as we lean on the Lord we are destined to fail. This

world will overcome us. The powers of darkness will grind us underneath their feet. But the amazing, wonderful and, at times, elusive truth, is that this can never be.

So we come to the last part of the psalm, the confident resolution. Even in the face of God's perceived absence, David trusts in Him. And this is the true miracle. "But I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation." He has faith that God loves him. Even when He doesn't show it in tangible, visible ways, even when he feels God's absence most intensely, he nevertheless trusts in Him and he can do that because he knows who God is and he knows that firsthand. And he knows what God has done because he's seen Him at work. Just as we can trust Him because of Christ and who He is and what He has done. Every single one of us has experienced His transforming power and love and even if at the moment He seems nowhere to be found, we know how real that is.

This may be the most amazing thing about the persecution of the Assyrians. Despite the fact that it would be possible to avoid many, if not all of the hardships that they have experienced under the Islamic boot, not just now but for the last 1,400 years, despite how easy it would be to avoid all of that simply by saying the *shadaha* and becoming Muslim, they have remained faithful. Even as they ask, "What's the point?" and "How long, O Lord?" they stay faithful to who they are and to whom they have believed. They are God's people and some of them literally have borne the cross. And even as they do so, they rejoice. They rejoice with David even in this darkness because salvation is theirs. Faith, the Book of Hebrews says, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Even though God may seem absent, we know that His salvation is ours because it has been promised and secured to us in Christ. And the wonderful thing is that that's not dependent on our feelings. It's not dependent on our day-to-day minute-to-minute spiritual experience. It's not dependent on our circumstances. It is ours, kept for us as a treasure in heaven and kept always. Therefore rejoicing is appropriate even when God seems farthest away because even at those times He is closer to us than we can know. And we can affirm with David, even as we sing to the Lord, "He has been good to me."

In the course of her presentation, Julianna told this story, and I'm not sure that I had heard this before. You may recall that, I think it was last year, ISIS had captured some Egyptian Christians, Coptic Christians, twenty-one of them, and they executed all of them by beheading. And as they were down on their knees in the sand, waiting for the blow to be struck, they cried out to God in praise of His mercy. And when the deed was done, one of the ISIS fighters echoed their praise of Jesus Christ and he was forced to his knees and was beheaded alongside of them. What's happening to our brothers and sisters in the Middle East is a crime against humanity. And one day, whether in this world or the next, those who are committing that crime will be brought to justice. We don't know how long that will take, but when it does, and even before it does, we will rejoice, we will trust and we will sing to the God of our salvation and we will join His people in every corner of the world in doing so.