

This past week at church camp we spent a lot of time with water—reminding the campers to drink lots of water, especially those who complained of headaches, for we didn't want any camper to become dehydrated. And, of course, we dealt with the rain on our first day, dodging the raindrops between activities.

Spending time in canoes or paddle boats on the pond was another favorite water activity. Tom told me that he paddled to the far side of the pond with a group of children and noticed a bird box someone had built containing a sign printed with the words, "Wood Duck." When Tom noticed that a different kind of bird was in the box, he said, "That's a Martin in the box. I wonder why that bird is in the box instead of the Wood Duck?" One camper replied, "Because the bird can't read!"

Of course, the favorite water activity occurred in the pool, splashing and diving under the water. Since the water was so cold, I sat alongside the edge of the pool, instead dangling my feet in the water. Several of the campers plotted a way to get

me wet as they cannonballed into the water in front of me, sending cool water all over me. It was then that I decided to get into the chilly waters, finding myself up to my neck in cold water.

Maybe you've had days like that, when you have felt up to your neck in water, more often what may instead feel like hot water, troubles and conflicts that seem too difficult to wade through.

The writer of Psalm 69 had experienced the same feeling as he wrote:

Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me. (1-2, NRSV)

The psalmist's throat was dry, eyes dim from crying all night, for he felt as though his enemies were out to get him. The writer admitted he wasn't perfect, that he had sinned, but he didn't feel he deserved the pursuit of the unidentified enemies.

In the midst of his agony, he was also concerned how his struggles might affect those around him:

Don't let those who look to you in hope  
Be discouraged by what happens to me,  
Dear Lord! God of the armies!  
Don't let those out looking for you  
Come to a dead end by following me. (6, The Message)

I think it's amazing that while fearing for his own well-being, the psalmist was also concerned about those around him, about how his struggle could affect others. I wonder, when you find yourself in turmoil, do you contemplate how your actions will influence your family? Your co-workers? Your church? Most of us turn inward in times of chaos rather than thinking how our struggle will impact those around us, but the writer of Psalm 69 invites to look at the bigger picture—to turn our struggle into an opportunity to reflect what God is doing in the world.

The psalm writer tried everything he knew that might help in his plea to God: fasting by going without food, wearing sackcloth to reflect his sense

of sorrow, and even praying, but nothing seemed to work. People sneered at him and gossiped. He cried out to God:

Don't let me be  
swept away by a flood  
or drowned in the ocean  
or swallowed by death. (15, CEV)

He begged God to pay attention to him, but as you may have experienced, you can't make God rescue you when the waters are up to your neck. All you can do is cry out to God, as Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells in his encounter with a woman who was visiting at a hospital:

Her head was against the door, and both fists were up beside her face, and she was banging on the door: "Let me in, let me in, let me in!" I couldn't imagine someone locking her out of the [hospital chapel] room.

I said, "Let me help you." I tried to open the door, but the knob wouldn't turn. It was locked. I stopped a worker, and I said, "The chapel is locked."...

She came back a little bit later with [a staff member], who opened the door for us, and this woman and I went in. I would say she was about forty. She had the look of desperation. I could tell

that she hadn't come to the hospital with any planning; she came urgently, she came running. The dress she had on was not typical public wear. She had no shoes, just scuffs. Her hair had not been combed, no makeup.

She had the look of desperation. She had the voice of desperation. I can't tell you if she was screaming or crying or moaning or what it was, but it was desperation. Strange sound. I heard some of her words. "I know he's going to die, I know he's going to die, I know he's going to die."

"Who?"

"My husband."

"What's the matter?"

"He's had a heart attack."...

I told her who I was, and I said, "Can I pray with you?"

And she said, "Please."

I started to pray for her and for her husband, and she interrupted me. She didn't just interrupt me; she took over. She started praying herself and stopped my prayer. I think maybe I was too quiet or too slow or saying the wrong thing or something. Anyway, my prayer wasn't getting there, and she knew it. So she said, "Lord, this is not the time to take my husband. You know that better than I do, he's not ready. Never prays, never goes to church or anything. He's not ready, not a good time to take him. Don't take him now.

And what about me? If I have to raise these kids, what am I going to do? I don't have any skills, can't find any work. I quit school to marry him. If I'd have known you were going to take him, I'd have stayed in school." She was really talking to God. "And what about the kids? They don't mind me now with him around. If he's gone, they'll be wild as bucks. What about the kids? This is not the time to take my husband" ...

I stayed as long as I felt useful. I went back the next morning, and she had on a nice dress; she had on shoes; she had combed her hair. She looked fine. She was in the hallway outside intensive care. Before I could ask, she said, "He's better." She smiled and said, "I'm sorry about that crazy woman yesterday."

I said, "Well, you weren't crazy."

She said, "I guess the Lord heard one of us."

I said, "He heard you."

She was desperate. She had God by the lapels, both hands, and was screaming in God's face: "I don't think you're listening!" That's desperation.<sup>1</sup>

The woman reflected the pleas of desperation underlying Psalm 69, one of the longest prayers for help in the Bible. It's not surprising that later New Testament writers referred to this Psalm when they

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wrote about the life of Jesus. John referred to this Psalm twice (2:17, 15:25) in telling the story about Jesus, and all four Gospel writers connected Jesus' thirst while dying on the cross to the psalmist's dry throat. The Book of Romans referred to the psalmist's frustration as Paul quoted Psalm 69 while writing about those who did not recognize Jesus:

Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and keep their backs forever bent." (11:9-10, NRSV)

Do you hear the desperate tone of voice in this passage? It's in these desperate times, when we feel that we're up to our neck in water, that we can cry out to God, knowing that God hears us. We can't control what God will do, but we can trust that God comforts us in the most desperate of times. As the

British-American Philosopher Alan Watts once said: "To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax, and float."

We know that we do not float alone, for God's presence sustains us even in the most desperate of times. The next time you find yourself feeling as though you've stumbled into the deep waters of life's turmoil, remember that God is the one who sustains you as you float in the waters that have risen up to your neck.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories*