



July 3, 2022

Psalm 30

The Poetry of Faith

Prayer: With the Psalmist we ask for your help, O God, seeking to place the desires of our hearts into the words and cadences which will be heard and pleasing to you. Lift us out of despair; listen to those who pray earnestly this morning whether in silence, word or song. O God you look upon our hearts and listen to our prayers, as a parent might listen to the concerns of a child, or as a loved one waits, minutes, days, or years – to hear the whole story tumble out and give voice in all its fullness...

I'll begin by quoting one of my favorite Old Testament scholars, Ellen Davis: "In the ancient world some civilizations were good at metallurgy: working in silver or gold or bronze, some ivory, some farming, the ancient Israelites who were nomadic, were good at praising God." I love the way this observation about what civilizations are good at mixes the physical and the metaphysical. In the Exodus, the children of Israel learned to live not by food or shelter, which are the gifts of lesser gods, but by God's promise and on God's promise – elevating their focus beyond their physical needs. They learned to trust that manna and quail would come, water would be provided as they lived into a life of praise and worship. They were people of the word, people living on God's promises. They gave praise to God in all situations and they established a tradition rich in songs of praise. Psalms. Psalm 30 is a psalm about recovery from a serious illness.

I'd like to turn to a consideration of small things, to gain insight on this Psalm this morning. The New York Times ran a story a couple of years ago about a humble wildflower called the Tennessee coneflower. First identified in 1898, for decades presumed extinct. In 1968 it was rediscovered by Dr Elsie Quarterman, who went to work to protect the flower, one of the first to be placed on the now much expanded Endangered Species list. The flower thrives in easily overlooked spaces: a combination of limestone and cedar glade common in Tennessee and a few other southern states. Dr Quarterman worked with the

- Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation
- The National Park Service
- The US Fish and Wildlife service
- Private and corporate donors to protect the flower

Today this flower blooms by the thousand in the wild. Because it is a native to the Tennessee region, it is home to American pollinators – native bees and butterflies. The article reported that this flower was removed from the endangered species list in 2011. Dr Quarterman attended the “delisting ceremony” at Cedars of Lebanon State Park in TN. She was 101 years old, and she had witnessed the arc of this wildflowers’ comeback, together with the species of plants and animals which thrive alongside it.

I am amused to learn that this flower is a part of a group of plants and animals that scientists call “Lazarus species” – species which are thought to be, and have been declared extinct, and yet they come back and go on to thrive.

What a great label! It sounds to me like the scientists have been reading their Bibles and thinking about impossible comebacks. Lazarus, already dead in his tomb, Jesus lingering elsewhere with others and ignoring the urgent texts from Mary and Martha to come and heal their brother. Lazarus was a great favorite. When he heard the news, Thomas thought they might as well all just go and die with him (John 11:16) they loved him that much. And when Jesus finally did arrive, Jesus wept. For the loss of his friend – that he had endured this death, for all he meant to those who loved him, for the burden of a loss which can only be felt by great love.

You know this story, Jesus went to the tomb, prayed, and shouted from outside “Lazarus, come out!” ... alive and well, although still wrapped in burial cloths

Everyone whom Jesus healed went on to die again another day. But in that moment, they knew healing, and when you know healing like that... How does it change you? Or does it?

If you have ever recovered from a disease, like Covid, say, or something that brings you into the awareness of your own mortality you will understand the backstory to our Psalm today. A psalm of thanksgiving for recovery from a serious illness. “So that my soul may praise you” – because my soul would have been unable to praise God – if dead.

You get a glimpse back into antiquity of someone putting ink to papyrus, later maybe pen to paper, now maybe emojis in the margins. If I’m dead, I can’t praise God...I am not dead. I am praising God! Not everyone understands this deep joy. Because when the car swerves and nearly hits you, when you feel the fade to black on the surgeon’s table, and you wake up again made whole and well...what can you say, to anyone outside looking in, life may be normal and unremarkable, but there's a certain individual moment of recognition for what has just been restored – everything. The soul knows what they have just come through, the soul may take a moment to reflect on the sheer joy of this. To describe it requires...

Poetry. You’ll make your own connections to the words and to your life. Poetry does that, it fills in the meaning with levels of experience underneath the words. This is what Israel is good at – the words of praise, the connections, the meaning and poetry of faith.

We just sang two verses of the Battle Hymn of the republic (written by Julia Ward Howe). A hymn full of poetic imagery which people have been bringing their own understanding to for generations: "he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" – what? That has meant different things in different eras. Great poetry, and like poetry it's okay if it moves us – differently. In fact, it's supposed to.

On this holiday weekend I will quote from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote from Paris to James Madison:

"...a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical...An observation of this truth should render honest....governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions as not to discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government."

Jefferson thought the act of struggling for freedom was important for how we continue to value it. Something about the struggle for freedom, liberty and happiness, helps us to value it in our lives and guard it once achieved. He thought the "turbulence" (his word) of a true democracy is preferred over the tyranny of a monarchy or dictator. He is talking about values which are precious in their absence.

In our day many voices are questioning what kind of a democracy we are...it is the kind of question, Jefferson would say, that leads to good answers. It's not an easy moment, but Jefferson didn't think democracy was ever going to be easy. Ever.

The psalmist says "you have turned my mourning into dancing; you have clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent." (vs. 11-12) Like the comeback of the coneflowers, like the resurrection of Lazarus, like the ongoing struggle for democracy

For the sake of what has already happened in your life, and for the sake of what is still ahead – open your heart, mind, and imagination to the poetry of faith that a life of faith allows. We can praise God in this moment too, maybe an underappreciated talent, but this is what we're good at. Amen

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