

***Psalms as Living Prayers***  
***“Abundant Awe”***

Psalm 65

Message for July 24, 2022

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One of the things that has attracted me to the psalms this summer is the deep need for prayer in these times. I felt drawn to this particular psalm of “new orientation” because through it, we behold how to be thankful when everything is so hard. As we heard in the Bible Wisdom teaching: “When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,” and we are caught up in “the tumult of the peoples.”

The psalmist sings of God’s grace and God’s blessing of the year’s bounty. Turning toward praise to express our gratitude and reflect on our blessings is an essential practice, and this is especially the case as we continue to face climate destabilization, systemic racism, gun violence, and the many unknowns of COVID. When we are enduring so much, noticing and naming all there is to be grateful for takes on even more significance. Witnessing to the growth we have undertaken amidst all that has felt draining and bleak enables us to remember what we have gained when we are grieving so much.

The psalm opens with praise and a public celebration of God’s forgiveness. We also noticed this with the lamentation psalm we explored a couple of weeks ago, as the psalmist focused on what was happening for the community (rather than the individual alone). Today we heard a psalm of communal vulnerability and gratitude. The whole people concede their transgressions and are grateful for God’s compassion. They have let go of their pride and turn to God with openness and vulnerability. The psalm is the speech of a liberated people. We are not told what the disorientation was; perhaps it was drought or war. But what emerges now is a people prepared to get on with its business as a community, because God responded.

Their liberation provides a new orientation, and the psalmist goes on to sing about God’s powerful work in creation. This is the God who establishes, who stills, who makes, who visits, who enriches, who provides, who waters, who crowns. We hear of the blessings of the harvest and the reliability of creation, which gives us life. This song reorients us from the

fallacy that we are autonomous and believe in nothing but ourselves – as though we don't need God and we don't need each other.

Today's text is another illustration of the wide range of experience and emotion that is included in each of the 150 psalms. The "wow" factor in this psalm, our "wow" prayer, notices that God is "the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas." We take in the imagery of mountains and roaring seas. We note that no matter where we are located on this vast earth, we are awed by the sunrise and sunset. Even as we witness such abundance and beauty, we know there are endings alongside the beginnings. There is death and birth, decay and regeneration. These ways of the world, whether perceived as good or bad, can be overwhelming. We talk about stress in our lives quite often, and most of us are also familiar with "good stress." You know, the stress of a new job or buying a home or relocating. Even when we can see the benefits of the change, as we recognize the advantages of what is unfolding, we still have so much to learn and navigate. It can be exhausting and frightening and maybe even paralyzing.

Yet change is essential to life. Anne Lamott observes, "If we stay where we are, where we're comfortable and safe, we die there. We become like mushrooms, living in the dark, with poop up to our chins. If you want to know only what you already know, you're dying. You're saying: Leave me alone; I don't mind this little rathole. It's warm and dry. Really, it's fine. When nothing new can get in, that's death. When oxygen can't find a way in, you die. But new is scary, and new can be disappointing, and confusing – we had this all figured out, and now we don't."

Beyond our individual hopes and dreams and self-improvement, we vision what our communities need and what it might take to reduce gun violence or protect the ozone layer. But we know such change will require sacrifice, creativity, discomfort, and collaboration. It is rare that we humans eagerly pursue such changes because they are challenging endeavors requiring that we be yoked together in that work.

Often, we are in pain for a long time before we are willing to take the risk for the new thing – for the thing that very well might pull us away from the painful thing which we are clinging to so tightly.

One of my favorite essayists is the writer and professor, Scott Russell Sanders. In his book, “A Private History of Awe,” he reflects, “When the pain of leaving behind what we know outweighs the pain of embracing it, or when the power we face is overwhelming and neither flight nor fight will save us, there may be salvation in sitting still. And if salvation is impossible, then at least before perishing we may gain a clearer vision of where we are. By sitting still, I do not mean the paralysis of dread, like that of a rabbit frozen beneath the dive of a hawk. I mean something like reverence, a respectful waiting, a deep attentiveness to forces much greater than our own.” What a helpful concept – we have more choices than we realize – sometimes we run away or avoid or numb out, but instead, we could embrace the change or we might even consider sitting still and paying sacred attention to what is unfolding around us, which will shape our ability to integrate what is flowing into our lives.

We are called to participate in the new creation – to be the hands and feet of the divine. As we reflect on this, consider: How do we participate in making things new? In doing things differently? When might we make space for reverence and allow ourselves to observe and wait? How do we generate change in the world and in the lives of others?

Last week, Richard Rohr’s blog for the Center of Action and Contemplation highlighted the writings of Episcopal priest, Becca Stevens. Her story points to small changes that develop into larger movements. She is the founder of Thistle Farms, a community run by survivors of sexual abuse, trafficking, and addiction. Becca describes how the community came about. She writes,

“My mother’s example of showing love through practical means gave me the wherewithal to open a home for women survivors of trafficking, prostitution, and addiction more than twenty-five years ago in Nashville, Tennessee. It was a small house for five women. I said: ‘Come live free for two years with no authority living with you. Live free.’ ... I figured that’s what I would want if I were coming in off the streets or out of prison. ... I did it because sanctuary is the most practical ideal of all.

I wasn’t interested in repackaging charity in shiny, new boxes with the latest words. I was bored by trendy cause-hawking that left me feeling disconnected. I was disillusioned by a bifurcated political

system that numbs compassion. I wanted to do the work of healing from the inside out. And that begins with a safe home. ...

From its humble beginning, Thistle Farms now has thirty global partners that employ more than 1,600 women. ... The mission to be a global movement for women's freedom is broad and is growing exponentially.”

She goes on to reflect,

“Initially, it seemed a bit ridiculous to me to think that by starting a small community, we could somehow change the world, but now, it seems more ridiculous to me to think that somehow the world will change if we don't do something.

Now, I can see that one loving gesture is practically divine. We have to do small things and believe a big difference is coming. It's like the miraculous drops of water that seep through mountain limestone. They gather themselves into springs that flow into creeks that merge into rivers that find their way to oceans. Our work is to envision the drops as oceans. We do our small parts and know a powerful ocean of love and compassion is downstream. Each small gesture can lead to liberation. The bravest thing we can do in this world is not cling to old ideas or fear of judgment, but step out and just do something for love's sake. ...

There is no secret formula to experiencing the sacred in our lives. It just takes practice and practicality. The deep truth of our lives and the fullness we are striving for don't happen with someone giving us the code to deep knowledge. Meaning and faith are not secret things. Sometimes what we need most is to remind one another of how the divine is all around us, calling us to see and taste it for ourselves.”

These observations, these stories, reveal how we so deeply impact one another. They remind us that life is filled with gifts and invitations, even when it is scary and overwhelming. Let us support one another in taking risks, in welcoming new orientation into our lives, and sharing vulnerably and authentically with ourselves, with one another, and with the divine.