

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 116:1-9, “The Land of the Living”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 6/18/2023

Very often we come to God most fervently when life is at its worst:
You’ve lost a job. A loved one has been diagnosed with a serious illness.
A relationship has hit the rocks and you’re not sure what will happen.

One of those seasons for me came while watching my father descend
through the layers of Alzheimer’s dementia from 2012 to 2018.
I knew that each year was the last best year of his life.
Each year seeing less and less of the person who
was so influential in shaping who I am.

We moved here in 2014 in part because we wanted to get closer to my father
and enable our boys to have time with him before he was gone.
I’m so glad that we did. There were blessings all throughout
those years, but along with them was persistent
loss and helplessness.

None of us are spared such experiences.
The Psalms make it very clear that God hears our calls
from the bottom of the pit, that we are invited
to wrestle and scream and tell God how bad things are,
and wonder what God is going to do about it.

This is a stance in prayer that is well supported by the Bible.

But what about after the storm passes?
How do we acknowledge what we have been through,
and give thanks to God when a traumatic encounter
has been resolved?

Psalm 116 is unique in that it provides insights for those of us
who have faced death (or walked alongside those who have),
but now carry on in the land of the living.

V 1 – We read, “I love the Lord, for he heard my voice,”
The word order is literally, “I love! For Yahweh listens.”

What an indispensable perspective we are given here.
We are genuinely heard by the Living God.

It's a basic statement that we are told in the church over and over
from the time we are born,
and yet it is still a striking thing to consider:
My voice is heard by the Almighty One who created all things.

It seems that we must re-hear such things as we grow wise in other ways;
we must come to a new awareness of how this truth enters our being,
our sense of self, our ways of relating.
For this Psalmist, the fact of God hearing corresponds to a lifelong commitment:
“Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.”

That frames the basic tone of this psalm but we quickly move
into much darker territory in verses 3 & 4:
**“The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave overcame me.”**

Life can turn on a dime like that.
“I love! God hears me! ... Welp, here come the cords of death!”

Perhaps you are in such a moment right now.
Perhaps you will have such an experience later this year.
We don't know when these things will come into our lives,
but we do know that they will come.
Derek Kidner says that in Old Testament poetry, *death* and *Sheol* are aggressive,
clutching at the living to waste them with sickness or crush them
with despondency; so the psalmist's plight may equally have been
a desperate illness or a wounding and disillusioning experience.
Who knows – it could well have been both together.

In recent years the number of video games, movies,
and TV shows featuring a zombie apocalypse in one form or another
has increased exponentially.

This trend reveals that the themes brought up in this Psalm
are universally compelling – in this Psalm, the cords of death
entangling someone, while in these shows the dead themselves
reach out to grab a person and pull them away
from the land of the living.

When we are in the midst of a time like this
our responses are rarely eloquent or deeply thoughtful.
Most of us can only muster the cry, “Lord, save me.”

I want to emphasize, then, that if you don’t feel the emotions
of freedom or restoration expressed in the remainder of this Psalm,
that’s okay.

It’s okay to be there, to feel the weight of your situation,
and to simply cry out, “Lord, save me.”

In verses 5 & 6, the Psalmist declares what God is like
for those who suffer anguish and distress.

- v. 5: Gracious, righteous, full of compassion.
- v. 6: Protecting the unwary, saving the Psalmist when brought low

These terms of honor and exaltation are what comes out
when you’ve been saved from a great difficulty.

Do you know that feeling?

I was once stuck in traffic for four hours on Thanksgiving day.
Being stuck in interminable traffic is an exhausting experience.
But when you finally break free, and all that stop and start
is behind you...your heart just breaks out into song!

That’s what is happening here. Verses 5 and 6 are the cathartic
release of emotion and gratitude that come after the tense moments
of a crisis are finally over,
but it’s all directed at God because the Psalmist understands
that anything good and lasting comes from
God’s grace and compassion and protection.

The result of all this, in v. 7, is a command directed inward:
“Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.”

This stands in contrast to the refrain found elsewhere in the Psalms,
“Why so downcast, oh my soul?” Do you know that one?
Here there is a command, “Return to your rest, my soul.”

In the wake of extreme difficulty, there is joy and exuberance,
but we can also become accustomed to the worry, the adrenaline rush,
the go-go-go.

The psalmist is saying, “No...return to your rest. You can let go now.”

You don't need to be hyper-vigilant any longer.

The habits you built up while coping with stress
can be refocused on good things that you get to choose,
because God has been good to you.

The conclusion of the matter is made clear in verses 8 & 9.

God has delivered this person's self from death, their eyes from tears,
and their feet from stumbling,

“That I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”

That line just captures my imagination.

“That I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”

When we know God, when our hearts are animated by the Spirit of God,
we may encounter death in our lives –

in our bodies, in our relationships.

And yet, the grace of God is with us,

and so we walk in the land of the living.

Whatever has come our way,

God's goodness has ensured that today we are alive
and walking each day in the life of Christ.

Later in the psalm, we read in v. 16 about the connection
between life and freedom:

“Truly I am your servant, Lord;

I serve you just as my mother did;

you have freed me from my chains.”

Life in the land of the living is a life of freedom.

Tomorrow is Juneteenth. On this day we remember the 250,000 enslaved
people in Texas who remained enslaved for two and half years

after the emancipation proclamation was read on Jan. 1, 1863.

Juneteenth is a day when the Black community celebrates freedom and life

while also remembering suffering endured in the past and in the present.

Death and loss are costly, and the legacy of slavery still exacts a cost,
but they do not have the final word.

God is leading us into the land of the living.

Jesus has faced death and overcome it.

When we live by faith in Christ we share in eternal life
that begins *right now*.

And so I give thanks to God. Not that difficult times have and will come,
but that God's promises endure, and that the land of the living
extends beyond the world we know today and into the world
that God is preparing for the future.

Let us all give thanks to God, then.

We can be signposts of the life that is now here in part,
and will one day come in full.