

Psalm 130: 1,2,5,6,7

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications!...

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits...
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning...

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
And with God is great power to redeem.

There are many reasons we carry fear, stress, frustration, resentment, sadness, helplessness, despair... There are many reasons. Some are very specific and clear to us and others are not. Sometimes it's about a season of life or a season of the year, and for some of us it becomes chronic and habitual over time... Add a pandemic into the mix, and everything is made worse...

What can a Psalm inspire, evoke and provoke in us to maybe change the channel, redirect our focus, give us new perspective, and awaken healing spiritual properties within us?

Psalms provide all kinds of metaphors that point to inner dimensions of experience. “Out of the depths” helps us visualize spatially what may go on internally for us. “Depths” point to something that is deeply rooted in us, perhaps hidden to us or something we repress and suppress through the day when we keep busy and distracted. But then comes the night. We try to sleep. We get those first few hours... but then, we awake, and then... “My soul waits... more than those who watch for the morning...” Those hours till morning... they can be very long, agonizing, frustrating... Everything feels so much more difficult and impossible... All we can do is wait... But what do we do in that waiting time other than have troubling thoughts swirl in our heads over and over with no resolution?

Why not try to engage God? What ideas, expectations and hopes do we attach to the word “God”? The psalms wrestle with God. They wrestle with traditional ideas and expectations of God. They push and pull at God, negotiate, bargain, appeal, rage and lament - “supplicate” before God. And somehow, out of such depths of supplication arises hope.

“With God is steadfast love”... with God is great power to redeem.” What will your supplications before God awaken in you?... “Steadfast love” is the kind of love that sticks it out, even in the worst of times, times of isolation, loneliness and deep darkness... “Redemption” means freedom. Someone pays a ransom for you and liberates you from bondage. Someone rescues you from the pit. But you have to have faith and hope in divine power to redeem. And you must choose your freedom when the path to it is revealed. You

must dance with God and move to the steps God will reveal to you. It won't be easy. It will take work. But then, no change that is meaningful and lasting can come without work... inner work.

Are you willing to wrestle with God, offer "supplication" before God, pray for the courage to choose the way to freedom as it is revealed to you by God? Or will you stay locked in the swirling depths that can and maybe have become chronic and habitual?

PRAYER: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, hear the voice of my supplication... I wait for you to reveal yourself, O God... speak to me until I hear your voice. Fill me with your steadfast love, O God... Give me the courage to choose the door to freedom and the power to walk through it again and again... Amen.

(every time there is ... punctuation in the text, it suggests a pause)

Psalm 3: 1-4

A Psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom

O Lord, how many are my foes!
Many are rising against me;
Many are saying to me,
"There is no help for you in God."

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me,
My glory, and the one who lifts my head.
I cry aloud to the Lord,
And God answers me...

Have you ever felt harassed and surrounded by trouble? Have you ever heard voices telling you not to bother calling up to God in prayer because it won't make a difference because God doesn't care or is not there?

The beautiful thing about psalms is that they touch on universal human experiences. Clearly for the psalmist, the most immediate trouble they're facing are concrete foes all around. The kind of context that would inspire the writing of this Psalm is given in the heading: "A Psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom." This story, found in 2 Samuel 14-18, is heartbreaking, as David is betrayed by his son, forced to run for his life and forced to engage him violently with tragic consequences. David's grief at the death of his son, mingled with guilt and shame for his failure as a father, is profound.

But Christians through the ages have also read scripture and the psalms in "spiritual" terms. That means we read scripture in a way that becomes relevant to

our experiences of life. In this case, we may not be a king, betrayed by a child hungry to take over the throne, and seeking salvation (salvation means wholeness) from human enemies all around. But we may see so many situations and circumstances in our lives as enemies. What are those situations and circumstances in your life? What are those fears that torment you in the middle of the night? What kind of wholeness are you in search of right now in your life? What relationship, health concern, financial stress or uncertainty in your life is fracturing or fragmenting the possibility of your wholeness? What commitment is awaiting your greater investment? What door is awaiting your opening and walk-through?

You are the only one who can think this through. Ask for the courage to think truthfully and act while the door is open and the opportunity if offered you. “I cry aloud to the Lord, And God answers me.” If you are not praying with persistence for clarity, truth and the courage to act, nothing will come of it. If you are praying with persistence and you do not hear an answer, ask yourself whether it’s because you do not want to hear what is being spoken into you. If you don’t bother praying with any intention or you make little space for it in your life, ask yourself: have I lost my faith or set it aside?

PRAYER: O God, all too often I am surrounded by enemies around and within. Doubts arise and voices keep telling me you don’t care or are not even there. Meet me in those difficult moments of doubt verging on despair. Meet me in my fear of listening to what you may be telling me. Give me the courage to open and walk through doors before me. I ask this through Jesus who is your way through death to life; Amen.

PSALM 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² God makes me lie down in green pastures;
leads me beside still waters;

³ God restores my soul.
God leads me in right paths
For God’s own name’s sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

- ⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Of all 150 psalms that make up the psalter, why is psalm 23 the most popular? It certainly lacks the emotional intensity of many of the lament psalms or the vibrant exuberance of many of the praise psalms. But it also provides rich metaphor, opening up imaginative possibilities for our praying and believing.

It begins with a statement of faith: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” In other words, because God is my shepherd, I will be in need of nothing fundamental to my flourishing. Really? That’s a grand statement is it not? Can I believe it? Well, the rest of the psalm elaborates on why it is that with God as my shepherd I shall be in need of nothing fundamental to my flourishing. There are three parts to this elaboration:

Part 1: vs 2-3 – Lying down in green pastures evokes an image of the lush foliage of inner fullness. Leading me beside the still waters evokes an image of profound calm. Restoration of my soul evokes an image of coming to myself after being overwhelmed, exhausted and spent. Leading me in the right paths evokes an image of finding the right way after I am lost and perplexed as to choices and decisions before me. I am invited to enter a journey of believing and praying to One like a shepherd in communion with whom I will experience a fullness, a calm, a restoration and a guidance towards better and best choices and decisions rooted in the solid wisdom of a higher love.

Part 2: vs 4-5 – But as we know, we cannot escape times of life when much that has kept us rooted and grounded is thrown into question, when believing and praying are difficult to sustain. The psalmist describes such difficult times in two profoundly evocative ways. First, there is the valley of the shadow of death. What experiences of life and times of life have felt akin to walking through a valley of the shadow of death for you?

Second, there is the image of having enemies encircling me. What experiences are evoked for you with the image of an enemy or enemies? Is it a particular person or group? Is it circumstances, a disease, an addiction or compulsion or some kind of obstacle that has grabbed hold of you and will not let you go? This psalm is inviting us to imagine though the means of faith and prayer what it’s like to have a shepherdly rod and staff to protect and guide us through a dark valley where

profound fear is confronting us. We are also invited in the face of defeat or humiliation before our enemies to experience the vindication of being celebrated with a feast in our honour and an anointing with oil, all intended to raise us up as cherished and valued regardless of how we have been run down and ground down. So exuberant is the experience of vindication, honour and feeling cherished that The psalmist exclaims: My cup overflows!

Part 3: vs 6 – and that exuberance leads to a renewal of confidence in the accompaniment, support and resurrecting power of the great Shepherd: Goodness and mercy will be my companions as I continue my journey, and my whole life will be lived with a more vivid awareness of the presence of God surrounding me (the house of the Lord is where God is especially present and where I am especially safe).

Now, if only I/we can develop such a faith! We are so called and inspired by Psalm 23.

PRAYER: You are my shepherd, O God... When I am rooted and grounded in you I can truly flourish in my life... But all too often, I do not feel so deeply rooted and grounded... I can feel harassed, shaken, frustrated, alone... Be patient with me, O God... Never cease coming to me and seeking to ground me again and again... I need that consistency and perseverance, O God, for every new twist and turn in life throws me off... May your love never leave me, no matter what valley of the shadow of death I will pass through, and especially when enemies surround me and infiltrate my thoughts and emotions... I entrust myself to you anew... Amen.

Psalm 27: 7-14

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek God's face!'
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,

for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Have you ever felt threatened or bullied? Have you ever felt forsaken or betrayed by those who should have been there for you? Whether you are a child or young person, someone in the workplace, part of a family or a community, one of the core vulnerabilities we all share as human beings is the need to have people around us who will be there for us to stand with us, believe in us and walk with us through any threat or crisis we will face. Whether they can do anything for us or not, we need people we can turn to, on whose shoulder we can cry freely or before whom we can vent without being judged or shut down for doing so. We also need people with whom we can discuss our challenges who can be truthful with us and whose love and support we trust. We need help in developing enough distance and perspective in a situation so that we can figure out the best way to make good choices, and then muster up the courage to act on them.

Psalm 27, like many psalms of lament, name the source of threat as “enemies” or “adversaries.” We have already been challenged in previous meditations to use our imagination in pondering what such enemies or adversaries may be in our lives. In this psalm, they seem to be those voices that tempt the psalmist to make bad choices (“Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies”).

But what psalm 27 offers us in addition, are beautiful ways of engaging “God” prayerfully even though such engagement is anything but polite or respectful in any conventional sense. Psalms teach us to pray passionately, using personal language, wrestling with God and conceptions of God, and also demonstrating in verse how understanding God and hearing God speak takes time to discern. If we give up our praying too early, we’ll never get to the beauty of discovery and an ever newer level of intimacy with the ground of our being some of us choose to name “God.”

Old Testament language is physical language, describing God in person-like terms, using bodily images, referring to natural phenomena and all things we access through our physical senses, and all this to communicate what is happening in our inner spiritual and emotional world. Whether it’s an earthquake or storm, whether it’s 40 days, going to a mountain or travelling through a valley, whether it’s fighting real life enemies or seeing a rainbow, God is seeking to communicate and journey with us human creatures. We are being called to discover a path to the “promised land” of flourishing, abundance and a purpose within a larger creation.

Psalm 27 speaks of the search for greater intimacy with God. A lot is at stake when we have expectations of intimacy. When the psalmist feels trouble surrounding them, they experience God as absent. Is God hiding? Is God angry and therefore non-responsive to the psalmist's plight? Now this may seem immature of the psalmist to think of God like this, but in any intimate relationship where we have high expectations of another's being present and available to us in our toughest times, it's easy to feel upset with the person. At the same time, even as the psalmist has moments where they feel 'cast off' or 'forsaken' by God, they come to other moments of strong affirmation. Even if our very mother and father forsake us God will not!

And even as the psalmist is threatened by enemies and adversaries this section of psalm 27 ends with another strong affirmation of faith: "I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." In other words, I will see goodness before I die. This also means I must develop the spiritual quality of "waiting" for the Lord. I must trust that goodness will come and it will come in time. I must wait faithfully, not give in to despair. I must wait openly, for goodness will come in ways I may not anticipate if my vision is too narrow or impatient. I will wait for the One who will never forsake me, trusting in a goodness that will find me no matter what. "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!"

PRAYER: We wait, O God... You have been there for us before, whether we've been aware of your presence or felt your absence, you have been there for us. Give us faith that you will be there for us today and tomorrow also. Give us the gift of patience, of "waiting"... Give us the gift of vision and awareness of your presence... You are healing energy, O God... you are restoring, renewing, new life-giving energy... You are our conscience, our spiritual sensitivity, and most of all, the warmth of love that breaks through our hardness, our despair and our fear... Thank you for walking the journey with us and never forsaking us... Amen.

Psalm 42: 1-6

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,

while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise God,
my help ⁶and my God.

When something terrible happens to us or someone we love... When we suffer terrible loss... How do we find language to express the pain, pain that is not visible? This psalm offers some beautiful words, metaphor and poetry, spoken and sung.

1) It expresses poignantly the feeling of loneliness in a person's suffering: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" I am isolated and alone in my pain. Even God seems to have abandoned me. I cannot feel God present with me.

2) But the liquidity of tears is preceded by the liquidity of flowing streams which like a deer seeking fresh water after a long journey is threaded to the imagery of a soul thirsty for God's living, healing presence. By adding the imagery of a flowing stream and a soul-thirst for divine healing presence, the psalm creates a poetic opening for the tears that may be in a person to just flow, freely. Tears are like streams of water and like thirst in the soul. The longing to let them flow must be given freedom and space, permission and encouragement. It is, oh so necessary, for the healing journey to let the tears flow...

3) But the psalm also opens up another step to the healing journey once the full flow of tears has had its season. The present situation of pain must be placed within a past and future, especially a past and future where God has been and may be present again... "These things I remember as I pour out my soul..." times when we have been with others worshipping, celebrating and other good things, times when we are feeling full of thanksgiving for the goodness of life.

And if we have known the goodness and fullness of thanksgiving with others, this can open up hope that our isolation in the pain and loss of the now will be for a time, not forever: ⁵ "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help ⁶and my God."

PRAYER: We seek your presence, O God. We need your presence, O God. Whether your presence is made vivid to us as an eternal father or mother God we pray to, whether we feel you most alive as an energy flow of love surrounding us and filling up our hearts, whether you are a solid rock upon which we stand or a comforting blanket keeping us warm as we sleep, whether you are reaching out to us through the compassion of a friend or the care of a neighbour... However you come to us, speak to us, touch us, arouse us, O God... We are seeking your presence. Reveal yourself to us anew this day and this time in our life journey... Amen.

PSALM 46: 1-3, 9-11

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁹ The Lord makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
God burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

What is it that you fear most these days? Is it infection or disease? Is it the loss of a job or financial stability? Is it the consequences of conflict and tension in a relationship? Is it some natural disaster, as the psalmist alludes to, or war and violence as many in our world fear?

This psalm has been read, prayed and sung by many in times of trouble. It has provided deep assurance of divine providence and the comfort of trusting that we will never be abandoned, even in our darkest hour. God is greater than any disaster or trouble, and God is with us, surrounding us.

But in order for the words to really seep into our souls to strengthen, heal and empower us for what we are struggling to face, we need to let go any literal reading of them. Before the last few hundred years in the "Western world" (meaning Europe & North America), literalism was considered a most superficial reading of sacred texts. Literalism is one of the negative consequences introduced with a modern scientific worldview.

A literal reading of this psalm makes it meaningless. Think about it... What kind of help can God be if the earth is shaking, the mountains trembling and the waters roaring? Should people not fear if they are in the midst of an earthquake, volcano or tsunami? And what about those folk living in a war zone? Wars may cease here and there, but sadly, the multiplication of wars and conflicts small and great are a permanent feature of our world as we have known it so far. If God is supposed to be a strength and help in time of trouble, God has a spotty track record at best. And yet, a more "spiritual" reading of the psalm would argue that beyond the very necessary help we need from friends, neighbours, health and governing authorities in times of personal and social trouble, without some deep inner grounding in the soul, we will not make it. We may be safe on the outside and get all the help we need, but if we are broken and shaken within, what power, movement force or energy can heal and renew life in us? God is the word the psalmist uses for this power, movement and presence in their life. God may definitely reveal God's self in the help we receive from other people and the chance circumstances of life that work in our favour. But more specifically, God works in and through us to grow us outward so we can be and become, grow and blossom, even in the broken places...

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." Is God your refuge and strength in times of your trouble?

PRAYER: O God, our God, my God... Be a present help in time of my trouble... Do not abandon me... Surround me... make me strong, especially in the fragile and broken places... in the face of the tumults of life, the distress and conflicts of life, reveal yourself as the rock and foundation more solid and grounded than any shaking I will experience in my soul... Shine a light on my way forward... Give me hope that I will get through whatever I must pass through... Arouse courage in me to find the kind of strength that is also strong in compassion... Make me a present help in times of trouble for others around me... I pray this way in the name of Jesus who shone your light in the way he lived, died and rose again... Amen.

Psalm 49: 1-3,5-6,10-11,16-20

¹ Hear this, all you peoples;
give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
² both low and high,
rich and poor together.

³ My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.

⁵ Why should I fear in times of trouble,
when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,
⁶ those who trust in their wealth

and boast of the abundance of their riches?

¹⁰ When we look at the wise, they die;
fool and dolt perish together
and leave their wealth to others.

¹¹ Their graves are their homes for ever,
their dwelling-places to all generations,
though they named lands their own.

¹⁶ Do not be afraid when some become rich,
when the wealth of their houses increases.

¹⁷ For when they die they will carry nothing away;
their wealth will not go down after them.

¹⁸ Though in their lifetime they count themselves happy
—for you are praised when you do well for yourself—

¹⁹ they will go to the company of their ancestors,
who will never again see the light.

²⁰ Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish.

In his book “The Road to Character,” David Brooks begins by making a distinction between what he calls the “resumé” virtues” and the “eulogy” virtues. In his words: “The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.” Brooks goes on to tell how for much of his life he was taught to focus on the resume virtues and that this is what society teaches us to focus on. And yet, at the end of life, what kind of virtue will really have mattered to have cultivated throughout your life?

Psalm 49 is a cold burst of reality on the bubble of success and wealth as the measure of life’s fulfillment. It reminds us that we’re all born vulnerable and we die vulnerable. Those who are wealthy and successful may be praised, adored and full of “pomp” in their own sense of accomplishment. And yet, will they have neglected the most important things of life in their pursuit of success and wealth?

And what about you and me? What matters most in our lives? What has mattered most in our lives? Has that shifted as we have aged and grown? Psalm 49 is composed by one who understands the temptation of beholding the successful and the wealthy, those who often look down and even mistreat those who are more “ordinary” in their estimation, with feelings of both envy and contempt. How is it that those who seem to have it all are all too often undeserving of it?

And yet, this psalm is also teaching us not only that rich and poor, successful and ordinary are all mortal and vulnerable at the end of the day. No. In meditating on our mortality and vulnerability, perhaps, our values may shift, from the “resumé” ones to the “eulogy” ones. Perhaps with the little time we have of life on this earth,

we may rethink and refocus what is worth pursuing and cultivating. Perhaps our connection with the whole, our search for authentic connection and community with human and non-human life, our opportunity to serve and give and help, and perhaps our capacity to savour the sacredness of life in ourselves and others, may be the best gift we are given. Indeed, this psalm may be a beautiful reset, reminding us to ground ourselves in life's true value... while we have time.

PRAYER: Eternal God... the beginning, middle and end of all time... remind us of our mortality. Remind us that our time on this earth is not forever and for some of us less than more... May we honour the gift that life is with gratitude... May we honour the sacredness of life by filling it with your love flow received deep within our hearts and shared out of an abundance you make possible... May we find our deepest joy in serving and our richest fulfillment in giving... May we find that still point of peace deep within us beyond all the turmoil of life around us... Come O Holy Spirit, O Spirit of Jesus, O creator and ever-creating Spirit... Come upon us... Come upon me... Amen.

PSALM 57: 1-3, 6-11

*To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David,
when he fled from Saul, in the cave.*

¹ Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
until the destroying storms pass by.

² I cry to God Most High,
to God who fulfils God's purpose for me.

³ God will send from heaven and save me,
the Lord will put to shame those who trample on me.

God will send forth God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

⁶ They set a net for my steps;
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my path,
but they have fallen into it themselves.

⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God,
my heart is steadfast.
I will sing and make melody.

⁸ Awake, my soul!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn.

⁹ I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.

¹⁰ For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens;
your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.
Let your glory be over all the earth.

The heading of this psalm provides a context which gives meaning to the words. Well before David was the celebrated King of Israel, he was a young man marked to be future king. Saul was the king at the time and saw David as a threat. At a certain point, Saul pursued him. 1 Samuel 22 records an occasion when David needed to hide from Saul and found a cave in enemy Philistine territory. Here, we're told, all those who were in trouble or in distress gathered and David became their leader. Out of a place of fear and despair David found opportunity and possibility. Hiding in a cave, he emerged out of it a leader.

What I find particularly beautiful in this psalm is how it is composed to be visualized. It begins in a cave, in hiding, in fear and a "destroying storm". I visualize myself bowed down or crouched in the dark, hiding, my soul scared, tired and hopeless. But as the psalm moves, it takes me out of the cave into the light, the storm has passed and I am standing. As I straighten, my feet feel light. I'm starting to float. I have wings and I fly upwards into the heavens. As I make my journey I begin to hear music. From whispering in fear I begin to speak and then I begin to sing, sing praises at full volume.

Or else, I can visualize being in a cave where it's all dark, it is night and it is stormy, but then I awake and emerge from the cave, into the dawn light and then the brightness of the day. Read the psalm a few times and see if you feel this movement in your body and soul too. What words stand out for you in the progression from fear to new hope, from darkness to light, from storm to a bright day, from down below to flying sky high?

Through it all, of course, there is God, and God is imaged as an eagle under whose wings I take refuge; God sending forth "steadfast love and faithfulness" which is like an energy flow I feel within me and through me, taking me like wings take a bird into flight for "your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds". God's "glory" is also over all the earth. Glory is light and splendour seen in the brightness of the sun. Imagine what this psalm can do when it is sung or prayed with an open heart and spiritual imagination. Try visualizing it and see where it takes you.

PRAYER: You are everywhere, O God, in the darkness and in the light, down below and high above, in me, around me, above me and in all things... In you I can hide. You create space for me to weep and to rage. You stay with me in silence when I have no words. You watch me when I sleep and you are there when I wake. You

show your face to me through others, and you find me when others disappoint me, let me down or betray me. You give me the gift of imagination, of faith, of hope for a new day when I'm tired and lonely and in distress. Show your face to me anew, O God. Take me from the cave out into the light, from below ground above and into the heavens. Give me wings to fly, or stand with me as I try to find my footing again... In Jesus' name; Amen.

PSALM 71: Selected Verses

- ¹ In you, O LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
- ³ Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
- ⁶ Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.
- ¹⁷ O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
- ¹⁸ So even to old age and grey hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might
to all the generations to come.

Faith is not some momentary thing you pull out of your pocket or purse when you need it. Faith that is real and makes an impact in our lives is a journey. Sometimes the journey takes us to ever new heights. We discover or rediscover some solid ground of trust, trust in a larger truth, a larger justice, a larger goodness and love... our lives are held in a larger flow of eternity and "God" is the beginning, middle and end of it.

Other times, faith can grow dim and lifeless, lacking the vividness of divine presence and the trust that we are accompanied by a larger presence in all we're going through. Sometimes, we lose our inspiration, we are disoriented and disillusioned. Our faith is not at the centre and sometimes we wonder whether it will ever come back to what it was.

Given how vulnerable we are to life's vicissitudes, many of which are well beyond our control, it is spiritually natural that faith will not just remain the same. The great mystics and spiritual masters of the Christian tradition (the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross is a good example) speak of "the dark night of the soul." For him (and for others), the dark night is a difficult experience, but not necessarily a bad one. Spiritual growth in our lives does include working through our times of difficulty where we are stretched and bowed down. In fact, he argues, the dark night is usually something we pass through in more mature times of spiritual awakening and growth. The fact that we are wrestling with faith and haven't just abandoned it is a sign that growth is being aroused. The new situation that is our lives and our larger needs are demanding the kind of faith that can grow with us to sustain, ground and direct us in ever new ways. We need resurrection after every new stage where some dying to what has been has happened.

What I love about Psalm 71 is not only how the psalmist is praying to God to become the solid foundation, the "rock", "refuge" and "fortress" so familiar in less turbulent days. And not only is the psalmist praying once again for "rescue" and "deliverance." But the psalmist is mapping out their whole life within God's sustaining and accompanying presence: "Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb... O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds..." The psalmist is continuing to do what they've always done, which are those practices of worship, prayer and meditation that have sustained the relationship of faith whether the season of life has been a challenging one or a joyous one.

But here is the final appeal: "So even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come." Not only must God be the beginning, middle and end for the psalmist, but their experience of the ever-present God throughout life (even through the dark night when God may have felt absent) may be something of great value to share with the next generation still in the childhood and youth of life.

For some of us it's not straightforward to share our faith with younger generations. Whether they are students, fellow congregants, children or grandchildren, our world is changing, and sometimes younger generations are being taught that new and younger is better than more ancient wisdom. Older generations may have their experiences, but they come from a world that has now changed. This is a sad commentary of our times. But may your experience be different. May you experience those children and youth who recognize genuine wisdom when they are in its presence. May they see the wisdom that comes out of the humility and vulnerability of having lived, seen, lost, suffered and made one's share of mistakes.

PRAYER: O ground of our being whom we name “God”, hear us when we pray to you. You have been that larger presence in and through our lives whether we’ve known and acknowledged you or not. You are the beginning, middle and end of all that is our life. Whether we’re in this world a few more years or many years, within the span of eternity our lives are but a moment. We have known moments of wonder and grace, moments of jubilation and victory. Other times have been difficult, discouraging, painful and disorienting. May we rediscover what it means to be connected with you every moment we breathe. May our faith, hope and love come alive anew as we live these days and season of our lives... You know us inside and out, O God... Each of us has been crafted uniquely. We have been made to absorb and become shaped by life’s experiences. Our bodies age and sometimes break. Our minds become forgetful, sometimes painfully so. Our hearts rejoice but also hurt. Embrace us in all of who we are and all we have yet to become in your presence... In Jesus’ name; Amen.

PSALM 84: 1-4, 10-12

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
² My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

¹² O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Has there ever been a time when you have felt particularly close to God or a time when God felt particularly close to you? Has there ever been a place you have been to or a place you sometimes go where you feel such closeness? For the people of Israel, like many ancient peoples, there were places and spaces where God could be felt especially close. It may have been a mountain, a hill or a valley. It may have been a burial site. But certainly for the Israelites, the holy city Jerusalem was such a place, and especially the temple. The “Holy of holies” was a space where only the

appointed priest would enter and only at certain times in the year. That's where the ark of the covenant (containing the 10 commandments) was kept and God was believed to be especially present there.

This psalm, like other psalms too, is inspired by this sense of getting close to God through the place and the space that is the temple, a place and a space where God dwells. As Protestants, we tend to downplay or dismiss thinking about the sacred inhabiting special places and spaces, or accessed through special objects like crosses or statues, or scents, sounds and touch. And yet, it is very much part of the way we're made as humans, accessing the divine and the sacred through all our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

Accessing the sacred is not just an inward, spiritual thing but a sensate thing too, and in fact, the two often interact. What revelations of God may come to us when we are out in nature, on a mountain, in a forest or sitting by a tree? And what about creatures dear to us (the psalm mentions sparrows and swallows finding shelter in the temple) or the people close to us. And how about those pictures or mementos or objects that somehow remind us of loved one or some special occasion like a wedding, birth, death or some special ceremony? And how much of God's closeness do we feel as the energy of love and care between us persons as it is exchanged and cherished?

But there is also something more that the psalmist associates with the sacredness of the temple. It is the sacredness of righteousness or justice (same word in Hebrew and Greek). Worship and justice joined by love must all go together. The psalmist experiences the closeness of God when they are walking in the way of righteousness just like they experience it in the midst of worship. They experience God's presence and strengthening when they are walking uprightly and trusting in God no matter what challenges they must face and what situations they must figure out how to engage rightly and compassionately.

And this is something we Protestants can fully get behind. We typically distrust any ritual for ritual's sake. Unless ethics are joined with prayer, unless a commitment to justice and right are inspired by our bible reading, and unless genuine compassion and care for the extra vulnerable are evoked by our worship, it is not the true God we are worshipping, praying to or meditating upon. The psalmist is very much aligned to such thinking, praying and meditating.

So what about you and me? How do we connect our worship and our service, our praying and our commitment to justice, our personal meditation and our concrete love of our neighbour? May we take this time and this week to find a fresh closeness to God as we open our heart to where God may be leading us in our relationships in the world and our personal journeys through a challenging

darkness into new light. And may we give thanks for those special places, spaces and objects that open us up to God's presence.

PRAYER: Come close to us, O God as we seek to get closer to you. We need your sheltering arms, not to protect us from life, but to carry us through the darkness into the light. Sometimes the darkness is very personal to us, O God. Sometimes it is our exposure and sensitivity to the struggle, hurt and suffering around us. We carry the pain of Ukraine and all those impacted directly. We carry the pain of those within our family and sphere of friendship struggling with their physical or mental health. We carry our personal struggles in a relationship or the grief of loss that continues to weigh upon us even as others seem to have moved on... Come close to us, O God, and help us feel your closeness... In Jesus' name; Amen.