

ALL DAY LONG

“... for you I wait all day long.” Waiting. We’ve been doing a lot of that lately. Waiting for the numbers to go down. Waiting to get vaccinated. Waiting for the arrival of the “new normal” – whatever that is. Waiting to travel, to see family and friends – in person. Waiting to escape our self-imposed solitude. Waiting. Waiting for some people to figure out how to wear a mask correctly or at all. Waiting. Waiting for changes in our national leadership. Waiting for bridges to be built, for common ground to be found. Waiting for racial justice. Waiting for a commitment to seriously addressing the environmental needs of our warming planet. Waiting. Waiting for the end of winter, for spring to arrive. And now we enter Lent, a season of preparation and *waiting* for Easter. Do we really need any more waiting at this point. I’m about “waited” out. I’m sick of waiting. And yet, the psalmist seems to relish waiting, waiting for God, “all day long.”

The crafters of the three year lectionary cycle have placed this psalm at the beginning of not just one but two seasons of preparation. It shows up on the first Sunday of Lent in Year B and the first Sunday of Advent in Year C, which means about 10 months from now we will encounter this psalm again as we prepare for Christmas 2021.

Psalm 25 is generally thought of as an Individual Lament. The psalm singer lifts up the very essence of his or her being to God, asking God not to put the psalmist to shame or to let the psalmist’s enemies rejoice over the psalmist. The psalmist then requests that God teach the psalmist and all those who wait for God’s goodness the ways of God while reminding God of God’s fundamental characteristics of mercy and steadfast love.

While not apparent in our English translation, Psalm 25 is an alphabetic acrostic poem. Each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with the 22 verses of the psalm corresponding to the 22 Hebrew letters. Interestingly, the Revised Common Lectionary ends this week’s reading after v. 10, which, as one scholar has noted, “... is sort of like stopping a recitation of the alphabet after the letter m, or interrupting the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer after, “and forgive us our debts ... ” I’m not going to belabor that observation but would encourage you to take a moment today to read the entire psalm and to see whether your experience of the psalm is altered by the additional verses.

Getting back to the acrostic, with each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet: Think about that for a moment. What’s one of the first things you learned as a child and that you probably taught your children – the ABCs, right? The alphabet is a fundamental element of one’s education. It is the first thing that any young student learns on the pathway to literacy. Scholars remind us that:

In ancient Israel, writing was seen as the special medium of God’s revelation. Thus the alphabet became associated with God’s word. Since the Torah, God’s law or instruction, came to Israel through writing, the structure of the alphabet was understood to reflect the structure that God provides the community through the law. Many of the alphabetic acrostic psalms revolve around the theme of the law or instruction.

The poem's structure enables one to memorize it easily, at least in Hebrew.

In Psalm 25, the psalmist asks God show the psalmist God's ways, to make them understandable, and then to lead the psalmist in those ways. When I was growing up our family did a fair amount of backpacking in the Sierras as well as in Yosemite. Often times the path would lead to broad areas of rock and granite where no visible path could be seen. Thankfully, previous hikers would mark out the trail through the use of "ducks" which were simple stacks of stones, usually three stones that you knew the stack was not the result of some natural occurrence. These "ducks" pointed the way over the rock to where the trail resumed with a dirt path. In a way, the psalmist is imploring God to stack the stones and lay out the "ducks" so that the psalmist can stay on the path.

As I was shoveling out my driveway the other day, I took a break to speak with a neighbor who was out for a walk. We both commented about how during the pandemic one day seems to blur into the next and sometimes it's hard to remember where you are in the week. On top of that, for many, working from home has caused additional confusion as work life and home life get blended together and the line between where work ends and home begins becomes muddled. It has been easy to lose one's way this past year. Familiar routines and weekly rhythms have been disrupted, regular engagements with family and friends delayed or re-envisioned remotely, and while I am thankful for Zoom connections they contain they're own special form of disorientation. It hasn't helped that our national leadership for much of the pandemic has also been at sea to say the least.

It's not that the problems we face are unknown or unclear. By now, we can recite the litany by heart: global warming, racial injustice, immigration reform, income inequality, red states and blue states with little interest in being purple states, to name but a few. No, the problems we desperately need to address are clear; it's the path forward that seems so elusive.

The artificial structure of Psalm 25 may invites the sense that the poem is not being prayed from any one moment of crisis, any one moment of joy, or any one experience of trust, but rather from a reflective perspective about all of life. In other words, it invites to hear a word for our day and age. At the heart of the psalm, particularly when considering just the first 10 verses, is the psalmist's appeal to God's mercy and steadfast love, fundamental characteristics of God's nature. If, with the help of Hebrew scholars, we unpack these words a bit we discover that the word "mercy" may be better translated as "motherly compassion" for the underlying Hebrew is related to the word that means "womb." In other words, God's compassion or mercy is tied closely to the concept of "womb love," that is, the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child.

Behind the phrase "steadfast love" lies the Hebrew word "hesed." *Hesed* is one of the most difficult Hebrew words to translate. It refers to the covenant love of God for God's people. Had we heard the assigned Old Testament lesson for today we would have heard about the covenant God made with Noah with rainbow as a sign. Similarly, later in Genesis, God covenants with Abraham that Abraham will have many descendants who will occupy the land of promise. And in Exodus 20, God covenants with the children of Israel to be their God and that they would be God's people. In 2 Samuel, God covenants with David that there would always be a king of

the Davidic line to sit on the throne of Israel. God's *hesed*, God's covenant love for God's people runs throughout the Bible. Christians believe in essence that God's ultimate act of *hesed* was the coming of Jesus.

And so, we too, like the psalmist, finding ourselves adrift, the way ahead unclear, waiting upon God's "womb love" and "covenant commitment." But this waiting is no ordinary waiting. It is not waiting in desperation but waiting in hope. The word "wait" translates a Hebrew word which means both to "wait" and to "hope." As one commentator notes:

The waiting described here isn't just waiting, like one waits for a meeting to start. It means more to wait and hope, like the sort of waiting one does in a hospital waiting room while a loved one is undergoing surgery, or perhaps the sort of waiting one does while waiting for a verdict to be handed down, or again, perhaps the kind of waiting one does after one has put in an offer to buy a home.

As we enter Lent, with all our world's, our nation's, and our community's complexities, we are invited to re-envision our waiting as a time to wait patiently, non-anxiously, joyfully, hopefully, for God. We wait upon the God who has loved us since before we were knit together in our mother's womb; the God who has loved generation after generation of God's people in covenant commitment; the God who lays out the ducks on the trail, and, if we but wait and listen deeply, will show us the way forward. May we be so blessed in our Lenten waiting.

AMEN.