

Text: Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-32  
Title: Sundowning  
Date: 07.31.22  
Roger Allen Nelson

The role of primary caretaker fell to the daughter as her mother slipped into dementia. And as the daughter reports it, the days were fine but at night her mother would get agitated and confused.  
She'd hallucinate.  
She'd worry that someone was breaking into the house.  
She'd back away from her daughter as if she were a stranger.

When the daughter finally reported this pattern, the doctor nodded gently and said,

*We call that "sundowning." When the sun goes down, dementia rises like the moon. Think about when you were a child. When the light drained out of your room and the darkness poured in—it can be very disconcerting, very disorienting.*

Psalm 107 is a psalm of sundowning.

As one biblical scholar puts it, "Psalm 107 is a song sung by a disorientated soul watching the light drain out the world and the shadows of death pour in." It's a psalm sung by one caring for an aging parent, living with grief, struggling with addiction, or facing a difficult diagnosis. Psalm 107 is sung by the lonely, the scared, and the suffering. It's a psalm of anyone who knows light to diminish and darkness to encroach. It's a psalm of sundowning.

There are four short stanzas in this psalm – four short stories. In the first, some wandered, lost and hungry. In the second, some sat chained in the dark. Third, some rebelled and suffered affliction. And in the fourth, some were at their wits-end in the face of a storm.

Each story follows the same simple pattern. There's a situation of dire straits, that prompts a desperate plea, resulting in divine deliverance, which is followed by directions for thanksgiving....

Dire straits.  
Desperate plea.  
Divine deliverance.  
Direction for thanksgiving.  
O that preaching was that easy.  
O that faith was that formulaic...

In each one of these stories, as the metaphorical sun went down and the darkness overwhelmed, people cried out to God. And, in each story God saves – light pushes back the dark. Therefore, each story ends with a summons to praise the Lord. In our translation:

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever...*

As you may have already guessed, the word here for love is *hesed*. *Hesed* is usually translated as lovingkindness, or mercy, or everlasting love. What's lost in translation is that *hesed* also has the sense of covenantal loyalty or relational fidelity.

It's not a love of heavenly whimsy or passing passion.

It's not a love that is vague or generalized.

It's a love that's promised.

It's a love that's personal.

(And by the way, *hesed* is the root word for *Hasidic* – a Jewish religious tradition.)

So, Psalm 107 opens with an invitation for the people of God, gathered from all corners of creation, to give thanks for the *hesed* of God. What follows are four stories of a God who didn't leave them stranded in the wilderness, stuck in prison, dead in sin, or lost at sea. Therefore, sing hymns of *hesed*.

But listen to Walter Brueggeman's take on this psalm:

*Imagine a world without Psalm 107. What if there were no one to sing this great song of thanks, no acknowledgment of rescue grounded in fidelity, no communal awareness that life consists in situations of distress, and above all no recognition of the cry of distress that sets in motion the divine mystery of rescue? Imagine a world without cry, without the public processing of pain....Imagine a world that has grown silent and cold of human pain. Imagine a world totally silenced, no prayers uttered, no hopes voiced, no hosting of the human condition and, consequently, no miracles of newness or healing.*

*For that reason, our worship must not be too happy, too well ordered, or too symmetrically serene, for at the heart of our worship is asking in need, being answered, and being taken seriously.*

We should sit in silence with that for a while....

Imagine a world without Psalm 107.

Imagine a world without a cry for help.

Imagine a world without an honest hosting of the human condition.

Imagine a world without *hesed*.

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity School, where she specializes in the study of the prosperity gospel – a creed that sees fortune as a blessing from God and misfortune as a mark of God's disapproval. In her mid 30s, Kate was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. A young mother, wife, and gifted scholar the sun was going down as she entered into the long struggle of trauma, loss, faith, despair, and trying to live while dying.

In "Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved" she writes this:

*What if everything is random? A woman who has left the faith for science writes: "I find it comforting to believe the universe is random, because then the God I believe in is no longer cruel." This is a painful conclusion for so many who comb through the details of*

*their tragedies and find no evidence that God was ever there. The world, it seems, is also filled with fathers and mothers begging for their children's lives and hearing nothing but silence. And, for ever after, every church service that sings that God is good rattles like tin in their ears.*

Dear friends, how do we sing Psalm 107?

How do we sing Psalm 107 when not every desperate plea ends in divine deliverance? To pretend otherwise rattles like tin. How do we host the human condition and sing of the *hesed* of God?

Maybe this is helpful...

Chances are that Psalm 107 was written to recount Israel's restoration from Babylonian exile. In that framework: because the people disobeyed God and ignored his covenant, they were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar. Then after several years in exile, many of them were allowed to return. The psalmist paints word-pictures describing the rescue of God's people from exile.

But we also read Psalm 107 as a template of our journey with God.

What was written for a community we read as individuals – expecting that when we're lost, ill, or enslaved we would cry out to God, be delivered, and give thanks to the Lord. His love endures forever...

At least that's the way we draw it up.

That's the way we tell the story.

That's the way it often works. Thanks be to God.

Until it doesn't.

I think it's helpful to hear Psalm 107 as a song of sundowning.

It poetically and powerfully captures our cry for salvation.

It's an honest voice of our desperate pleas for help, healing, freedom, and saving.

It bears witness of the encroaching darkness.

I listen to news on the BBC. Between the froth and fury of Fox News and MSNBC it offers a global perspective. This week I heard stories about Ukraine's history and current practice of warehousing disabled children. The sounds and stories from those facilities were as haunting as any cry from a ring of a hell. I later heard a story about Afghan families selling their young daughters into marriage.

Again, it seemed an unfathomable distance from the proclamation that God is good and that *hesed* endures forever. And I had trouble holding in tension the news news and the Good News.

Psalm 107 hosts the human condition and still points to the salvation of God. Our faith is such that we hold both of those realities. The calling of Psalm 107 is to sing the whole song. To tell the truth about the human condition, to cry out to God, to watch for expressions of his mercy, to rest in the promise of *hesed*, and to hope in the resurrection.

The monstrous mystery of the gospels is that God's love is such that God didn't abandon us but entered into our suffering and death. The unfathomable hope of the gospels is that God in Christ is redeeming all creation to *shalom*. And there's no timetable on *hesed*.

In Kate Bowler's words:

*I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, the gorgeous and the tragic. Except I'm beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out.*

No matter where you are this morning,  
no matter the darkness or the slivers of light,  
no matter your confidence or your silence,  
let us join the psalmist in proclaiming.

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever...*

Amen.