



# Lenten Reader 2017

*A compilation of reflections on Scripture for  
the season of Lent from members of the  
Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada.*



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## A Brief Introduction to Lent

The Lenten Reader has become an annual publication of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada (ECCC). You are currently reading its fifth iteration. As the organizer and editor of this publication, I am always grateful for the final product which requires the contribution of 40 authors across the ECCC and beyond.

The work of producing an annual publication is reflective of the work we all enter in the season of Lent. As I start the process of selecting texts for the Reader each year, I have a sense of coming back around to a familiar project, a familiar marker on the journey. It's never the same marker, I'm different, a year further along in my journey of faith. Nevertheless, the season of Lent marks out for each of us a return to repentance, reflection, prayer, and fasting. The Church year affords us this familiar space to enter into possibly unfamiliar space in our walk with God.

The Psalms are our text for this Lenten Reader. In particular, we are following a rhythm of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation. This way of categorizing the Psalms comes from the biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann. He asserts that each Psalm falls into one of these three categories. As the prayer book of the Israelites, it makes sense that the Psalms would cover all experiences of our lives: times of orientation (feeling secure and close to God), disorientation (feeling lost and far from God), and re-orientation (returning to security and closeness to God).

The Psalms proceed roughly in chronological order, but not always. It was more important to maintain a rhythm of two orientation Psalms, followed by two disorientation Psalms, and finally two re-orientation Psalms. We break this rhythm when we arrive at Holy Week in order to spend more time experiencing with Jesus the disorientation of rejection, crucifixion, and death. Hopefully this journey will make the celebration of re-orientation on Easter Sunday all the richer.

There is one devotional for each day of Lent. There are no entries on Sundays as Sundays are not included in the forty days of Lent. Instead there are works of art to help you meditate and pray. Contributions for the Lenten Reader come from all over the Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada and guest contributors from affiliated ministries. Thank you to all who wrote devotionals. I am also grateful to Hanne Johnson for her assistance in editing and compiling the reader.

May your walk with Jesus be encouraged and challenged this Lenten Season!

Julia Sandstrom  
Editor

First Day of Lent  
Ash Wednesday

March 1

Psalm 1  
Orientation

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As we enter the season of Lent, how fitting that we orient our thinking from the offset with the words of Psalm one, “The Blessed Man”.

The blessed man does not *walk* in the counsel of the wicked or *stand* in the way of sinners or *sit* in the seat of mockers (vs. 1). Take note of the three postures: walk, stand, and sit. Our physical orientation must never be directed toward evil. Instead, we are instructed to “*delight* in the law of the LORD, and *meditate* on IT day and night!” (vs. 2).

A similar refrain is heard in Psalm 37:4: “Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Is your orientation at the beginning of this Lenten season *directed* toward the LORD? Are you determined to discipline yourself over the next 40 days to *delight* yourself in Him?

When we truly *dedicate* ourselves in Christ, the *distractions* of life—the *temptation* to sin, the *busyness* of everyday living, the *hindrances* to spiritual growth—become secondary and eventually dissipate. It is then that *JESUS* takes center stage! All the things that stunt us from being fruitful and effective in our daily Christian living simply vanish! We become *content* in simply knowing that in Christ is our *salvation*. He is *all* in *all*—our *sufficiency*!

The blessing of this reality is evidenced in our being like a tree *planted* by streams of water, *yielding* fruit in season and *prospering* in whatever we do (vs. 3).

This stands in direct contrast to the wicked, who, “are like chaff that the wind blows away” (vs. 4) and will not experience the blessings known to the righteous (vs. 5) and who will eventually perish (vs. 6b).

Psalm one concludes with the promise that as we orient ourselves to the LORD He watches over us (vs. 6a). What a precious thought!

*He leadeth me, O blessed thought!  
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be  
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.*

*He leadeth me, He leadeth me,  
By His own hand He leadeth me;  
His faithful foll'wer I would be,  
For by His hand He leadeth me.*

May this be the reality evidenced in each of us as we look to Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our salvation and faith.

Mark Mast  
Rainy River, ON

Psalm 8  
Orientation

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Oh, LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (x2)  
Oh, LORD, we praise Your name; Oh, LORD we magnify your name,  
Prince of Peace, Mighty God, Oh, LORD God Almighty!  
-Michael W. Smith

Down through the years the words of this first verse have been sung in praise and worship in many services and that's the way our chapter today begins and ends—as a call to worship.

When are we overcome in praise to the Lord if we're not in a church service? I find that I marvel at the Lord's creation when we travel through the Rocky Mountains. I also feel this way when I'm at the ocean front just watching the waves come and go in an unending rhythm. There are other times you may marvel at creation: in the quickness of the hummingbird, the flight of a bumble bee, the unfolding of a bud into a flower, the individuality of the snowflakes, the dawning of morning sunlight, the colours of the sky at the closing of the day, the colour and movement of the "Northern Lights", the designs of frost on your windows, the quickness of a shooting star, or the birth of a child. Our list could be endless as we stop and consider God's creation.

This chapter calls us to adore our creator—to love Him. To truly get to know Him and appreciate who He is. It calls us to reflect on His Majesty, His Holiness, His Love, His Sovereignty, His Goodness, His Righteousness and Justice, His Grace and Forgiveness, His Omnipotence, His Omniscience and Wisdom, His Providence, His Truthfulness and Faithfulness. We have an amazing God! And the most amazing thing is He wants to be our friend and walk with us each day. He has offered to not only be our friend as a daily companion, but to be our councilor and guide. J. Oswald Sanders reminds us, "Worship flows from love. Worship is the loving ascription of praise to God, for what He is in Himself and in His providential dealings. It is the bowing of our innermost spirit before Him in deepest humility and reverence."

Marvel with me in the words from another song, this one written by Stuart Hamblin back in 1959, "How big is God, how big and wide His vast domain/To try to tell these lips can only start/He's big enough to rule the mighty universe/Yet small enough to live within my heart."

Psalm 13  
Disorientation

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In life, perspective is everything. Many times the way we perceive people and experiences, can be a reflection of us—coloured by our fears and pain. Our perspective is ruled more by where we are standing in our minds and hearts, than what is actually true.

As I read Psalm 13 in *The Message*, I wandered around in the words David spoke and it struck me how quickly he moved from "Long enough God - you've ignored me long enough" to the declaration of, "I'm so full of answered prayer." It can take me a while when my heart hurts or I feel unseen by God to move toward feeling my prayer is answered.

I wanted to know what changed for David from verse 1-4 , to verse 5 and 6. I can't say for sure what transpired, but I wonder if perspective isn't a factor. In the beginning David implores, "Take a good look at me, God" asking to be seen in his great burden and sense of abandonment, but did God not already see David? Had the Father left David or did he just take that for granted?

English philosopher Bertrand Russell says, "Now and then it is healthy to hang a question mark on things we take for granted." I like that imagery. It invites us to wonder about our assumptions, to not push against the question, but be at home in it .

I wonder if that is what David did. Was it that where his heart stood and what he imagined needed a "question mark hung on it"? The truth is, sometimes we feel very sad and our belly and heart can ache with the weight of what life seems to burden us with. Sometimes we feel like Jesus can't remember our name or even recall what we look like.

I wonder if those are the times we need to pull a question mark out of our pocket and hang it on the idea that we are lost, forgotten, or abandoned.

Lent is a powerful time to wonder again about who Christ is and how He loves. To wonder how that could define who we are especially if we feel accompanied by empty ache in our life.

It is a good time to "hang a question mark" on those lonely ideas. Christ invites us to see Him, to take on His perspective. Then perhaps we can declare for ourselves "I've thrown myself headlong into your arms!"



Psalm 22  
Disorientation

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*“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” - Psalm 22:22; Hebrews 2:12*

Often the most difficult part about experiencing hardship in life is making sense of that space in-between God’s apparent silence and the promise of His presence.

As the Psalmist writes, God is “enthroned on the praises of Israel” because “In you our fathers trusted... they trusted and were not put to shame (vs. 3-5).” In contrast, the psalmist’s inability to see God in the midst of his own suffering brings him shame. He finds himself no more than a “worm”, “scorned”, and “despised” (vs. 6) far from God’s saving grace (vs. 1).

The strength that allows the Psalmist to declare, “Yet you (God) are He”, comes in the midst of the bulls, the drought, and the preying dogs (vs. 9). It is a strength that he gains by lifting his eyes upwards and outwards towards a God who has heard his cries in the silence, who is not far from his pain. This leads the Psalmist to pray, not simply to be delivered from his trials, but for his trials to “tell of God’s name” and to “praise God’s name”. Praise that is in the midst of his family and his community, a praise the psalmist declares comes not on his own strength, but from God (vs 25).

Recognizing that Jesus, the founder of our salvation, was “made perfect through suffering”, the author of the letter to the Hebrews reflects that the Psalmist need not be “ashamed”, because just as Jesus tasted suffering on behalf of “all” so does our suffering unite us with the One through whom all things exist (Hebrews 2:5-13). As Jesus shares in the cry of the Psalmist, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me”, He demonstrates just how far God is willing to go to meet us in the space in-between. At the cross we are reminded that it is okay to sit in these difficult spaces, to wrestle with the silence. We are also reminded that God has left nothing outside His control. It is because of this promise that we can join the Psalmist in saying “He has not hidden his face from (the afflicted), but has heard their cries”. Praise be to God.



*Shepherd And Sheep*<sup>1</sup>  
Camille Pissaro  
1888

Psalm 23  
Re-Orientation

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I recently watched a documentary about a man who, driven by unabashed self-ambition, left his Jewish family in Brooklyn and eventually winds up in California where he discovered and managed many of the super bands and singers of the 60's, 70's and 80's. He then went on to finance and produce some of the most successful movies from the 1980's forward. He became the wealthiest, most powerful and influential man in the industry crowned as "The King of Hollywood." Nevertheless, despite all his worldly success, his personal life was a continuing series of disasters and disappointments with years spent in therapy, all leading him to exclaim in a critical moment, "*I believe we all die unhealed.*" He had it all, but he had nothing.

I was really struck by the profound nature of his statement though and how, from a purely human perspective, it embodies the nature of our human condition. It points to the implication that we start out as "healed", where we are whole in the beginning and then through the journey things happen that render us damaged or in need of healing. Well, not quite right. We started out of the Garden, broken from the beginning.

It reflects a hopeless despair that there is no eventual remedy for the ills of this world. Well, not quite right again, you know why. It originates out of our DNA based preoccupation that everything is about me—how I'm feeling and the inference that some unknown cosmic force bears a responsibility and has failed me in serving my well-being.

As an antidote to all this, God offers Psalm 23 through the hand of David.

"I shall not want..."

"I shall not fear..."

"I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

End of story.

Read—really read Psalm 23—read it like you've never read it before; for through our Shepherd we are healed, not only in death, but in life itself.

Psalm 27  
Re-Orientation

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“One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in His temple.”

One thing, the first thing, is a mutual seeking after each other. David asked the Lord to be present while at the same time he committed to live in the Lord’s presence all his days, every day. Not just present anywhere, but in the Lord’s house.

Each home holds a different aroma, carries a different atmosphere, revolves around a different timetable. If we want to grasp the character of the Lord, we need to meet Him in His environment. That is where we will gain the perspective of the One whose presence is not discriminatory, but sits at our family table as well as at floor mats around the world, at pop-out airline trays, in alleyway cardboard constructions. We will see the One whose power moves beyond the construct of chronological time created to bring order to our finite minds and find the One whose grace would not be grace if it were dependent on our behaviour. In the house of the Lord we are secure within impenetrable walls. Within His safekeeping we find dignity in the face of rivalry. His temple of teaching and guidance make every sacrifice one of great joy and worship, not burden.

Then, when we walk in the land of the living, Faith and Trust advance us. In the darkness we find Light. In doubt we find Delight. In fear we find Strength. Out of rejection and oppression we are adopted and lifted high.

Gaze, wait, be strong, take heart! Be confident of this: you will see the goodness of the Lord enter the land of the living because you will be cloaked in it.

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Matthew 6:33

Psalm 14  
Orientation

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The fool says in his heart “There is no God.” All have turned away, all have become corrupt. Do any seek God? The question of the psalmist is the same of many today. In a world so sick with sin, a person can choose one of many foundations to build their life upon. Money. Fame. Power. Kids. Family. Friends. Self. Work. Fun. Facebook. Addiction. Entertainment. Ease. However, can any of these sustain us when the storms of life arise? We have the option of many foundations, but only one Cornerstone.

The world is not in any better shape today than it was in the psalmist's day. It's probably worse. Same sickness. Worse symptoms. But we have greater hope. They were waiting for Jesus to come. We are waiting for Him to come again.

Oh that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion. Salvation has come! He did come! He conquered sin and death. He suffered in our place for our sin. He died on a cross and rose again on the third day. We have a secure hope to build our life upon. Not the fragile foundations the world says are number one, but are unable to uphold us in the stresses and disappointments of life.

Jesus said, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. We don't need to find our way, search for truth, build our life. He is all that we can't attain with any amount of striving and painful effort.

Before He ascended to Heaven, He gave His followers a special message. Not only had He come to provide salvation, He promised He is coming again. Soon. In the meantime, He told us what He wanted us to do. Go and make disciples of all nations.

The Bible reminds us that we are not our own. We were purchased with a price. The precious blood of Christ.

When He returns, will He find us faithful stewards of what He has given? Or will we have let a myriad of other foundations/priorities seep in and steal our time and attention from that which He has called us to do. Sharing the love of God, the Good News of Jesus Christ, isn't just for those serving across the country or across the ocean. It's also for us. Across the street. Across the dinner table.

People need to know that the only thing that will satisfy and give us peace and fulfilment is knowing we are God's children, reconciled to Him because of Christ's sacrifice for us. As for everything else that concerns us, we can trust Him completely. Any other attempt to find fulfilment will leave us unfulfilled.

Praise God that He did not leave us in our plight and that He is with us everyday, until the end of the age. May He give us courage and wisdom to boldly proclaim the Good News that no one can truly live without.

Shannon Young  
Melfort, SK

Psalm 33  
Orientation

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*When is a song not just a song?*

When it's a bold declaration of truth and trust. When it's the chorus of the created rising to praise the Creator.

So, All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing. You make beautiful things out of dust. Bless the Lord, O My Soul, O My Soul... Joy to the world, the Lord is come... hope is stirring, hearts are yearning for you. Join with history's crowd singin'-shouting "Praise is rising, hosanna!" My God is mighty to save... he rose and conquered the grave. There is a Redeemer... Sing "how great is our God..."

*When is a song not just a song?*

When it's an expression of goodness, beauty, justice and love. When it's a reflection of faithfulness. When it's not just notes on a page, but the skilled, tuned, amplified expression of praise from a grateful re-oriented life.

So let hope rise. Sing strength for today... bright HOPE for tomorrow. "Day by day" declare with the heavens the glory of God. Sing "my HOPE is built on nothing less... than the living WORD and his righteousness." Join with all creation "the centre of unbroken praise". "...all the earth will shout Your praise... Our hearts will cry these bones will sing... Great are You Lord. Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee, how great Thou art... how great Thou art.

*When is a song not just a song?*

When with words, the created echoes the song that spoke everything into being. When it's in Spirit-filled sync with the orchestration of the grand conductor composer. When it's a defiant call to remember that God spoke order out of chaos and that tune never gets old. When you're singing more than just a song.

So, let your life-song sing. Declare, You are the everlasting God... you don't grow faint, you don't grow weary. Take my moments and my days... let them flow in ceaseless praise. Blessed be the name of the Lord... Praise God from whom all blessings flow... Praise him all creatures here below... Praise him above ye heavenly hosts... Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise. Praise. Praise.

With a joy-full, hope-full, love-full song.

Amen

Psalm 32  
Disorientation

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According to C.S. Lewis, “we have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin”. For most of us, this is completely true. All too often we fail to reflect on and repent of our sins. Amidst hustle and bustle, terror and sin, both in our personal lives and worldwide, it is easy to simply forget our need for forgiveness or feel that our transgressions are incomparable to the sins of others.

However, in his next statement, Lewis goes on to remind us that “mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of a sin”. Sometimes, this guilt can even feel all consuming. According to one study, the average person experiences feelings of guilt about five hours per week. As verses three and four show, there is freedom and comfort found in confessing our sins to Him. No matter how shameful we are, speaking with Christ about our mistakes or heartbreak is for our benefit and is not merely designed to be an obligation or painful process that furthers our guilt. We forget this constantly. Verses eight and nine remind us of this as they state that He is our hiding place and instructor. Our creator wants to guide each one of us! Though a simplistic concept, it is all too easily forgotten.

The last part of Psalm 32 reminds us that though the wicked experience hardship, those who trust in the Lord and rejoice in Him experience the Lord’s unfailing love. I pray that each one of us experiences joy in Him especially in a world that is often filled with negativity.

Psalm 32 was one of Augustine’s favourite Psalms and he reportedly had it inscribed on his wall. It is easy to understand why this was a favoured Psalm as it summarizes exactly how we should live: repentant, open to His instruction and love, and full of joy and praise.

Psalm 35  
Disorientation

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When was the last time you heard anger, frustration, sadness, and despair expressed in prayer during church worship? Often we hear or say prayers that are polite and eloquent. Even if we hear raw emotions and unfiltered words expressed in prayer we are tempted to think, “those emotions are unacceptable” and “that word needs to be filtered”.

However, in the Scriptures we hear many examples of people expressing their unedited anger, lament, grief, hopelessness, and despair to God in the midst of injustice and suffering. Specifically, in Psalm 35, David’s prayer is a cry for justice that is neither unfiltered, nor refined. It is unashamedly honest. He says,

**“...Bring shame and disgrace on those trying to kill me;  
turn them back and humiliate those who want to harm me.  
...So let sudden ruin come upon them!  
Let them be caught in the trap they set for me!  
Let them be destroyed in the pit they dug for me...” - Psalm 35:4,8**

David doesn't try to hide his feelings. He doesn't attempt to be polite or polished in his presentation. He simply expresses his hatred and aggression towards his enemies and calls out for God's judgment. It is interesting that while he expresses his anger towards those who are unjust, he does not act against them in his anger. Instead, he appeals to God to judge them and puts his hope in God to make all things right.

This Psalm teaches us to be honest in prayer. It teaches us to acknowledge our concerns and feelings and ultimately commit all things into God's care. In other words, it teaches us to say anything and everything, literally anything and everything to God and trust that He will take care of it according to His wise ways.

May we be honest with the plight of our world, including the persecution of the church in the Middle East and North Africa, the astonishing rise of paranoia in the West regarding Muslims and people of colour, the state of refugees and immigrants who are fleeing persecution, oppression, terror, war, and poverty, and the injustice and suffering we are facing in our own contexts. Be it anger or indifference, may David's psalm and Jesus' prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane help us to bring our feelings to God in prayer. One thing is certain—we will never fully learn to trust God until we are completely honest with Him about everything.





*Hope*<sup>2</sup>  
George Frederick Watts  
1886

Psalm 30  
Re-Orientation

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Friends and family who know me, know that I tend to like things to be positive. Darlene, my wife since 1978, read me a passage about my basic personality type that compares me to Peter Pan and his propensity to just fly around. When I saw that I was assigned Psalm 30 I was thrilled. There won't be any deep brooding over the pain of life. There won't be any *woe is me*. There won't be any great announcements of God's judgment on the wicked. This, as the Psalm begins and ends, is about reorientation:

*"I will exalt you, Lord,  
for you lifted me out of the depths..." (vs 1)*

and

*"... you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
that my heart may sing your praises ..." (vs 11b-12a)*

Unfortunately for any superficial syrupy reading of the text, David included verses 3-10. These verses are the stuff of real life. These verses are the pathway to reorientation and joy. These verses deal with our need for the mercy of the Lord. These are about our need to walk in close relationship with the God of our salvation. These are the verses that remind us of the holiness and greatness of God; yet also remind us that He does love us and hears us when we call.

One final issue for those who like to live in the surface and sometimes self-centred world of Peter Pan; this is a communal psalm. This psalm was a dedication text. This is about more than my joy; it is a call to the community to come together, to remember who God is, how faithful He is and how merciful He is. This invites us to a deeper joy because it is a shared joy.

Peter Pan represents the mischievous character that never wants to grow up. Psalm 30 invites us to a life of greater depth and growth into maturity. Yes there is great joy in reorienting our life, but it is only after we come through the difficult days of disorientation that the joy shines brightly.

*"Merciful Lord, it does not surprise me that you forget completely the sins of those who repent. I am not surprised that you remain faithful to those who hate and revile you. The mercy which pours forth from you fills the whole world." St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)*

Psalm 34  
Re-Orientation

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What gets your attention? Lent prompts us to refocus our attention on the Lord. Psalm 34 starts with a full-hearted, full-throated focus on God: “I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall continually be in my mouth.” But in spite of our best intentions, there are many things that catch our attention and pull us out of the orbit of grace and gratitude.

David, the psalmist, first mentions fears. Fear is looking into the future and anticipating pain or trouble. Some fears are reasonable and they prompt us to take some evasive action or make some provision. However, many of our fears become obsessive. The poet recognizes the need to be “rescued” from them. How? By re-orienting to the Lord: “Look to him,” says David. The result: Instead of a pinched, worried face, a radiant face reflecting the One who holds our gaze.

Sometimes we don’t just fear trouble—we actually have trouble. It becomes double trouble when it absorbs us and eclipses our view of God. Then it’s all we think about and talk about; we become blaming, complaining people. The antidote is to turn back to God: “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.”

Sometimes we live with the ache of unfulfilled desires and needs. David thinks of the lion cubs which he heard when living in the wilderness. Like most babies, they whine and cry and yelp when they are hungry. Life narrows to just getting needs met. When we have the ache or pain of unmet desires, we can become consumed by our suffering. Instead, “taste and see that the Lord is good,” says the psalmist. “Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.”

We are reminded that this attention is reciprocal. The psalm closes with the assurance that, “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are open to their cry...the Lord is near...he redeems.” The Lord is watching us, listening to us, present to us, and ready to rescue us. Today, notice when your attention is captured by fears, troubles, and longings and instead, “Turn your eyes about Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace” (Helen H. Lemmel, 1922).

Psalm 37  
Orientation

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Around the office, I am known for making toast. A loaf of bread in the freezer, a jar of peanut butter in my snack drawer, and a toaster is all I need to get by. Toast is quick, convenient, and has immediate satisfaction. Even so, I know that while those few slices of bread will fill me, its sustenance will be short lived. Soon, I will be hungry again. Recognizing this, I made a resolution with myself to be more mindful of the food I prepare—selecting foods that will fill me with the nutrients, strength, and energy that will get me through the day.

It was not long before this train of thought moved past my meal plans and onto my spiritual life. What am I feeding my spiritual life with? It was easy for me to determine the ‘toast’ elements of my life – watching television, browsing social media, etc. These things satisfy me in the moment, but will evidently leave me wanting more. These things are of this world and they are temporary.

Psalm 37 describes the way of the wicked as just that, temporary. The psalm informs us that the wicked will wither and soon die away. Their power will be broken. They will perish, vanish, and be destroyed. They will be no more.

The wicked way of life is contrasted with the way of the righteous. We hear that the righteous will receive an inheritance that will endure forever. They will enjoy great peace and their children will be blessed. They will be protected forever and will not wither.

So, how can I feed myself to gain a long-lasting life? We can turn to this psalm (vv. 1-9) for instruction on the righteous way.

“Trust the Lord and do good.” (vs. 3)

“Commit your way to the Lord.” (vs. 5)

“Be still before the Lord.” (vs. 7)

Consider today the things that you are feeding your life with. Are you feeding yourself in a way that will lead to these promises of a long-lasting life? Or are you feeding yourself with things that will soon fade away and leave you hungry for more? Give thanks to the One who has made a path for us to walk in this righteous way.

“The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord;

He is their stronghold in time of trouble.

The Lord helps them from the wicked and saves them,

because they take refuge in him.” (vv. 39, 40)

Psalm 104  
Orientation

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Paul exhorts us to, “Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, *always giving thanks* to God the Father *for everything*, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:19b-20; emphasis added). What is striking about this call to worship is the total pervasiveness of it: we are *always* to give thanks—for *everything*! Paul mentions singing and music, which have always been important in the worshipping practices of Israel and the Church. Other expressions “from your heart” are appropriate and fitting as well: artful expression through painting or writing; bodily expression through lifted hands, a bowed head, or movement in dance; acts of kindness to others, which Christ receives as though done “unto me” (Matt. 25:40); and the offering of our lives – our very selves - to God, sacrificially, day by day, moment by moment, following not the “patterns of this world” but God’s good, pleasing and perfect will, through the Spirit’s transformation of our mind.

How on earth do we begin to do this? And I really do mean *on earth*. The call to be grateful always and to offer constant praise to God seems more like an angelic, heavenly ideal than an “all too human” earthly reality.

Psalm 104 shows us how we can begin to do this. It encourages us to indwell this earthly space – the space of our daily, very normal lives – and to open our eyes to the presence of God in the midst of it. It calls us to be intentional about being present to God (calling God into our conscious awareness) in the midst of all the wonderful and mundane things we do. It encourages us, in other words, to cultivate a *contemplative* disposition: a habitual and thus intentional way of seeing the world as God’s creation and offering praise to God from our hearts.

How does the psalmist approach this? The psalm begins and ends with praise (signaling its centrality), an intentional decision to “let all that I am” *praise the LORD* – “all my thoughts”, “as long as I live,” “to my last breath!” (vs. 1, 31-35). The psalmist puts this into habit-forming practice by pausing to notice and reflect on his surroundings, God’s creation. This intentional noticing, reflecting, and praising is what I mean by *contemplation*. First (vv. 2-9), he notices the vastness, greatness, wonder, and mystery of the cosmos, leading him to praise God’s greatness, transcendence, and sovereignty. Next (vv. 10-23), he notices God’s loving and careful provision for all creation – animals, birds, livestock, and people. Amazingly, God’s provision for people is not merely functional, but exuberant, bringing comfort, gladness, and strength. Finally (vv. 24-30), the psalmist notices God’s creativity, wisdom, and pleasure (even playfulness) as Creator and LORD, leading to the final burst of praise of God’s glory (vv. 31-25).

Today, I invite you to join the psalmist in cultivating a contemplative disposition. Take some time (even 5-10 minutes) to go for a walk in your neighbourhood or near your workplace. Notice what is going on around you. Remind yourself that God is there, God is working. Invite Christ to show you, by his Spirit, how He is present. And then offer prayers of thanksgiving and intercession as the Spirit leads.

Patrick Franklin  
Mitchell, MB

Psalm 50  
Disorientation

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If you are looking for a Lenten reflection that will bring you comfort, turn the page. This is not that. The words of Asaph can only be described as harsh, even jarring. If anything, they put us on edge. God's words, for those who dare hear from Him, are more like a punch in the face than gentle arms generating warm feelings. Yahweh's appears here, among His own, to judge (vs. 1-6), to rebuke (vs. 7-15), and to condemn those that have forgotten their covenant relationship and the faithfulness that accompanies it (vs. 16-23).

Ouch.

Today we need to be reminded of a central element of His Gospel. God tells us the truth about our brokenness. He did that when we first realized the depth of His grace and surrendered our lives to Him. Here we learn He will do it over and over again. He tells us the truth about our brokenness because we really want Him to. In a crazy, perhaps unexpected sort of way, it is good news. We want to know what we might be embracing that interferes with the promise He made to bring us to maturity, to experience a fuller measure of a life designed to be abundant.

*Lord, please show me the reality of my present condition. Lord please renew my mind, Lord please restore to me the joy of my salvation. Lord, we give you permission again to remind us of your sacrificial love, your righteousness, your desire for deep relationship. Rebuke us for reducing our relationship with you to obligatory "re-gifting" of the stuff in our possession that belonged to you in the first place.*

Today, God's invitation is to re-examine the current status of our relationship with Him. To invite Him to point out what is true and what may need to be corrected or restored. Take some time to listen now.

Finally, note the response to the Lord that brings restoration described in verse 23 "Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me, and they prepare the way so that I may show them the salvation of God".

Finish by taking some time to thank God for His many gifts of grace. Begin by giving thanks that He is a truth teller.

Psalm 51  
Disorientation

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Psalm 51 is probably one of the more familiar Psalms in the Bible. Many of us can sing portions of it, as it's been written into the popular worship chorus, "Create in Me a Clean Heart". When we study the scriptures, we also know that this is the psalm that David wrote after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba. It's David's heartfelt confession of sin and a pleading with God to make him clean and new again.

As I've been reading and praying over this psalm, I've come to the conclusion that it may not only be about confession of sins. In a broader sense, perhaps it's about just coming to God in our brokenness, no matter what that brokenness may be.

Sometimes in life busyness can take us to the same place of brokenness as having unconfessed sins. We become tired, worn out, and empty, as we realize that we've been trying to do too many things on our own terms and in our own strength. These 'things or sacrifices' may even be 'good things that we're doing for God', but in the end we become depleted and broken and then wonder why.

Verses 16 and 17 really challenged me in this psalm: "You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering. The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God."

How often do I get busy doing things for God and 'make sacrifices in His name'? All the while being too busy to sit at His feet, to listen and to learn HIS way of doing things. What He really wants from me is honesty (v.6), obedience (v.12), and a spirit that is broken before Him (v.17). When I finally get to the end of myself and I'm willing to listen and sit before Him in all my brokenness and repentance, then He will restore, renew, and fill my life with joy once again. In that place of acceptance, obedience, and love, I am able to hear what HE wants me to do with the days that He is giving me.



*Waiting Room 3*  
Vincent Van Gogh  
1882



Psalm 40  
Re-Orientation

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I think we all know what it's like to be "in the pit", as David calls it—whether that be an experience of loss, illness, or hurt. It's in those times where we encounter intense darkness, profound loneliness, and we may start to lose hope.

In Psalm 40, David describes how God rescued him from one such pit and set his feet on solid ground again. In the past, I read this as God coming though and rescuing us from our circumstances, be that miraculous healing from illness, a restored relationship that seemed impossible, or an outrageous gift in time of need. But then I found myself in the deepest, darkest pit I'd known in my thirty-five years of life. I was looking death in the face. God didn't rescue me like I thought He would. Oh, I had faith that He could and I waited and waited like David. However, my circumstances didn't change.

I did. You see, through my waiting and calling out to God, I realized that while I thought I was in the pit of death, I was really in the pit of fear, disbelief, and self sufficiency. I had been in those pits long before I got deathly ill; I just hadn't noticed the quick sand under my feet before. Our pit experiences have a way of changing our perspectives. In the middle of my difficulty, He regularly reminded me that He had already conquered death and gave me the sweetest peace and joy I have ever known. One day at a time, one moment at a time, He helped me out of some of those places I had been stuck in for years.

Friends, if you have a story of great rescue where God changed your circumstances and made things right again, share it boldly, like David—with anyone who will listen! Perhaps you have been calling out to God and your circumstances haven't changed or maybe even seem to be getting worse. Our God is still good! He has promised us His unexplainable peace (Phil 4:6-7) and unimaginable joy (John 15:11). Remind yourself of His promises and His faithfulness. Thank Him for His presence with you in the pit. Then hold on and watch for His deliverance in ways you never expected, one moment at a time. This too is a transforming story of deliverance worth telling!

Psalm 65  
Re-Orientation

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“We are filled with the good things of your house.”

To be filled with the good things of God is a powerful image. Throughout this psalm, David again and again refers to the ways in which he and the people of God experience God’s abundance.

“You care for the land and enrich it abundantly” v. 9

“Streams of God filled with water to provide the people with grain” v. 9

“You crown the year with your bounty” v. 11

“Your carts overflow with abundance” v. 11

“The grasslands of the wilderness overflow” v. 12

I am so struck by this notion of being filled by the good things of God. Out of God’s abundance we are filled to overflowing with things that sustain and delight us.

Then I think, is that actually true?

Not that God’s good things are inaccessible but, rather, is that ACTUALLY what fills me? Or, truthfully, am I filled with other things? What if instead of the good things of God, I am seeking to be filled by a fleeting sense of affirmation and achievement, the novelties of entertainment and social media, ensuring I am perceived to be standing on the right side of every argument or issue, or any of the myriad other things which promise me a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction? What if instead of being filled to overflowing with the good things of God, I’ve become content to stave off anxiety, loneliness, and boredom through distraction or amusement?

It strikes me that when I opt to ‘fill’ myself with these other things I miss out on the abundant life God intends. Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10). There it is again, this notion of abundance that describes the experience of life lived ‘in God’s house.’ This abundance is definitively not about affluence, but about learning to experience contentment and satisfaction in the reality that I have been drawn into the house of the Father through the Son.

Psalm 65 opens with an invitation to re-align our lives toward that kind of contented satisfaction; modeling confession, but promising us the experience of God’s forgiveness as God draws us deeper into real abundant life.

Adam Gustine  
Covenant Offices

Psalm 111  
Orientation

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In this psalm God is magnified and appreciated for His works, His deeds and how they have benefited His people and provided opportunity for anyone to observe and reflect on them, particularly those who are impressed by His deeds. These works display His power and majesty emanating from His righteousness such that it leaves an indelible impression. The attributes described depict a compassionate, caring, being whose purpose is to reveal His character by His deeds. There is Good News in this psalm; God has provided redemption for His people. He is committed to His agreement (covenant) with mankind to deliver them, redeem them, care for them, and cause them to fear Him. This is the true crux of the matter: To fear God because this is the beginning of wisdom. This is not the goal of the relationship it is the introduction, the first handshake as it were. Life, holy, abundant life proceeds from this, but what is this fear?

Just over 26 years ago my family and I were introduced to the wonders of Canada through our immigration to Alberta. During those early times we noticed interesting things. While traveling through the mountains, there was a road sign that said, "Chain up here!" or when we visited homes there were 'storm doors'. When we serviced our vehicle there was an electrical cord attached to the engine somewhere. When we asked curiously about these things we were told, "The winters here are harsh!" But it was spring and when summer made its appearance all those things we observed faded into the background. The long evenings of summer soon gave way to the chilly nights of the fall and it seemed that things were cooling down somewhat. Three days after the Christmas of 1990 we were introduced to winter. It was something quite inexplicable. We awakened one day and the sky was clear blue. The brightness of the sun beckoned us to go out and walk around. When we turned the news on, the weatherman said it was 30 below with a wind-chill that made it feel like minus 40. These temperatures and numbers did not compute and seemed at odds with that glorious sunshine. When we opened the door, all hope vanished. It was devastatingly cold.

What little fear I had sprang to maturity and I wondered, "How do these people live here?" Within a few weeks the first blizzard showed up. The fear of winter has never left me because of that first encounter; the warnings and the anecdotes didn't really prepare me. Now I always prepare myself for it, both its beauty, and horror. I drive and dress for the conditions. I have a healthy respect for it too, but the fear has never left me, it keeps me wise.

Psalm 112  
Orientation

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Recently friends and family from various parts of the country came together to joyously-celebrate my mom's birthday. Some of my nieces who had not seen my brother for a number of years commented on how much he now resembled my dad who's been gone from us for over 23 years.

Over the years people who know our families of origin have commented on how our two sons have characteristics that are obvious hand-me-downs from previous generations—the family name and appearances are being carried on!

Walter Brueggemann posits that Psalm 111 and Psalm 112 belong together. They are probably from the same pen and composed in the same manner. In both psalms there are 22 lines corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first eight verses in each psalm consist of two lines and the last two verses of three. Further, along with identical structure, the thought in each is similar, and the same phrases recur. In Psalm 111 the deeds, glory, and righteousness of God are celebrated, and in Psalm 112 the righteousness, worth, and happiness of the good themselves are celebrated.

Note: just as God is known by His faithful actions [Psalm 111], the righteous, or “happy” person is known not by essence, but by actions [Psalm 112]. We're told in this psalm that the righteous person is generous and pursues justice [v.5], and cares for the poor [v.9]. As followers of Jesus we're blessed to have a sure standing before God for time and eternity, but, in the eyes of our world, our goodness must be marked by our actions within our social contexts.

The Apostle Peter reminds his readers that by the grace of God they've become “partakers of the divine nature” [2 Peter 1:4]. As we surrender to Christ and allow His Spirit to transform our natures, the family character is seen through our interactions with others in our world!

An old gospel song had a plaintive chorus, “let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.” The testimony of the psalmist in Psalm 112 is that the character of our God is manifested by the faithful actions of His people. May it be so in us!

Psalm 73  
Disorientation

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Psalm 73 tells it like it is. It speaks the truth. The truth is that as we watch the brokenness in this world we sometimes wonder if we've hitched our wagon to the wrong approach. Sometimes we see how the arrogantly-powerful and the wickedly-rich breeze through life. We wonder if their way is better. It certainly looks like their way is more effective in this broken world with its proverbs of, "whoever dies with the most stuff wins" and "take care of number one".

There are times when we get so dis-oriented that we even begin to envy the wicked-rich. On the surface, their life seems so easy. Even though their haughty condescension grates on us, we can't help but notice how easy life is for them. With the psalmist, we too begin to question, have "I been wasting my time keeping my heart pure?" "Am I deluded trying to keep my hands washed in innocence?" "I'm trying to do everything right and my only reward is 'trouble all day with promise of trouble bright and early next morning.'"

Trying to make sense of it gives you a throbbing headache right between the eyes. That is, until you enter the sanctuary of God and the Spirit reminds us how the wicked-rich end up. Their slope is slippery. The LORD will cast them down. Even still, we come before the LORD like a dumb oaf – bitter at heart – only to realize that He is continually with us. He is always with us. He is with us through the troubled days that run right into troubled mornings. He is with us, through the envy, through the bitterness. Like a good Father, he takes us by the right hand and leads us forward. Sometimes, we even have those great moments when there is nowhere in heaven or earth that we'd rather be than with Him. In the frailty of our flesh, and the weakening of our heart, we realize He is our stone foundation. We have those fleeting realizations that He is our portion – our reward – forever. The wicked-rich will come to their end. The LORD will not suffer the foolishly unfaithful forever. Until then, our right hand holds tightly to the LORD YHWH. He is our refuge.

Psalm 74  
Disorientation

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This Psalm of Asaph is largely a message of distress; anguish over the loss of Jerusalem, the Temple, and a way of life that has disappeared at the hands of conquerors. God has seemingly abandoned His people.

“See how the enemy has destroyed your sanctuary...” (v. 3, NLT)

“They burned down all the places where God was worshipped...” (v. 8, NLT)

“We no longer see your miraculous signs...” (v. 9, NLT)

We, as 21<sup>st</sup> Century North-American Christians, typically don't experience this type of loss. By and large, the marginalization we experience, if any at all, is much more of an inconvenience than outright persecution. Perhaps it has less to do with the actions taken against us by political or ideological antagonists, and more with our need to be recognized as having some importance—to know that we have not been relegated to the 'loser table' in the lunchroom of moral discourse and/or socio-political influence.

We can't help but lament the thought of ourselves becoming irrelevant. This bothers us, and for good reason—we want to feel as though we have something to bring to the conversation.

It can be difficult for us to imagine ourselves having any 'mainstream relevance' when it feels as though the pillars of our faith institutions have begun to crack or even crumble. We feel threatened at the thought of becoming the moral minority in politics. We feel cheated when things we once claimed as “ours” have been co-opted and stripped of the meanings we expect everyone to recognize inherently, as though somehow it makes a dime's worth of difference that we insist on saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays” when Christ is only slightly less of an afterthought at our otherwise self-indulgent holiday gatherings. (Okay, rant over.)

We fear being brushed aside. We fret at the idea of giving an inch, only to lose a mile. For a people that have grown comfortable with being the only game in town, this new reality is unfamiliar territory. And still, the writer of the text manages to find hope in the truth that God is bigger.

“You, O God, are my king from ages past, bringing salvation to the earth...” (v. 12, NLT)

“Both day and night belong to you, you made the starlight and the sun. You set the boundaries of the earth, and you made both summer and winter.” (vv. 16-17, NLT)

God is not limited by boundaries—God sets them. God is boundless.

It is one thing to recognize the power of God's hand when we have visible signs of 'all we have accomplished,' as though we are in need of trophies to prove our efforts worthwhile. It is quite another to know that God is with us, in control, and capable of accomplishing His will when the spotlight is not upon us, when no one has asked for our opinion—to know that God's covenant to us is not so easily broken as the stone palaces we erect in His name. God is bigger than our enemies. But more importantly, God is bigger than us.

We can live in this reality, because God is here also. God functions outside the palaces and prefectures that we have established, and is actively at work through the actions of His people—big or small. This is Good News. This is where we should find our rest.

Rob Horsley  
Saskatoon, SK



*A Stormy Night*<sup>4</sup>  
Alfred Stevens  
1892

Psalm 66  
Re-Orientation

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2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> year of the Reformation, a pivotal moment in history when Martin Luther and others began re-orienting the collective imagination and hearts of Christians towards new life in Jesus. It was an upheaval that had an effect on education, geo-politics, theology, and economics. But for most it opened the door for ordinary people to step into God's presence and know that they were loved, it was as much a reformation of the heart as it was a reformation of society and the church.

Prior to the Reformation, only the elite could read the Bible in Latin and the ordinary people could only sit and wonder at what they heard. They wondered if their prayers, in rustic German, were even heard by God. Yet through the rediscovery of Scripture and a dynamic relationship with Jesus, that all began to change. God, they would discover, was not hidden in a cathedral beyond the reach of the hurting and the broken hearted.

In Psalm 66 we read a song for those people who come into God's presence. They sing, they praise, and they remember all that God has done for them. There's something that strikes me as very liberating and life-giving in the midst of this Psalm and in light of those pre-Reformation people who did not know if God was listening to them. Psalm 66:20 says, "Praise God, who did not ignore my prayer or withdraw his unfailing love from me." Imagine hearing this and realizing that God was better, closer, and more loving than they might have ever known.

We celebrate that the Reformation is the spiritual forerunner of the Evangelical Covenant Church we know and love today. Today we stand on the shoulders of others who were alerted and surprised by the utter graciousness, nearness, and tender, passionate love of God. May you know that wherever you are, and whatever you do, God is listening and delights in revealing His love for you.



Psalm 91  
Re-Orientation

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“For he will command his angels concerning you...they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” These are beautiful, comforting words—powerful promises of God’s protection, a source of strength and solace. And yet these words from Psalm 91 are quoted by the deceiver as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness.

The power in these promises is real and true, but requires us to be careful. When we interpret these words of God as some kind of magical guarantee, we miss out on the message of the psalm and the depths of the promises. When we too are tempted to take that step from confidence in God’s protection to assurance that God’s protection can be forced to operate at our beck and call, we fall victim to the deceiver’s lies.

God’s promises of protection and deliverance are not meant as assurances of a life free from discomfort or misfortune. Nor are these words meant to be kept in our back pocket until a moment when we feel like we have the right to hold God to His word. Like petulant children, we say, “But you promised!” when things aren’t going our way.

Did you read verses 3-8? These verses make plain that the life of the psalmist is far from trouble free. The deadly pestilence, terror of night, and a plague at midday are the lived experiences of the writer. There are real reasons to be afraid, real threats to be faced, real troubles to be navigated. When God’s own voice speaks to the psalmist, God promises rescue, protection, deliverance, and that God “will be with him *in trouble*.”

That seems to be a crucial feature in understanding this psalm. The certainty of trouble is as much promised in God’s words as the truth of deliverance. God’s protection does not mean a life free from threat or danger. But it does mean God’s presence in the midst. As human beings, our lives will face threats. We will become disoriented. We will experience challenges to our understanding of who God is and how God works. Psalm 91 offers us the chance to re-orient our lives and our understanding of God after such struggles. To understand that God’s promises are the richer for not avoiding the realities of our lives, but for plunging directly into them to wade with us through the muck.

Jesus avoids the tempter’s snare in the wilderness. But He does call upon God’s promises of protection (see Luke 23:46). And where is Jesus when He claims the truth of God’s provision? Hanging upon a cross.

Psalm 119  
Orientation

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I recently heard someone say, “We live in the age of TGIF”. And he wasn’t referring to the sigh of relief associated with the long-awaited weekend after a busy and draining week at the office. He was referring to Twitter, Google, Instagram, and Facebook. If the result of a new study by Microsoft Corp. is true, the average attention span of our species has now fallen to 8 seconds, thanks to our excessive use of smartphones and constantly being distracted by multiple streams of media. Apparently, that is 1 second less than the attention span of goldfish! That spells trouble not only for every preacher on Sunday morning but also for every reader of this psalm which sits like a Mount Everest right in the centre of our Bibles.

What is most unexpected here is its singular theme, despite its length. I can’t recount ever hearing such an extensive ode of love and appreciation and enjoyment of God’s Word and commandments in any other piece of literature. It reminds me of a line in a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, where a Lover is addressed by his Beloved saying, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!”

I believe unless we personally embrace that same posture of love that the Psalmist had, rooted in a deep and rich reflection of the many ways and repeated times God has opened our eyes, calmed our fears, corrected our stubborn ways, and led us onto a better path than the one we would have chosen, we will neither understand nor treasure the Lord’s speaking into our lives like He does. We won’t taste and enjoy the rich feast that is laid out right before our eyes. We will miss out on the blessings that only those will reap who purposely seek the presence of our Heavenly Father and truest friend, those who have learned to trust His wisdom and guidance in all areas of life.

Yes, it takes quite a bit of time, effort and concentration to meditate on God’s Word in this way, but if we are motivated by a desire to be shaped and changed by it, the rewards are priceless and lasting! Why not take a new step of discovery today and be surprised by what we find!

Psalm 131  
Orientation

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I long for those sought after, treasured moments, when I surrender to Christ. Those moments, though fleeting, give me a sense of peace beyond my understanding. My greatest desire and hope is that one day I will experience this everlasting peace forever as I lie in the loving arms of my Savior and Redeemer, Jesus.

Psalm 131, a Psalm of David, is a gift from God to me. I feel God's words, through His servant David, have oriented my heart to relinquish my self-centered desire to control my life, my drive to try to understand matters beyond my comprehension, and to release my self-important haughty attitudes. Instead, I desire to recline, calmed and quiet, in a posture of full and complete trust that God is in control and Jesus surrounds me in love, with protection, and complete provision for more than I can ever ask or even imagine.

God has been at work in me and in my faith. For the longest time my spiritual diet has been that of a milk fed child. I have struggled and fought to control my life, to lead my own path, and not listen to the Holy Spirit's small voice. Even so, God graciously and patiently has called me to membership, fellowship, and most importantly to worship at Emmanuel Covenant. My brothers and sisters have prayed, mentored, and taught me God's Holy Word. I am so blessed! I thank God for the heart change. My faith diet is no longer that of milk, but that of solid spiritual food, grounded in the Word, sustained by prayer, and a gradual submission to God's will.

David's image of a weaned child, one no longer needing his mother's milk, is a powerful one for me. As a daughter, mom, and grand mom I have valued those special moments when my child or grandchild has relinquished his/her battle to explore, play, eat, and has nestled in my arms in our "grandma chair" and fallen into a deep, peaceful sleep. All the cares, worries, and stimulation of a growing child drift into a nap of restful sleep. Twice David in Psalm 131 uses this common image of a weaned child, content in the arms of its mother. So too, do we need to surrender our control and trust God to hold us in His loving arms.

Oh how I want to place my hope in the Lord now and forever more!

Psalm 79  
Disorientation

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If Asaph was writing this psalm today, many people from Syria and surrounding countries might think that he was writing a song for anti-ISIS demonstrators to sing. Although we have heard firsthand stories from our refugee family in Strathmore, it is still hard to comprehend the tragedies that families face who have seen their communities in ruins as “Barbarians have broken into your home, violated (our place of worship), left (Aleppo and Damascus) a pile of rubble! They have served up the corpses of your servants as carrion food for birds of prey...dumped out their blood like buckets of water. All around (Syria) their bodies were left to rot, unburied.” (vs. 1-3, The Message)

This psalm is part of a group of songs of disorientation. We hear hearts crying out to God for mercy on His chosen people who are “nothing but a joke to our neighbors” (vs 4). The writer calls on God to curse the Barbarians. He sees the Lord’s anger as a possible punishment for “the sins of *our* parents” (vs 8) but also confesses and asks “forgive us our sins” (vs 9). Next he suggests that God’s reputation is at stake. The destruction of their holy city has brought shame on God’s people, but also on God’s holy name!

At the end, the author moves from disorientation to re-orientation. The psalm’s pendulum has swung back and forth between prayers and cursing. The imagery of the survivor’s condition is very vivid “Give groaning prisoners a hearing; pardon those on death row from their doom” (vs 11). When God’s justice is served, *then* “The ones you love and care for, will thank you over and over. We’ll tell everyone we meet how wonderful you are, how praiseworthy you are!” (vs 13)

Lord, help us to experience your abundant mercy every moment, even when we don’t understand your timing. Amen.

Psalm 81  
Disorientation

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“Sing for joy to God, our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob. Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre” (vs 1-2). I love the image of praising God with music, song and dance. When I look for things to be thankful for, even when things aren’t going well, when I sing or speak praises to my God, there is an uplifting of my soul. That’s what I strive to do, but like Israel, I don’t always do it.

“But my people would not listen to me, Israel would not submit to me” (vs 11). I used to beat myself up and feel like I would never live up to God’s expectations. It wasn’t until recently that I realized it was my expectations I wasn’t living up to. It is not that He doesn’t care or want me to listen and obey, but that He graciously forgives me when I don’t and doesn’t love me any less. I have learned that I am not alone, everyone struggles with the same things I do, even people I have looked up to, whose faith is very strong. I don’t know about you but I find it comforting to know I am not alone.

I have also learned that God loves me unconditionally, more than I can begin to imagine. I have known this fact for years, in theory, but didn’t fully allow myself to fall into His arms and live into that love. I knew He loved me, that is what I had been taught, but I kept Him at arms length, thinking deep down I wasn’t worthy of His unconditional love. My point is that I am a sinner and will fall short, but I am forgiven, time and time again because of His grace, His love and His mercy. Knowing all this, I feel less stressed and more content in my relationship with Him. This allows me to be myself, the person He created me to be.

Without my own expectations holding me back, I am free to worship Him fully. It was me that was holding back, not Him. I am still working on the part that says, “Sing for joy to God”. It isn’t easy but I try in all circumstances and in my day-to-day life to look for the joy that will makes me sing to God, I am a work in progress. I have come to realize that the journey is a lifelong one. Because I better understand His unconditional love for me, I can be less hard on myself and fully enjoy the time I do spend with Him.



*The Joy of Life*<sup>5</sup>  
Robert Delaunay  
1930

Psalm 100  
Re-Orientation

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One of the things I love about the liturgical seasons in the Church calendar is that sometimes, these sacred seasons can be whatever we need them to be. Take Lent for example.

On the one hand, Lent is a time to consider the darker shades to our spiritual journey: a forty day path of repentance, fasting, and temptation. On the other hand, Lent is a time to reflect on the lighter spiritual springtime arrival of tracing new life after a long winter.

The psalms offer worshippers a versatile experience. Feeling penitent, impatient, and imperfect? The psalms are your heart's true guide. Feeling grateful, glorious, and awestruck? The psalms have you covered there too.

Our devotional psalm for today is Psalm 100. It's a psalm on the sunnier side of temple worship experiences.

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*

*Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.*

From an invitation to all the earth, the Psalm then narrows in on one location: the temple. This is the place where these first Psalm singers believed the presence of God dwelled. The entrance of the temple beckons worshipers:

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.*

Even with this inviting image, I wonder if we can we shift our focus from something less "thousands-of-years-ago" to something more up-close-and-personal?

Justin McRoberts recorded a song in 2003 called "Holy Ground." In it, he sings:

*Now it's not just bushes burning, the street's on fire*

*My heart is learning*

*Every footstep falls on holy ground*

*Every house a church where hope is found*

This is a modern psalm inviting us to see the closeness of God who dwelled in human form, whose Spirit is as close as our every breath, and who never stops showing us the divinity woven into our humanity. That is why during Lent, on a path of temptation and suffering, we can trust that:

*The LORD is good,*

*His unfailing love continues forever,*

*and his faithfulness continues to each generation.*

We no longer make the pilgrimage to the temple so let's remember that our Lenten journey is less about arrival and more about awareness. Jesus shows us the closeness of God's presence and not even death can keep us from God's love.

Bobbi Salkeld  
Calgary, AB

Psalm 103  
Re-Orientation

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David is talking to himself (his soul) and reminding himself that God is worthy of our praises for so many reasons. God loves us and knows us. He has made us, remembers who we are, and what we may need. He understands that we are human, that we make mistakes, and that He forgives. His love and mercy are much more than enough for those that choose to follow Him. There are indeed many reasons to give thanks.

When I read this Psalm there are praise songs that ring clear and true in my heart. "Bless the Lord, O my Soul... Worship His Holy Name..." can you hear them too? I have many wonderful memories of times when the people of God gather for worship (large or small) to praise and give thanks to God. I am truly thankful for the gifts God has given to some to lead us in word and song.

So then, how can I bless the Lord? How can you bless the Lord?

As a wife, mother, and nurse I thank God that he gave me a heart to care for others. Also that he gave me a heart to create so others may see Jesus.

In our daily lives, let us remember to praise the Lord whether we are walking in His beautiful creation, caring for a patient, listening over a cup of coffee, making a meal to share, knitting a prayer shawl, or any other situation we find ourselves in each day. In these and many more moments of our day, let us remember to praise the Lord.

Let all that I am praise the Lord;  
with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name.  
Let all that I am praise the Lord;  
may I never forget the good things he does for me (vs.1-2).



Psalm 133  
Orientation

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I will never be able to read this psalm without thinking of the late Dr. Henry Schellenberg. I had the privilege of singing in his choir for three years when I was a student at Providence College. In our repertoire was a piece composed by his friend and colleague Dr. Bill Derksen entitled Psalm 133. Its words come straight from the text and the interweaving of its melody and harmonies are illustrative of the precious anointing oil running down Aaron's beard and the dew of Hermon falling on the mountains of Zion.

If you've ever listened to or sung in a choir, appreciated the resolution of tones in an orchestral piece, or simply delighted in any harmonic blending of voices and instruments, perhaps you will understand the appropriateness of a choral piece put to these words. Music, especially music that employs many voices or instruments working together, reveals the goodness and beauty of the unity described here.

All of us know the discomfort of dissonance. When tones clash instead of blend, we long for their resolution. In resolution we experience peace, satisfaction, and rest. So too in our closest relationships, among those we call family. We are made for peace, and when peace is elusive, we feel it deeply. When David describes the goodness of unity, he uses three images that are outside of our context, but for the Israelite people they would have elicited joy, peace, hope, and a sense of purpose. When we dwell in unity, we point to God and to the promise of everlasting life.

Dr. Schellenberg passed away on February 20, 2013 after a difficult battle with brain cancer. The summer before, on August 7, when he was still functioning relatively well but the inevitable was in sight, some alumni organized an evening of singing under his esteemed direction. I am grateful to have been part of it. Psalm 133 was one of the pieces we sang, a testament to Dr. Schellenberg's legacy of teaching us what unity looks like, sounds like, and *feels* like. He trained us to move as one body with many parts, to listen to one another so we could. Unity does not assume uniformity. Rather, it is the coming together of unique voices toward one purpose with the recognition that each voice contributes to the creation of something more beautiful and more powerful than it could by itself.

Psalm 145  
Orientation

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This past year has presented my husband and me with a variety of challenges. We have moved into a new home, in a new community, and both of us started new jobs. Amongst many joys and blessing there have been times where it has been difficult to adjust into these new roles and expectations.

Psalm 145 is a beautiful song of praise that reminds us how amazing and unfathomable the works of our God and King truly are. David intends for this Psalm to help us refocus our attention and revitalize our bodies to share in the glory and presence of our sovereign Lord.

“I will exalt you my God the King;  
I will praise your name forever, and ever.” (vs. 1, NIV)

As I read through the Psalm I continually returned to the idea that our God is unfathomable—that through Him every living thing is satisfied. God has a plan for each and every one of us. At times this plan seems blurry, out of reach, or brings us to a stand still. However, this Psalm explicitly demonstrates that our God will lift us up as a result of His greatness, righteousness, faithfulness, compassion, and grace so that we can invite others to join in His salvation.

“The Lord is gracious and compassionate;  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” (vs.8)

We have a responsibility to share in God’s plan and bring the news of salvation and praise of our God the King to everyone around us. It is through our challenges in life that God enables us to use our gifts and our strengths through His love to bring others to Him. When we continually praise God in our lives and exude his love through our actions, we join in the idea that someday we will all join together in recognizing and praising God.

“My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.  
Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (vs. 21)

Psalm 130  
Disorientation

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Seasons of disorientation force us to face uncomfortable truths. And to modern ears, is there any truth more uncomfortable than the fact that we are sinners, completely unable to rescue ourselves from the pits we find ourselves in? We're tempted at every turn to believe that "God helps those who help themselves," and that given enough time and effort we can navigate ourselves out of the darkness. However, one of the difficult lessons seasons of disorientation teach us is that we are masters at overestimating our capacity for self-deliverance.

Psalm 130 is written by someone who has come to understand the depths of their problem and the shallowness of any self-centred solutions. *Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord.* The psalmist's distress doesn't drive him to look within, but outside of himself. In his place of darkness he doesn't see self-help as an option as it relates to rescue and deliverance. He wants and needs the Lord to answer.

He wants and needs the Lord's forgiveness. He doesn't see the solution to his anguish lying in a change "out there," but within. He is not looking for the Lord's deliverance in general, but specifically for the Lord's deliverance from the crushing weight of his sin. This is a cry for mercy from one who has no illusions as to the nature of his own character. But this is also a cry for mercy from one who has no illusions as to the nature of God's character.

*But with you there is forgiveness.* Forgiveness is offered by grace, through faith in the Lord. A promise made real to the psalmist, but one completely stunningly fulfilled in Christ.

Out of the depths of our sin, shame, and guilt—places where we are all too keenly aware of the limits of self-salvation, we can cry out to Jesus. And we can do so with confidence, because at the cross we see the glory of unfailing love making complete forgiveness possible. We witness guilt and shame being covered by an atoning love. At the cross we see any self-centred means of salvation being exposed as foolishness even as the Christ-centred means of salvation unfolds.

And therefore because of the cross we can stand unashamed and justified. Because of the cross we can, with reverence, serve Jesus boldly and faithfully. And because of the cross, we can live—even within this season of disorientation—through a posture of faithful endurance knowing that this too will be swallowed up in the victory of "full redemption".

Psalm 137  
Disorientation

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Grief. Sadness. Anger. Vengeance.

Why is the Psalmist in this position? God has punished sin.

*“Sit in silence, go into darkness, queen city of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms. I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance; I gave them into your hand, and you showed them no mercy. Isaiah 47: 5-6a.*

Have you been there? Has God punished you? Were you angry with the messenger or did you recognize God’s message in your pain?

Sometimes the messenger like the Babylonians shows no mercy. We want vengeance. The Psalmist here cries out to God to smash the babies’ heads against the rocks. I am thankful I have never experience the horror of war. We see and hear about it in the news. Babies and children suffer not only in war zones but in our country also.

Why do helpless children suffer? Isaiah tells us Israel was punished for their sin. The children suffered because of sin.

I say in horror: But God you are sovereign – you can stop this! The children are helpless do something!!! Jesus said “let the children come to me.” Do something God! Where are you God?

As we have just finished with Christmas and are on the path to the cross my thoughts go to another child –the sinless holy Son of God – born in a manger. He lived a perfect life of good toward man. His life on earth ended on a cross.

Why did an innocent man have to die?

*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:27-28*

In answer to my question: “Where are you God? Do something?” He points to the cross.

I ask myself, do I see the horror of Christ’s death? It was my sin that held Him on the cross. Instead of asking “Why?” I need to ask instead, “What am I doing to make the world a better place?”

*He must increase I must decrease. John 3:30*

Sixth Sunday of Lent  
Palm Sunday

April 9



*Mary Madgelene's Box of Very Precious Ointment* <sup>6</sup>

James Tissot

1886-1894

Psalm 113  
Re-Orientation

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There are mountains on every side of my hometown in Creston Valley. I'm still getting used to how beautiful it is. Imagine seeing the sunrise from behind one set of mountains and set behind another!

Some days, while my coffee is brewing, I just stand gawking at the picture window. The sky turns this brilliant fuchsia, streaked with purple clouds, and the black Skimmerhorn mountains come into sharp relief as the wisps of fog burn away. It's the most incredible thing. Sometimes I squint my eyes, wondering, "How can the sky even be those colours?!"

Ten hours later, driving home from a long day, I'll come around a corner to sharp peaks aflame, backlit by an orange so intense my breathe catches in my chest. The mountains look navy blue, their edges shimmering like they're outlined in diamonds. I've actually laughed right out loud in the car, thinking back to the morning. It's like the sunrise and the sunset are competing, trying to outdo one another with extravagant, outrageous beauty.

I am utterly moved to praise here twice a day. There's no other appropriate response.

This psalm invites us to praise God as we watch the sun rise and set. Well, that's easy. It also invites us to praise Him for the work He does in people. Sometimes the changes are more subtle, but truly, God is redeeming people's lives as they follow Him.

Think about the man who manages to bring his temper under control or the woman who finds her voice. Consider the family finally able to move into a home of their own—debts paid off or a job offered and held. Think of the survivor sharing her story, the addict who stays clean, an adoption finalized, or forgiveness extended and received.

All those changes happen almost imperceptibly over days and weeks as we submit our lives to God's leading – like the sky lightening in the hours leading up to dawn. You barely notice the change until suddenly you glance up and everything is gloriously ablaze with light!

May we praise Him at the rising and the setting of the sun. And, in all the moments in between, may we praise Him for the blazing glory of lives redeemed and restored as His people turn back to Him.

Psalm 117  
Re-Orientation

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Here we have the shortest Psalm in the Psalter and the shortest chapter in the Bible. Just the other day one of my students asked, “What could we possibly learn from this short verse that just says to praise God?”

What can we learn? Spurgeon shares that *“this Psalm, which is very little in its letter, is exceedingly large in its spirit, for, bursting all bounds of race or nationality, it calls upon all mankind to praise the name of the Lord.”*

God desires that all nations praise Him. Normally it is the people of God who are called to praise the Lord, but not here. Here, we see “all you nations” not just the Jews but the Gentiles also.

*All the nations.* How can we understand this? God’s desire is to be known. God created all of us to be in relationship with Him. From the beginning, God’s redemptive work in and for Israel had in view the redemption of the Gentiles. It is no different today. God continues to desire to be known by all people. He continues to call all nations to praise Him. To praise Him means to make “much of Him”. The idea of bragging about God comes to mind.

How often do we make “much” of our God? How often do we “brag” about Him? As we realize that our God wants the nations to know Him, I often ask myself what am I doing to share who God is with people who do not know Him. Often we find ourselves in comfortable situations and we stay there. I am being challenged to get uncomfortable and start to brag boldly about God.

I was asked not too long ago, “Why do you praise God?”

The answer is as simple as this Psalm. Our God is a God of love. The definition of this kind of love includes merciful kindness, loving kindness, faithful love, steadfast love, and unfailing love.

Our God is also faithful. If our God shows this great and strong love for us, than His faithfulness can only be everlasting. He is a God who continues to be faithful in our life. God’s character cannot change and His promises cannot be broken. We see it over and over again.

We have a God who loves all people and a God who is faithful. I believe we need to get bragging about Jesus and see Psalm 117 fulfilled so that all nations might hear this Great News.

Psalm 130  
Disorientation

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The translation I am reading out of, the NLT, has the brief subtitle: a song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. The motion written out in this psalm is that of one who is approaching Jerusalem, the temple, the place where God lives. You can imagine that as pilgrims and travellers who were going to the temple in order to make a sacrifice, or pray in the presence of God, they might begin to really think about their lives and history of sin as the reality of coming into the presence of a God who dwells in the holy of holies. They would see the first glimpses of the city on a hill, the walls of the city and the tops of the buildings drawing ever nearer. They were drawing ever nearer to the presence of the One whom they knew has power over life and death, who has the power to judge, and who has the power to forgive. This psalm moves from sin and despair to hope in forgiveness, faith, and love.

The Psalms in general are the true embodiment of faith, hope, and desperation expressed through words. They represent the mood, as it were, of those who lived throughout the times of Moses, David, and the exile. Perhaps more pointedly, they are for us who profess Jesus Christ as Lord, the thing that above all else connects us to those who have come before throughout the centuries precisely because they are the prayers that Jesus would have said. This is the day before the night when Jesus was betrayed. I imagine that Jesus, knowing His time was approaching would have thought upon this psalm thousands of years ago, from a place of despair, thinking of the days to come. And still He was able to say, "I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on Him." Just as Jesus depended upon His Father for comfort and redemption from the grave, we too depend upon Christ and what He is about to do for us. 'O Israel (O Nelson, O Breton, O Saskatoon, O Durban, O Sarnia), hope in the Lord; for with the LORD there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows. He Himself will, and has redeemed you, from every kind of sin. Repent and believe the Gospel.



Psalm 137  
Disorientation

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For so many of us we are like the captives who-in the opening of Psalm 137 are sitting beside the rivers of Babylon weeping and mourning for something or someone that once held a very special place in our hearts. Many of us have experienced a great loss that feels like purpose and joy have been stolen from our lives. In our struggle to find hope in the new normal, the enemy of our souls comes to mock us as the captors did to the captives when they requested a 'joyful' song. In these dark moments, when we feel most alone, we must remember how we have experienced the unfailing love of Jesus personally. Like the Psalmist said, "If I forget you Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill upon the harp". That is how important these experiences are to us. Those moments when we have experienced God's love so deeply are like anchors that balance our ships in rough seas. They are rivets of reinforcement in our shield of faith that we raise to block enemy arrows.

Part of the ending of Psalm 137 says, "Oh Babylon you will be destroyed." This is a great reminder to us of the Day of The Lord when all will be put right. The enemy will face justice for all he has stolen from us and all tears will be wiped away. There will be a New Jerusalem and our great and loving King Jesus will reign. As Revelation 21:4 says, "He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever."

Are you experiencing a great loss? Do you feel like life is too heavy? Sit for a while in Jesus' presence and let His voice speak to you of His unfailing love. Let His spirit wash over you and imagine it filling all the cracks in your heart caused by pain till what you see is a wonderful labyrinth of solid gold filled spaces that are reminders of His love carrying you through the deepest wounds.

Psalm 88  
Disorientation

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Good Friday—that day we can only call *good* because we know what comes next. For the first disciples and certainly for Jesus, that first Good Friday was anything but good.

Psalm 88 is a unique disorientation psalm because it is the only one that does not come to any resolution by the end. All other psalms of disorientation find some hope in God again by the final verse. Psalm 88 is different. Psalm 88 is a Good Friday psalm—it leaves us in our distress, leaves Jesus dead in a grave, leaves us praying to God, “Why do you hide your face from me?”

This psalm evokes utter desperation for the Father. The psalmist feels so abandoned that he counts himself among the dead (vs. 5). I imagine these words scrolling through Jesus’ mind as His companions had abandoned Him, as He took on the wrath of God, and as He breathed His last. If these words are expressions included in our sacred Scriptures and if they express the very experience of the Son of God, I wonder what is stopping us from this type of raw, unfettered communication with the Father?

These difficult words *are* in our sacred Scriptures and if Jesus’ words, “Why have you forsaken me?” are any indication, than we know that Jesus thought the same things while on the cross. However we rarely pray this way. We rarely tell God exactly how we feel. When I feel distress about the future, I pray in niceties and ask that God will help me. I certainly don’t tell God just how desperate I am for His aid.

Psalm 88 and Good Friday remind us that God knows our deepest pain and it doesn’t scare Him away. He may not provide neat and tidy answers, but He will hear us.

As you attend a Good Friday service or as you end the day, I encourage you to enter into Psalm 88’s disorientation, entrusting your deepest self to God. It may not feel *good* today, but as we know, *Sunday’s comin’!*

Psalm 143  
Disorientation

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Aviation in Alaska is a part of the fabric of our lives. Like many others, I earned my private pilots license. In our training, a shield is put over our eyes while the instructor puts the plane through a series of maneuvers, turning, going up and down, and at some point the shield is removed. The task is to get the plane straight and level. It is called unusual attitude recovery and if you are afraid of flying, you know how unsettling those bumps can be.

In Psalm 143, the Psalmist expresses a life that is in an unusual attitude. Look at some of the phrases that are used: “Listen to my cry for mercy...come to my relief.” We read, “So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed.” These are words of a life that is not exactly straight and level, with smooth air. No. It is a, “my spirit fails” reality that the writer was facing.

We have all been there and perhaps you are there right now. What is expressed as a cry for help may resonate with you greatly today. If they do, the words of verse 8 may be your request too, “Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.” I need some good news Lord! Please?

Verse 5 grabbed me, “I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.” Recently I paused to do this very thing. It was in a time of extreme busyness and I was facing some struggles. My thoughts began to flood – stories from the Bible, stories from my own life, and experience – it became a great source of encouragement and strength. As an exercise, I would encourage you to remember, consider, and meditate on what God’s hands have done. God is faithful to us, His servants.

Psalm 150  
Re-Orientation

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He is Risen!  
He is Risen Indeed!  
Alleluia!



Fra Angelico  
*Resurrection of Christ and Women at the Tomb* 7  
c.1442

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