

A GLAD OBEDIENCE

Why and What We Sing

Walter Brueggemann

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Foreword

This book is a vocational summons offered to everyone baptized into Christ. Indeed, in our baptism we are “buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). That’s why both ancient and recently renewed baptismal liturgies invite us to reject Satan and all of Satan’s empty promises and to affirm our allegiance to Jesus as Lord, a subversive message worthy of the most robust texts for singing together. This book is a witness that the church’s singing is an indispensable baptismal pedagogy, a school of joyful, revolutionary formation for all people who seek to live out their baptismal calling.

This calling is not only for pastors, theologians, and church musicians. It comes to each and every one of us. What remarkable opportunities we all have to live out our calling as we sing together—to frame our songs, following Professor Brueggemann’s lead, as “script[s] for subversive activity,” to sing in such a way that we relinquish “Promethean pretensions to management and control,” to feel deeply the ways in which robust doxology “will propel us to engage on behalf of altered production, distribution, and consumption . . . altered toward neighborliness,” and to embrace the life-giving conviction of the Heidelberg Confession that our only comfort is that we are “not [our] own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to [our] faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹

Brueggemann’s work is a poignant call to stop singing on automatic pilot, to resist our long-standing habit of inattention to the words we sing. Like a master docent who awakens the imagination of otherwise beleaguered tourists on their too-hasty tours of art museums, Brueggemann here invites us to slow down and pay much deeper attention to the church’s songs, alert to the stunning way they so often recast the world in which we live.

This high view of church song also blesses and sharpens the specific vocation of the church's lyricists and songwriters. Today's congregational song lyricists are called into a long-standing tradition of lyrical craft, in which artistry consists not in obscuring elusive and noncommittal responses to the world but rather in rendering profound spiritual mysteries and heart-achingly poignant confessions and sentiments in ways that are accessible on first encounter and that reward repeated exposure over time. It is a holy and mighty challenge indeed. What an affirmation it is to have one of the church's most prominent theologians pay sustained attention not only to theological treatises but also to hymn poems—to the poetry of Watts and Wesley, Washington Gladden and Civilla Durfee Martin, and to the anonymous words of prophetic freedom songs and folk hymns.

There is a particular blessing here for those who paraphrase or echo the prophetic poetry of Scripture—those who write less as an act of self-expression and more as an act of apprenticeship. Indeed, the ancient words, images, and genres of Scripture are truly still out ahead of us, beckoning us on toward deeper, richer communion with God, one another, and the world that God loves. How we need prophetic poets apprenticed by Scripture.

The more I immersed myself in this text, the more I thought of the thousands of people across the world who, each and every week, choose and lead the songs of God's people gathered for worship—people who need to be affirmed, thanked, called, challenged, and resourced. Alert congregational leaders reading this text could generate quite a job description for these important roles in church life:

- Frame songs as acts of joyful, life-giving resistance to idolatry. Teach us that songs are an antidote to exploitation and depersonalization.
- Learn to study the Scripture texts in, around, and under the songs you love.
- Do not become so attached to subversion for its own sake that you fail to recognize genuine, covenantal, Christ-shaped forms of subversion. Cultivate the radical theological imagination needed for that discernment.
- Teach us by example what it means to sing as gift and gifting—each song a gift, each singing of a song a gift, each song a witness to gift and giving, each singer a gift in the giving.
- Devote attention to songs that convey the weightiness and hope of *hesed*, God's tenacious, covenantal solidarity and loving-kindness.
- Rescue chestnuts from the dustbin of sentimentality. Resist kitsch.
- Pay attention to context—the unique context of each Scripture text, the unique context in which each song was born, the unique context in which it will be sung today.

- Choose not only songs that express what a community already experiences but also songs that will stretch a community toward ever deeper obedience to God, ever more vivid ways of imagining God's covenantal love and fidelity.

Oh, to have more job descriptions for pastoral musicians with instructions like these. What a powerful antidote this could be to the habit so many communities have, as Brueggemann might say, of taking world-upending, astonishment-inducing texts and then rendering them with music that is utterly conventional and ultimately sentimental.

Finally, this book offers a vocational call to those who live in the spiritually fraught world of “the worship industry.” Songs are bought and sold in our world, including songs about God's covenantal fidelity. Ideally, this economy provides just compensation for those called to be poets, composers, arrangers, curators, publishers, and even professors who write books. Praise God for all who participate in this economy with justice-oriented integrity. Yet it is a spiritually dangerous world, ever tempted by the idolization of celebrity and the kind of totalitarian, depersonalized commodification that Brueggemann laments.

May everyone who participates in this economy heed the message of this book: Be vigilant to fight the commodification of the church's song. Resist anything that blunts the fullness of the Christian gospel. Do not squelch the dimly burning wicks of voices at the margins whose songs may not otherwise be heard. Resist cultural imperialism. Embrace ways of creating, curating, receiving, and singing songs that demonstrate the shalom of God's way in the world.

May God's Spirit use this book as a catalyst for this kind of faithful, baptismal witness—sung shalom to the glory of God.

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Preface

In 2013 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) published a new hymnal, *Glory to God: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*.¹ In order to get the new hymnal before the congregations of the church, a series of regional “launches” was offered. Happily for me, I was invited to participate in the first of those launches, and later I shared in a celebration of the hymnal in one presbytery. The material that follows in this book consists, with considerable expansion, in the presentations I made at those events.

The subtitle of this new hymnal, “Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs,” is a phrase quoted from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. That phrase, used in the two epistles, indicates both that the early church was committed to singing and that it understood itself to be in continuity with the singing of Judaism in the usage of the Psalter. In the usage in Ephesians, such singing is contrasted with drunkenness and debauchery; the writer urges the church to be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). The phrasing suggests an allusion to the Pentecost narrative wherein the earliest church participants were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4) and were judged by observers to be “filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13). The contrast of “filled with the Spirit” with drunkenness (“filled with new wine”) in both Acts and the epistle suggests that the singing of the church was robust and emotive. In the usage of the phrase in Colossians 3:16, commendation of “psalms, hymns, spiritual songs” is in the context of a holy life marked by forgiveness and thanks; this context suggests that the singing of the church was an act of emancipation from quid pro quo interactions (which were without forgiveness) and from self-sufficiency (which was without gratitude), marks of the world in which the church did its singing.

The entire paragraph in the Letter to the Colossians (3:12–17), with its reference to singing, suggests that singing, along with forgiveness and thanks,

is indeed a countercultural activity that marks the participants of the church and that distinguishes it from its cultural context. Indeed, it is still so that congregational singing, along with forgiveness and thanks, marks the church as a very different community in the context of a culture that is, for the most part, unforgiving and ungrateful. As a result, we might consider this new wondrous hymnal as a script for subversive activity. It is for certain that congregational singing, judged by the norms of our market culture, is an absurd enterprise: a group of intrepid people eagerly lining out poetry filled with archaic images and metaphors reflective of a prescientific worldview and singing ancient memories, hopes, and mysteries that contradict the “reason of the age.” Such singing, when done intentionally, is perfectly countercultural.

This new hymnal is a marvel and a wonder because it reflects in a quite fresh way the great diversity and scope of the church’s singing around the world. The variety of hymns assembled here provides a serious script, out beyond any sectarian or ideological parochialism, for singing alongside Christians in many other cultures. The hymnal features, moreover, many new hymns that move beyond both traditional patriarchal imagination and uncritical triumphalism as the church accepts its new role in the world. My friend Bart Campolo has decided to be a “humanist” college chaplain seeking to evoke and form communities of spiritually alert students who are untouched by any conventional Christian faith claims but who embody a wide spiritual hunger and eagerness. Campolo comments that the formation of such a humanist community is difficult because “the church has all the good songs.” This hymnal is compelling evidence of that claim. The church around the world does indeed have “all the good songs” and continues to generate good hymns around which church faith and church life can be gathered and voiced.

Given the subtitle of the new hymnal, “hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs,” and given my own locus in Old Testament studies, it was inescapable that my presentations at the launch would concern the book of Psalms. For that occasion, I decided to take up four long psalms that come in canonical sequence and engage in different actions reflected in very different genres. My focus is on the question “Why do we sing?” It is a question not very often asked in the church, even though we sing often and regularly. I mean by that governing question to reflect on what it is we are doing when we sing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs. The answer to that question I think is not abstract or theoretical. It is rather an answer given in the way we practice the songs themselves. Thus in the sequence of Psalms 104, 105, 106, and 107, we see the church after Israel, by way of sustained cadence and rich poetic imagery, performing and exhibiting human practices that belong peculiarly (but not exclusively) to the Christian community. The practices performed in these particular psalms, which recur in many church hymns, are definingly human when it is remembered that our humanness consists in our lives played out in the presence of God. We can thus see the following:

- In Psalm 104, we have a practice of wonder and awe that issues in exuberant praise.
- In Psalm 105 we have an act of remembering God’s good actions that moves us to glad obedience.
- In Psalm 106, we have an act of remembering our own waywardness that situates us honestly in our need and hope for God’s rescue.
- In Psalm 107 we have acts of gratitude that specifically name the occasions of God’s transformative fidelity and our response with material gratitude.

The four liturgic actions—praise, readiness for obedience, readiness for rescue, and thanks (to which other like actions can be readily added)—together constitute a rendering of humanness as it is given in the biblical-evangelical tradition and as it may be performed in our worship.

After I had completed this exposition, I was fortunate to have access to a dissertation from the University of Gloucestershire by Peter C. Ho, who suggests that these four psalms constitute in the Psalter something of an intentional corpus.² Along with the obvious fact of their shared uncommon length, Ho observes a number of intertextual references in the psalms that together suggest some intentional coherence to the four. Such a judgment can only strengthen the case I have tried to make for the focus of discussion. The four psalms together provide ample testimony to why we sing.

These dimensions of humanness, which are embraced as they are performed, amount to “a world of gift” that refuses the more conventional and pervasive “world of commodity.” The momentary departure from the world of commodity in worship requires a practice of imagination and emotional emancipation that together defy the tight calculus of market ideology. The contrast between the commodity world “out there” and the “gift world” in here in our singing is made clear in the following comment on a sermon by Charles Chauncy in 1747, “A Caveat against Enthusiasm.”³ Chauncy championed the “reasonableness” of Christian worship and warned against enthusiasm:

That you can’t reason with them [the enthusiasts] is the first sign, but interestingly enough, all the others have to do with their bodies: “it may be seen in their countenances,” “a certain wildness . . . in their general look,” “it strangely loosens their tongues,” “throws them . . . into quakings and tremblings,” and they are “really beside themselves, acting . . . by the blind impetus of a wide fancy.” It is precisely the feeling that one’s body has been entered by some “other” that Chauncy wishes to warn against.⁴

The alternative to “enthusiasm” is reasoned worship and reasoned talk that values analytic cognition operating through intellectual control and market exchanges. In such a world, worship is essentially “talk,” the kind of reasoned talk in which Presbyterians and many other Christians are wont to engage in worship.

In contrast, singing is artistry that entails a kind of freedom that resists such analytic control. Lewis Hyde says of such a contrast:

The ceremonies of enthusiastic religions tend to include the body, rather than talk. The celebrants dance and sing, they quake and tremble. But no one dances ecstatic dances in the church of the rich. Nor do they speak in tongues or raise their hands in the gesture of epiphany the way the Christian enthusiasts do. The rich would seem to sense that the more you feel the spirit move in the physical body on Sunday, the harder it will be to trade in cash on Monday. Better to sit in one's pew and listen to a talk.⁵

The contrast of course need not be complete, and certainly the hymnal committee did not intend to champion "enthusiasm." But the point of the contrast is worth noting. Singing is, by the way of the world, quite "unreasonable" and bears witness to an alternative reality.

The sum of the contrast can be seen in any singing congregation. There is an occasional break with bodily restraint as there is a break with closed reasoning into daring imagery beyond our explanatory capacity. People sometimes raise their hands or move their feet and sway a bit with the cadence. Thus an answer to "Why we sing?" is that in singing we may evidence and enact our God-given humanness, which is marked by bodily freedom, by uncensored articulation, and by full-person engagement. Israel, which has been dancing and singing since Miriam defied Pharaoh, has known this (see Exod. 15:20–21). The early church knew this in Pentecost, which made imperial magistrates nervous (see Acts 16:25–34). Martin Luther knew this as he expounded the grace of God that contradicted all human "law." He knew that such grace must be sung. Martin Luther King Jr., kneeling before sheriffs, knew that singing counters intimidation and evokes courage. And now with this new hymnal we know it in the late days of capitalism, which wants to cover over bodily humanity (with its wounds and possibilities) by the offer of religious kitsch. The singing church has always known better. The more the church forms its life outside the restraints of dominant values and outside economic necessity that insists on those values, the more its singing is an emancipatory practice of full-bodied selves in the image of God. To this end, the new hymnal is a compelling, inviting, accessible script of treasures new and old.

The second half of this book, titled "What We Sing," explores fifteen different hymns—some old chestnuts that no longer appear in some hymnals and others that are newer compositions—and asks the question "Why do we sing this particular song?" I conclude with a more recent presentation that I offered at Xavier University. The happy occasion for my presentation was the fact that the university has acquired a copy of the new St. John Bible, with its spectacular calligraphy and other artistic work. That occasion gave me opportunity, through the exposition of three other psalms, to draw out some implications of my original exploration in relation to the new hymnal.

I am grateful to David Dobson, David Maxwell, and a host of Louisville Presbyterians who included me in the hymnal launch. Beyond that I am glad to be able to salute my ancient Psalms teachers, Allen G. Wehrli and Samuel Terrien, and a goodly company of Presbyterian Psalms scholars, including Patrick Miller, William Brown, and Clint McCann.

I am glad to dedicate this book to my friends David Ellis and William West, who are among the most zealous, talented, and generous church singers I know. David from time to time offers solos in our worship. William, from the first pew, enables the congregation to find its doxological voice. Together they make a difference in the way we sing.

To know why we sing may bring to us a deeper delight in our singing and a strengthened resolve to sing without calculation before the God who is “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps. 22:3).

PART ONE

WHY WE SING

What is the linkage between a hymnal and my work in the Old Testament? I propose that the interface or commonality is this: We have 150 psalms, and we only know and use six of them (Pss. 23, 46, 103, 121, and two more on special occasions in the church year: Ps. 22 on Good Friday and Ps. 51 on Ash Wednesday). That practice leaves us free to disregard all the other psalms.

When hymnal committees convene to choose the texts for their new collection, they have tough choices to make. Some hymns are obvious candidates for inclusion. Some will barely make it. Some will cause the hymnal committee no end of consternation, even long after they've made their particular decisions. But mostly we know, love, and are likely to sing about thirty-five of them, if that many, no matter what the particular hymnal committee had in mind. Thus we treat both collections, the Psalter and our hymnal, in the same way: as inventories of rich resources—in both of which we are highly selective and exclusionary in practice, sometimes militantly and defiantly so.

Thus I begin by considering the psalms along with the question, “Why do we sing hymns and psalms?” If one were an anthropologist and regarded a worshiping congregation as a primitive tribe (sometimes it is!) and observed its worship practice from the back of the room, congregational singing might appear odd indeed. It consists in a mighty effort, sometimes with the urging by the leader to do louder or better, sometimes poorly and inadequately rendered, and sometimes done well by paid professionals. But it is always a serious investment in a bodily enterprise that requires some energy and that at its best brings us into community. An anthropologist would readily see that we are engaged when we sing hymns in “world construction,” the articulation of a world that is very different from the one we have regularly in front of us.¹

Martin Luther, the great father of congregational singing, was of course no disciplined anthropologist. He was rather a bold energetic preacher, teacher, liturgist, and exegete who celebrated the notion of “evangelical” in order to assert that our ultimate trust is not in any humanly constructed world—not the Bible, the church, or the church's doctrine; not morality, liturgy, piety, or

polity; and not the flag, the currency of the state, or the ideology of the corporation or the market. Instead, our ultimate trust is in the God of the gospel, who is out beyond our best reason, distorted as that reason is. Luther understood that congregational singing not only creates unity in the body but also offers a particular kind of unity, a shared act of rendering one's whole life before the mystery of God. That rendering, because it probes the emotional extremities of our existence, must perforce be done in a lyrical fashion that creates openings in our reasoning, that invites a kind of honest assertion and submission that is lacking in reasonable prose. We sing because life is God-given, God-sustained, and God-claimed. Our singing is our glad assent to that God-giveness and a refusal to have our lives be less than, more than, or other than that.

In the next four chapters I will consider four long psalms that come in sequence and are in the center of the Psalter (Pss. 104, 105, 106, 107), none of which makes "the big six" that we know and love. I will bring to each of these psalms in turn the question "Why do we sing?" I will ask it particularly of each psalm: "Why do we sing *this* psalm?" What are we doing when we sing it? What would we miss if we did not sing it? What do we miss because we mostly do not sing any of these four psalms? My comments will be quite text specific; as you read, however, I invite you to generate a list of hymns that would be linked to and reflective of particular psalms. You can work from your best thirty-five, but perhaps more than that will be given to you by the spirit. Or you can probe your own hymnal to find what you may have overlooked.

Thus we sing to render our lives in all of their rich complexity, in honesty, back to God. Gerhard von Rad has famously concluded that the psalms, along with the wisdom tradition, constitute a "response" to God, to who God is and to what God has done.² We do so as a part of a singing company that has been so rendering its life back to God since the tambourines of Miriam (Exod. 15:20–21), since the triumph of Deborah (Judg. 5:2–31), since the grief of David (2 Sam. 1:19–27), and since the defiant hope of Mary (Luke 1:46–55).

Chapter 1

Psalm 104

I begin with Psalm 104 because it is our best model for a “creation hymn,” partly derived from Egyptian religion but now drawn close to YHWH, the God of covenant in Israel.¹ We sing it in order to situate our lives amid God’s creation, locating ourselves among the many creatures, fully honest about our creatureliness, which is like all the other plethora of God’s creatures but peculiar among them in our particular mode of feedback to the creator. Clearly other creatures all praise God, as the Psalms assume, each in its own appropriate mode.

We sing because we trust the structured generativity of creation that we receive with sacramental sensibility (vv. 1–24). The speaker, a glad creature of God, makes a quick self-identification at the outset: “O my soul . . . my God.” But then it is all about YHWH, all about “you” in direct address. The divine name is uttered once in verse 1, and then not again until verse 24 (except for the incidental mention in verse 16). The hymn is direct address to “you,” a known, named primal agent who has acted and who continues to act. This speaker knows that “you” must be addressed and dares to imagine that when “I” (“my soul”) sings to YHWH, YHWH’s glory, honor, and sovereignty are

in mighty ways enhanced or, as we say, “magnified.” As we have voice, so we declare ourselves to the creator God. This long inventory of twenty-three verses moves from the grand landscape of creation to the particulars of daily life, all held in God’s purview.

The doxology begins with the ordering of all the creation, all the heavens, all the earth, all the clouds, all the wind (vv. 1–9).

- You are clothed.
- You are wrapped.
- You stretch out the heavens.
- You set the beams.
- You make the clouds.
- You ride on the wings.
- You make the winds.
- You set the earth.
- You cover it.
- You set a boundary.

The singer has no doubt that this seething mass of vitality is ordered and rebuked, tamed and limited, restrained by a God-authorized boundary that it will not cross (v. 9). The singer takes into full account the seething but knows about the sovereign voice that presides over it to cause safe living space. The chaos is contained and must submit to the will of the creator. Thus the very singing evokes a world in which the effect and threat of chaos are limited and contained. The poetry refuses any explanation; the song is about wonder, not explanation, about trust, not control.²

The song is sung in an arid climate, and we may sing it now as we come to the “water wars” in which water will be scarcer even than oil. Here in exuberance the singer chooses terms that “splash” with freshness:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
 they flow between the hills,
 giving drink to every wild animal;
 the wild asses quench their thirst.
 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation . . .
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

vv. 10–13

Even in translation we get the concrete, life-giving goodness of the water: “gush” (v. 10), “quench” (v. 11), “satisfied” (v. 13). Human creatures have no privilege here; “all creatures of our God and king” are sustained. In the singing we may imagine ourselves “quenched” and “satisfied,” like animals at an African watering hole along with wild asses and birds, all of them guaranteed in the earth. When we are quenched and satisfied, moreover, we may gain a bit of distance from our anxious consumerism, discerning that we are never quenched

and satisfied by commodities but only by gifts given by the creator. That same water causes grass to grow:

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use.

v. 14

In a single verse the nonhuman and human creatures stand together before the life-giving gifts of God.

But then the lyric comes closer to us human creatures. Now the concern is for our “heart” and our “face” (v. 15), that is, full human health flourishing. Our face and our heart require the following:

- Wine to gladden
- Oil to shine
- Bread to strengthen

After all the big structure of heaven and earth, the real gift of the creator is *bread, wine, and oil*. This is the stuff of daily food without which we cannot live. It has, however, been transposed in our liturgical imagination into the stuff of sacrament, the gift making real the giver. So we pray,

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these your gifts of bread and wine,
that the bread we break and the cup we bless
may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.³

It is an audacious albeit familiar prayer. It is, however, an audacity that is rooted in the deep sense already voiced by the psalmist, who saw that such food is more than biological sustenance, though it is that. It is a holy gift that “gladdens” and “makes shine,” that vivifies “humanness.” Daily food is sacramental! These daily elements witness to the truth of gift, giving, and giver; we, we creatures, are on the glad receiving end of olive oil from trees that we did not grow, bread we did not bake, and grapes we did not produce: wine, oil, bread! These are gifts that bespeak life given; they cannot be owned, possessed, stored up, confiscated, or monopolized. They are for all human creatures who yearn to have glad hearts and shining faces.

The creatures all sing of this amazement concerning the very flow of life too readily taken for granted. That life is made possible and assured by the generous gift of water, wine, oil, bread, and grass, appropriate for each creature, for each creature can digest the generous gift.

The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;

the stork has its home in the fir trees.
 The high mountains are for the wild goats;
 the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
 You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
 the sun knows its time for setting.

vv. 16–19

The cedar trees stand tall in praise (v. 16). The birds nest confidently (v. 17). The storks settle gratefully; the goats climb securely (v. 18); the coney (rabbit) twitch their noses; the moon shines; the sun rises (v. 19); and all creatures are busy with their joyous vocations. All creation works in an ordered way. All have food. All have water. All have time.

There is time for hungry animals:

You make darkness, and it is night,
 when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
 The young lions roar for their prey,
 seeking their food from God.
 When the sun rises, they withdraw
 and lie down in their dens.
 People go out to their work
 and to their labor until the evening.

vv. 20–23

There is a time for everything, a time to work and a time to rest, a time to prowl and a time to hide! The night is occupied by young lions who rove in their hungry roar, knowing that they are on the receiving end of God's food. But they are not, however, creatures that work 24/7. They know when to stop . . . at dawn. They make way for a new set of creatures, human persons who have been sleeping and now go out to work (v. 23). But these day-time human creatures are also not 24/7 creatures. They will yield in due course to "lion-time" when the sun sets. The singer sketches from the big canvas of heaven and earth, ruled by God who presides over all that is, seen and unseen. But the doxology from there draws close to food and sleep, knowing that

“. . . life [is] more than food, and the body [is] more than clothing.”
 (Matt. 6:25)

The singer finds that life in its dailiness is from God and so yields it back to God.

The singer has withheld the name of the creator until verse 24. All the data is collected, enough data to make scientific probes, enough material out of which to imagine evolution. But then the name of the creator bursts into the song: "O LORD" (v. 24), O YHWH, O wow! It is your works, your wisdom, your creatures. It all you! And we have received it. We receive it every day. We live every day on the terms you give; we receive, we along with rabbits and lions

and birds and cedar trees, all living, all receiving. YHWH is the daily reliable giver. O my!

We sing because we know about the rumble of chaos and are glad for its domestication by YHWH (vv. 25–26). Chaos is there; we do not deny it. It is the chaos present before time, *tohu wabohu* (Gen. 1:1). It is the chaos of disordered politics when “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 19:1; 21:25). It is the chaos of surging waters when Jesus slept in the boat and finally awakened enough to call that it should shut up (Mark 4:35–41). It is the chaos of a family distressed, a failed marriage, an unwanted pregnancy, an unwelcome diagnosis. It is chaos in a society bent on violence, a world of hate, guns, and terrorism, a government that can host torture, a rapacious corporation that devours, an economy that leaves too many behind, a deeply felt disorder that makes us weary and edgy.

So we sing, “Yonder is the sea, great and wide” (Ps. 104:25). We see the whitecaps of confusion and hear the surging waters with ships tossed about. We know this seething, which is bottomless and endless, relentless in its devastating power. But we also know better. In our singing we also know about that old authoritative voice that commands chaos into obedience:

I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
 a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
 though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
 though they roar, they cannot pass over it.
 Jer. 5:22

From the outset we have had this stately liturgy that prevailed over chaos: “God saw that it was good . . . very good,” and God rested with no anxiety (Gen. 1:1–2:4). We anticipate an ending to such chaos with a new heaven and new earth and no more sea, no surging deathly force against us any longer (Rev. 21:1; see Isa. 65:17–25). Our lives are suspended between that initial “goodness” and that anticipated banishment of chaos. And we, midway between ending and beginning, can succumb in anxiety and fear. We can submit to surging chaos and act out our own chaotic antineighborliness.

But then we take a second look. We remember that he said to the waters, “Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:39). That he said to the raging chaos, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10). We watch and notice that the ships manage. It must have been fearful for the first Vikings and fearful of late for a cruise ship that lost its power. But they go! They travel all the way from Phoenicia to Tarshish and back again. They keep a schedule. The claim is vouched for me just now: out my window I see a regatta of seven geese in our pond, swimming single file. They do not hurry. They exhibit no anxiety. As much as I can tell, they accept the world given them and settle for an orderliness in their own lives. The ones on the ships from Tarshish back to Phoenicia record the stars and measure the winds. We can trace a direct line from ancient Vikings to our

own present mates at Hubble. We have learned that even chaos has an order and a structure. We remember that even the monsters of the deep have limit and order and sense. They have enough intentionality, like birds that migrate, about proper coming and going (see Isa. 1:3a; Jer. 8:7). And we remember the dictum in the wake of the primal flood:

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.

Gen. 8:22

We sing to celebrate that chaos is ordered:

There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Ps. 104:26

It is God who intended the sea monster to have fun in the water. And you, you mighty creator, in your playfulness, perhaps enjoy a dolphin performance or the sea monster for entertainment; you treat them like toys. Jon Levenson refers to the sea monster as “God’s rubber ducky.”⁴ You enjoy them; you, in your sovereign power, laugh at them in delight, and all the creatures find their best life in conformity to your will. Our singing reassures us, not in denial of vexed reality but in acknowledgment that you finally are Lord of lords, Lord of all creatures, even the odd ones who risk a bit of disobedience to you. With bold articulation, we sense that even our own chaos, so present to us, is not “on the loose.” It is contained because your rule will not be outflanked. It all belongs to the creator:

It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens,
and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth.
He makes lightnings for the rain,
and he brings out the wind from his storehouses.

Jer. 10:12–13

We in our supporting role yield the stage to you, you in your wonder that outruns our sense, you in your wisdom that outruns our anxiety, you with your creation that you cherish. We find ourselves being cherished and sustained, and all the others alongside us as well.

It is no wonder that YHWH teased our brother Job about Leviathan. When Job, like us, imagined his moral supremacy, YHWH reminded him of his modest creatureliness:

“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
 or press down its tongue with a cord?
 Can you put a rope in its nose,
 or pierce its jaw with a hook?
 Will it make many supplications to you?
 Will it speak soft words to you?
 Will it make a covenant with you
 to be taken as your servant forever?
 Will you play with it as with a bird,
 or will you put it on leash for your girls?”
 Job 41:1–5

Will you be able to treat chaos as toy, as do I? No, you will not press its tongue. No, you will not rope its nose. No, you will not pierce its jaw. No, he will not address petition to you. No, he will not make a covenant with you. No, you will not put it on a leash. No, the power of chaos will not be managed by you. It will be managed, however, by YHWH, who makes this enormous chaos for entertainment. No wonder we sing!

We sing because we know our secure place in the food chain that is sustained by divine watchfulness and generosity (vv. 27–28):

These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season;
 when you give it to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
 See Ps. 145:15–16

When we forget the dependence of other creatures on God’s generosity and imagine that we are lords of the food chain, we scramble to produce more and possess more and consume more. We build bigger barns. We build storehouse cities as Pharaoh did, and, like Pharaoh, we build them with cheap labor. We maintain engines of force to control food supplies, oil deposits, chemical resources, and cheap labor. We are propelled by our anxiety.

And then comes the voice that guarantees the food supply: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’” Because, said our rabbi in gender-exclusive language: “Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matt. 6:31–32). It is to the “Father who art in heaven” that we pray for daily bread. We have been praying for daily bread since that first daily bread was given us in the wilderness. We were warned then not to accumulate or hoard, and now we watch while our surpluses get worms and smell and melt (Exod. 16:20–21). But we know better; we have known better since the first surprise of bread in a place where there seemed at first to be no bread. For good reason Jesus wondered aloud to his disciples, “Why are you talking about having no bread?” (Mark 8:17).⁵

We look back at the birds and the lilies and the rabbits (coney!) and chipmunks and the geese and the deer. And we know that they have been feeding

forever. It all works! It yields food! Creation is the gift that keeps giving! We along with the other creatures are situated in a food supply that is reliable. We all are situated there by virtue of our status as creatures. They look to thee. We look to thee. We all look to thee! Where else should we look? Certainly not to the ideologies of market capitalism or communism. None of those ideologies is finally generous to creatures who neither toil nor spin.

You give in due season;
 You give and they gather;
 You open your hand; they are filled.
 Ps. 104:27–28, au. trans.

You give, and you open; we gather, and we are filled. Food starts with you. On the receiving end they (and we) gather and are filled: “Some gather[ed] more, some less . . . those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed” (Exod. 16:17–18).

We say our little table prayers. We mumble them, or do not have time for them. We now know how to produce our own food. We now have lab-produced food laden with preservatives . . . and obesity. When we imagine that we may have food on our own without the mysterious giving of creation, we eat too much, or we eat the wrong things. We eat what we want, even after we are warned about the consequences for our health. We eat what belongs to our neighbor. We imagine that we can have bread that is not broken and that it will nourish us. We imagine that we can drink wine to satiation without its being poured out in forgiveness.

But the sight of our fellow creatures stops us short. They do not gather more than they need. They do not hoard. Who ever saw a hummingbird that is overweight? But that very bird has enough! When and if we remove food from our anxiety zone, we will be sated. Because life is more than food, we eat daily bread. We do it in peaceableness. We do it in anticipation of the heavenly banquet when all will be fed. Food is the great zone of anxiety among us. And now in our singing, it becomes a zone of trust and gratitude and neighborliness . . . filled with good things!! Our singing leads us to both confidence and awareness. Amid the doxologies of abundance we learn more, if we are discerning, about the scarcity all around us. It is scarcity that contradicts the creator—scarcity produced by anxiety, greed, and violence. And we expect, when we are alert, that our doxologies will propel us to engage on behalf of altered production, distribution, and consumption. Without doxology, it is certain that these practices will not be altered toward neighborliness.

We sing because we have breath (vv. 29–30). Lessons in singing are much about breathing properly. Singing is a way to measure and appreciate the gift of breath. It is a rule of life that we must inhale before we exhale. It is a rule of life

that we receive before we give. It is a rule that we cannot live without oxygen, for without it we would soon have brain damage. We must have it; we must receive it. But we cannot hold it, not for very long. We cannot hold it, possess it, store it up, sell it, buy it, or trade it. It is a gift that keeps on giving, and we keep receiving until we cannot any longer.

Because we can breathe, we must sing. When we live in a context of fear, greed, and violence, however, we cannot breathe freely, and we cannot sing. We know about the terrified cry of racism: “I can’t breathe.” When we are bonded, coerced, and driven long enough, none of us can breathe. And we surely cannot sing in such life-damaging circumstances. But sing we must. To sing, we must breathe freely. And to breathe freely, our bodies must be freed; our lives must be freed from threat. So the psalmist ponders free breath and all that free breath means for a good life.

We sing in order to conduct a quick seminar on *ruah*, “wind, force, breath, spirit.” We remember that when we catch our breath, we can function again; but we must stop to catch it. We notice that God’s good *ruah* caused creation. It was that breath that hovered over the chaos and evoked life (Gen. 1:2). When God authorizes another breath, we live. When God breathes on plants, they grow. When God breathes on animals, they prosper. We are all creatures of the breath. But it is also the case that God’s breath, taken as hot wind, can cause grass to dry up:

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades.

Isa. 40:7–8

We sing of God’s breath to remember that we are drastically penultimate, dependent on that gift of breath.

With God’s breath comes God. God’s own lordly presence must be hosted. When God is not welcomed, we may find an absence. Call it exhaustion. Call it depression. Call it despair; or call it pride, the attempt to be self-created, self-sufficient, self-possessed, “served” to security. Without the breath, we are indeed reduced to “selfies.” We fence out new life; we imagine that the breath will not penetrate our vaults, our gated communities, our “whole life centers,” our closed moral systems, our preferred economic arrangements, our fixed ideologies, or our flattened worlds. And then we die!

We die in dismay when you hide your face.
We die in shriveling when you give no *ruah*.
Ps. 104:29, au. trans.

We die in pride with unsustainable self-sufficiency. We die, and the body politic dies.

In the face of such death Jesus came as the Easter lord, and he breathed on them (John 20:22). And they lived. No wonder we sing! Because we have been breathed on!

We die on our own without you. But that is why the positive of verse 30 follows the negative of verse 29:

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

v. 30

The hard truth of our singing is that we are not on our own. The good truth of our song is that we live from this divine iron lung who renews us instant by instant, who gives to us breath in our weariness, who enlivens us when we fail.

We sing because our lives are God-occupied (vv. 31–35). Now we have again the divine name; we heard it in verse 1 (“O LORD”), incidentally in verse 16 (“the trees of the LORD”), and then bursting out in verse 24 (“O LORD, how manifold . . .”). Until now those are the only times the speaker mentions the creator’s name! Otherwise it is all “you,” all “thee,” just a pronoun—until verse 31. But then verses 31–35 gather it all together with an avalanche of soundings of the divine name (au. trans.):

- “May the glory of YHWH endure forever” (v. 31)
- “May YHWH rejoice in his works” (v. 31)
- “I will sing to YHWH as long as I live” (v. 33)
- “I will sing to my God while I have being” (v. 33)
- “I will rejoice in YHWH” (v. 34)
- “Bless YHWH, O my soul” (v. 35)
- “Praise YHWH” (v. 35)

It is now all YHWH! Karl Barth thought we could not move with religious initiative from the world to God; he insisted that the move is in the other direction. But John Calvin knew that we can work it in either direction, from God to world or from world to God.

In the first place, we cannot look upon ourselves without immediately turning our thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom we “live and move.” The knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.⁶

Here it is from creation to creator, culminating in the name
that is above every name,
that is in, with, and under all,
who is the Lord of chaos,
who is the guarantor of food,
who is the source of breath.

We sing the name laden with generosity, because we cannot do else wise. The world, gospel practiced, leads us there.

So we say with the Psalmist, “Glory to YHWH”;
 as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever.
 So we sing with the Psalmist that we “rejoice in YHWH”:
 Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

This God has mightily to do with the world: This is the one

who looks on the earth and it trembles,
 who touches the mountains and they smoke.
 Ps. 104:32

The earth trembles in obedience; the mountains smoke in acknowledgment. This God impinges upon, calls to account, assures, waters, and forgives. And when we attend to this impingement and notice and acknowledge, what else will we do but sing?

I will sing as long as I live
 because it is the focus of my life;
 I will praise while I have being
 because my being is situated in my praise.
 I will sing; I will rejoice!
 Ps. 104:33, au. trans.

We sing because we acknowledge, in gladness, that we are penultimate. When we do not sing, when we imagine ourselves ultimate, we will end in self-serving hubris or self-destructive despair. We will end devoured, in pride or in defeat, by ourselves. It is our singing that guards against too much diminishment or too much enhancement. It is our singing that reminds us of limit and vocation and purpose. It is our singing that assures us that no good can come from our self-funding arrogance or our self-denying impotence. We are safe from chaos (vv. 24–26); we are fed to satiation (vv. 27–28); we are breathed on (vv. 29–30). My life, our life together, has no other purpose than to glorify and enjoy God. So we say at the outset and at the end:

Bless the LORD, O my soul.
 Ps. 104:1, 35

Enhance the Lord, O myself; that is my beginning and the end of our song.

We sing because there is a sticky footnote of sternness at the end of this song. It is a little notice in verse 35 that we will never sing in church (also see Ps. 145:20):

Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
 and let the wicked be no more.

It is an odd reference to “sinners” and “the wicked.” They have no staying power. They will be consumed until they are no more. Who are they? They are the ones who do not sing. They are the ones who do not bless, who do not acknowledge, and who end up having no “soul.” They are the ones who think they will manage chaos on their own. They are the ones who think they can have their own food supply. They are the ones who think they can hold their breath and sell it as a commodity if they train hard enough. They are the ones who imagine they are not creatures but have themselves created. They have no future!

We sing our penultimacy as an act of resistance and as a proposal of alternative. The resistance performed by this singing is against the reduction of creation to a series of commodity transactions because it is all gift. It is thus a resistance against market ideology that seeks to buy and sell and trade and own everything. It is resistance against scientism (notice that I do not say “science”!) that tries its best to explain and thereby control everything. Singing has no conflict with science that is grounded in wonder nor any need to dispute evolution. But this singing does resist our Promethean pretensions to management and control. This singing is an act of alternative to the rat race grounded in an ideology of scarcity. It is the affirmation that we live in a generous context of abundance in which there is enough for all of God’s creatures. Such abundance requires, as the ancient singers surely knew, discipline and generosity and a readiness to forgo every luxury and convenience for the sake of the neighborhood. Thus this singing is inherently subversive; it is lining out a subversion of reality that gives our lives back in wonder to God in acknowledgment of a governance other than our own.

So imagine: we sing our penultimacy. We sing our derivative quality. We reach our lives back to the creator, glad enough to be creatures alongside rabbits and lions and birds, especially hummingbirds! Glad to be penultimate. In Hebrew the last words of the psalm, “Praise the LORD,” are “Hallelu-Yah,” a combination of “praise” (*hallal*) and the name of the creator, *Yah*.

We know about singing “hallelujah” to the creator since the ancient cadences of St. Francis:

All creatures of our God and King,
 lift up your voice and with us sing.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!
 O brother sun with golden beam,
 O sister moon with silver gleam,
 sing praises! Alleluia!
 Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!⁷

Francis sings directly from the Psalter into a world preoccupied with control and certitude. He sings resistance and alternative.

We also know “hallelujah” in new singing. In the new Presbyterian hymnal *Glory to God* we get fresh resistance and alternative in an all-new doxology:

Hallelujah! Sing praise to your Creator,
sun, moon, and stars and angels above.
Praise the Lord, whose word established the heavens,
who upholds all the earth in power and love.
God reigns on high, let the heavens rejoice!
God reigns on high, let the heavens rejoice!

Praise the Lord, all mountains and oceans,
rolling thunder and wind and storm clouds on high.
Praise the Lord, your Maker,
all living creatures, all the beasts in the fields and birds in the sky.
Both young and old, come and join in the song!
Both young and old, come and join in the song!

Give to God all glory and honor.
From the depths to the heights let praises resound to the Lord,
the source of strength and salvation
for all people on whom God’s favor is found.
Praise God, you saints who are claimed as God’s own!
Praise God, you saints who are claimed as God’s own.⁸

In both ancient cadence and contemporary beauty, the people of God sing because we are called to live in an alternative world that requires constant reiteration. It is a world of *order* amid palpable chaos, of *food* for all creatures, and of *breath* given reliably and sovereignly withheld. It is no wonder that we continue, even in our frightened context, to sing exuberantly to the God of life who dwells beyond all our explanations.

Chapter 2

Psalm 107

Psalm 107 provides a welcome counterpoint to Psalm 104 because it is as specific as Psalm 104 is generalizing. Whereas Psalm 104 is *praise* as an act of exuberant self-abandonment, Psalm 107 is a *song of thanksgiving* with all the particularity of blessings counted and gifts named. These gifts and blessings invite gratitude and evoke verbal and material response. We tend to conflate praise and thanks, and sometimes the same conflation occurs in the Psalter. We would do well, however, to make a clear distinction between the two, because they emerge differently, they function differently, and they imply different actions and practices.

Harvey Guthrie has provided a helpful, acute sociological analysis of thanks and praise. He judges that temple worship of the city-state in the ancient world (for Israel it was Jerusalem) took over the generic hymns of praise from other high cultures. The hymns of praise celebrated the cosmic sovereignty of God and by derivation affirmed the cosmic authority of the king of a city-state:

From the temple-palace complex at the highest place in the kingdom,
the place nearest to heaven, the order and security ensured by the cosmic

sovereign flowed out into the city within whose walls people were safe under the protection of the king, the vice-regent of the cosmic sovereign. Likewise, order and security flowed outward from the city to the city's cultivated and protected territories in which the king's plows and police held chaos in check.¹

The authority of the king via the temple was sustained by hymns that affirmed the legitimacy of the established order.

By contrast, outside the domain of the city-state and "outside the cosmos" existed a peasant economy that depended on the specific gifts of God. This community rendered thanks for specific acts of deliverance and prosperity. In contrast to the cosmic God of establishment hymns, the God of the peasant community was a personal God, intimately linked to the life-and-death crises of a relatively impotent class of people. This class distinction between the powerful and the vulnerable and their songs is in sync with the study of Erhard Gerstenberger, who has shown how more vulnerable communities articulate God in more intimate personal terms.² This study illuminates the preferred practice of the lyrics of what we might call frontier religion with its more romantic casting in such familiar hymns as "The Old Rugged Cross," "I Come to the Garden Alone," and "I Need Thee Every Hour." The powerful do not need to "cling to the cross" and surely do not need God "every hour." These thanksgiving songs of which Guthrie and Gerstenberger write are quite in contrast to "praise hymns" of both stately cathedrals and contemporary megachurches, in which the singing lacks almost all specificity. In the cathedrals the hymns of cosmic order are impressively regal. In many megachurches they are singularly vacuous, with no story to tell.

The great Psalms scholar Claus Westermann sees the matter in a very different way, a point noted by Guthrie. Westermann regards thanks as subordinate to praise in the Psalms and as characteristically offering less-adequate theology because it "can become a duty," is private and concerns "no one except the one thanking," and can be "something required."³ Thus thanks, in Westermann's purview, runs in the direction of bargaining: "I thank you because you did this for me." There is no doubt that the practice of thanks can function in that way. I would judge, however, that such practice constitutes a betrayal of authentic thanks, because genuine gratitude is not a requirement or duty, nor is it private. It is rather an overflow of appreciation for blessings that can be counted one by one. Thus I conclude that Guthrie is right to suggest that thanks functions with a particularity that draws faith close to lived experience, whereas praise can float off into a vacuous generic enterprise without the embarrassment of the particular. Granted, the two genres and practices of thanks and praise are merged and have coalesced in the Psalms, but it is important with reference to specific psalms to notice and pay attention to the distinction.

I thus ask of Psalm 107, why do we sing it? Why do we not sing it? What is lost when we do not sing it? My answer is that we sing it because we must attest

to our gratitude; we do not sing thanks, I hypothesize, because such thanks is a demanding engagement and requires too much embarrassing awareness that we are on the receiving end of gifts that we must have to live, but do not merit. When we do not sing thanks, we curb our gratitude and keep it private and unexpressed without transformative currency among us. We may thus deceive ourselves into an illusion of self-sufficiency.

The structure of Psalm 107 begins with a more generalizing introduction (vv. 1–3). This is matched by a double conclusion at the end. In verses 33–36, we have thanks voiced for the work of the *creator*, thus showing some affinity to Psalm 104; in verses 39–42 we have rumination on the work of the *redeemer*. Together these two conclusions acknowledge YHWH as creator (vv. 33–36) and redeemer (vv. 39–42), the one who presides over the order of the cosmos and the one who intervenes in the processes of history.⁴ Every zone of reality is credited to the one to whom thanks is rendered. Between this introduction and these two conclusions we have, in verses 4–32, four specific case studies that provide the grounds for gratitude and the enactment of thanksgiving. The generalized introduction and the conclusions depend for their verification on the concreteness of the named blessings and recognized gifts that are credited to YHWH, the giver of all good gifts in the verses in between.

In verses 1–3 we are addressed with an abrupt, plural imperative: “Give thanks!” The verb in Hebrew is *yadah*, which becomes the noun *todah*, “thanks.” The verb *yadah* means to verbally acknowledge, to attest, to confess, to recite the narrative. The noun *todah* means to match the verbal with a material act, thus “thank offering.” The imperative at the outset of the introduction is followed by a double motivation for giving thanks:

- Because YHWH is good
- Because YHWH’s covenantal fidelity lasts forever

The congregation, the plural company addressed by the imperative, is invited to speak out, to “say so.” Thus thanks involves narrative reportage on that for which we are grateful.⁵ The same imperative invitation is more fully expressed in Psalm 118:

Let Israel say,
 “His steadfast love endures forever.”
 Let the house of Aaron say,
 “His steadfast love endures forever.”
 Let those who fear the LORD say,
 “His steadfast live endures forever.”
 Ps. 118:2–4

The address in Psalm 118 is triple: to Israel, to the priestly order of Aaron, and to the ones who fear YHWH. The point in each summons is the same. It

concerns YHWH's *hesed*, YHWH's abiding fidelity that is acted out and made manifest in a particular way. In what follows in our psalm, we will see that the body of the psalm consists precisely in testimony about specific exhibits of divine fidelity. Thanks is "saying so." We sing because we must "say so."

The ones who are summoned to speech are the ones redeemed. The rhetoric identifies the responders in two ways. The "redeemed" are those who have been "bought out" of slavery from which they could not extricate themselves. That same language is used of the exodus, in which YHWH is said to have paid for the freedom of Israel. On the other hand, the "redeemer-avenger" is a next of kin who has intervened to maintain the honor, dignity, and well-being of a vulnerable member of the family. We sing along with and after the emancipated slaves and the protected vulnerable members of the family. That is us! That is why we sing! These emancipated selves and protected family members bear witness, and we bear witness with them, that YHWH, in fidelity, has brought them (and us) to a place of well-being to which they could not have arrived themselves. We sing because we are the emancipated; we sing because we are the protected vulnerable. We are the ones brought to a safe place.

The second act for which thanks is rendered is that YHWH has intervened to "gather." This is a preferred term for bringing exiles home, the ones who have been "scattered" in vulnerability. Thus Isaiah can say concerning eunuchs and foreigners, two categories of the "severely disqualified" from belonging,

Thus says the Lord GOD,
 who *gathers* the outcasts of Israel,
 I will *gather* others to them
 besides those already *gathered*.
 Isa. 56:8, emphasis added

Or in a text that rejoices in the anticipated ingathering:

Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will *gather* you;
 I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
 and to the south, "Do not withhold;
 bring my sons from far away
 and my daughters from the end of the earth—
 everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made."
 Isa. 43:5–7, emphasis added

What we likely have in Psalm 107, then, is thanks for rescue by those who have been displaced and who can remember their vulnerability and the risk of that exile. That same formula of gathering is used in my church, the United Church of Christ, as a summons to the Eucharist:

This is the joyful feast of the people of God. Men and women, youth and children, come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and gather about Christ's table.⁶

Our thanks is for the great *ingathering* of the *scattered* to the God who gathers!

The geography of homecoming has been transposed into the liturgy of homecoming. It is all of a piece. Thanks grows out of lament. And lament characteristically is about loss, displacement, isolation, helplessness, and abandonment. Israel will give voice to its deep need, and so Israel now is compelled to give voice to its newly received well-being that is grounded in God's *hesed*. Thanks requires that we have available in our memory and imagination a "before" of misery or need and an "after" of well-being, and that we acknowledge the agency of YHWH, who brings us from the "before" to the "after." This is this same before-after that is voiced by the father in our best-loved parable:

"But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32)

In the same gospel Jesus offers an inventory of the ways in which he has moved "before" to "after":

"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." (Luke 7:22)

We do not often enough render the before of lament or the after of thanks for the agent of the transformation. That agent who is good and steadfast is front and center in Israel's thanks. It is YHWH, who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. That is why we sing.

With that introduction, the psalm plunges into four concrete testimonies. In these verses those redeemed and gathered do indeed "say so." They have witnessed that the world is open to and impinged upon by the good resolve of the faithful God. Thus thanks attest God as active agent moved by need. This attestation is contrary to the progressives who are embarrassed about an "interventionist God" and is contrary to fundamentalists who have reduced God to a cardboard proposition so bound in pure perfection that there can be none of the adrenaline of compassion. This attestation of thanks yields a world *in need of gifts* and *in receipt of gifts* that, in first-person witness, will not be explained away. Such testimony is always against establishment epistemology that assumes that no new gifts will be given.⁷ The witnesses are not embarrassed by their gratitude and are not intimidated by more "reasonable realities." The witnesses step up to give an account of a transformation credited to YHWH. These witnesses attest to an ancient transformation, but their characterization of that ancient transformation is open enough that we can take their characterization and see that it applies to our own lives as well. We give thanks, as

do they, for the same wondrous turns from “before” to “after.” We sing that inexplicable movement from death to life.

We sing because we can vividly remember that we were rescued from **hopeless wandering in the desert** (vv. 4–9). We sing because we must bear witness to that wonder performed by YHWH for us. As we will see in these four cases, these articulations of thanks are highly stylized. The patterned speech consists in four recurring elements: characterization of the trouble, a turning to YHWH, YHWH’s response, and giving thanks.

First, there is *a characterization of the trouble* to which YHWH responds (vv. 4–5). In this case it is wandering aimlessly in the wilderness before there was MapQuest. This is perhaps the experience of caravan traders who were lost between oases without resources. Their condition was one of weakness from lack of food and water, a slow sentence of death. In Israel’s canonical recital, such an experience is the wilderness sojourn wherein Israel regularly and abrasively disputed the inadequate leadership of Moses and the inadequate food supply from YHWH (Exod. 16–17). In our own contemporary experience, that threatening dislocation may take many forms of lack of resources: perhaps the strange new world of rapid communication, mobile finance, and the disappearance of a neighborly infrastructure. We know, as did the psalmist, about being in a context without adequate resources and an inability to cope in a user-unfriendly environment.

Second, those lost in the desert know what to do. *They turned to the Lord* (v. 6). They engaged in lament, protest, and complaint to YHWH, who should have made better provision for them. In Israel’s initial complaint in the Exodus narrative, the matter is different. There they only “cried out,” not addressing anyone in particular, simply raw bodily distress (Exod. 2:23). But by now Israel knows better. It knows now whom to address in extremity. As a result, even their cry of need is an act of faith. The cry is focused on YHWH, the one who invites engagement and has promised attentiveness. Thus the cry of weakness is a summons that YHWH should enact covenantal fidelity.

The cry is followed promptly by a third element: *YHWH delivered* (vv. 6–7). The line does not even say that YHWH “heard.” YHWH went immediately to transformative action. He “snatched” them out of danger. He plucked them up. He led them back to a safe habitat. This cry of Israel in need and this response of YHWH with succor together constitute the most elemental features of faith. It is no wonder that Karl Barth can say that prayer consists in “simply asking.”⁸ In this case, the “ask” is heard and answered. The cry evokes YHWH’s restorative activity.

The fourth element is *thanks* (vv. 8–9). It is the same verb here as the initial imperative of verse 1. Thanks is to give concrete verbal attestation, to “say so,” to tell aloud what YHWH has done. The subject of thanks is divine *hesed*. The ground of human gratitude is active divine fidelity that is long-lasting and far-reaching, even into the desert. Thanks for *hesed* as covenantal fidelity in verse

8 is parallel to a second theme of thanks, namely, “wonderful works.” The phrase bespeaks an inexplicable turn, a hard thing that human agents could not perform, an impossible action that defies our expectation. It is a turn for which our best term is “miracle,” that is, a show of divine power that refuses all explanatory calculus. Notice, I do not say that it violates natural law. Such a formula is to situate YHWH’s action in our reasonableness. Rather, the act of rescue is an exhibit of YHWH’s capacity to override intractable circumstances in order to create a new possibility for life. Martin Buber judges that such a divine act is one marked by “abiding astonishment,” an event that becomes a defining memory to which the community bears continuing witness.⁹ Verse 9 is a reprise that reiterates the specificity of the miracle (au. trans.):

- “YHWH satisfies the thirsty.”
- “YHWH fills the hungry with good things.”

YHWH acts to override life-threatening scarcity with life-enhancing abundance. This quenching of thirst and this satiation of hunger together sound like the famous sheep of Psalm 23, who receive good pastures and still waters; it is a drama that recalls the ancient miracles of water and food in the wilderness (Exod. 16:13–14; 17:6) and anticipates the revolutionary expectations of Mary:

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
Luke 1:53

The drama of thanksgiving is a wondrous move from *a zone of death* to *a new zone of life*. The move is regularly and paradigmatically enacted in these terse lines (au. trans.):

- “They cried to YHWH” (v. 6)
- “Let them thank YHWH” (v. 8)

YHWH dwells in the midst of crises. It is divine action that is the antidote to crisis. Thanks is not rendered for what is owed and paid. It is not rendered for what is expected. It is rendered in fullness for gifts given beyond merit or expectation. The one who shows up on the lips of Israel is the one who is able to “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20).

We sing because we remember how our prison cells were opened, and we must tell the tale of our emancipation (vv. 10–16). The second episode of gratitude enacts the same four rhetorical elements seen in verses 4–9. The only difference is that the text lingers longer over the initial description of trouble (vv. 10–12). It is prison. The theological reason for imprisonment in verse 11 is that they “rebelled against the words of God,” defying the guidance of the Most High. But such a verdict should not be taken at face value, for such a theological

affront did not, in ancient Israel, merit prison. We may guess, reasoning backward, that prison was a fate for those who defied established authority, who did not pay taxes or bills, who did not show up for work, who defied settled order. Prison is for those who refuse conformity and the expectations of the political economy. In our season of “mass incarceration,” this episode in the psalm is particularly poignant, given the shabby unbearable condition of our prison system.¹⁰ These prisoners in the psalm get “hard labor” (v. 12). When I read that phrase I thought of Nelson Mandela on Robbin Island. He got hard labor. And no doubt the regime would have said that he defied the law of God. But what they meant is that he refused to conform to apartheid, which seemed, for some, to be God’s will. In any case, the ones who speak had “no one to help” (v. 12). That is how it often is with those who end up in prison.

Second, Israel in its helplessness knew an overriding agent of help (v. 13). They cried to the Lord. They were helpless and bowed down in their misery. Even there, however, they remembered that YHWH is the one who hears and saves. So they cried in protest and petition.

YHWH then saved them (vv. 13–14)! YHWH saved from prison. YHWH brought them out. YHWH broke their bonds asunder. The action echoes the exodus when YHWH brought the Israelites out of Egypt. The attestation of deliverance is like the poetry in which the poet declares:

For the LORD hears the needy,
and does not despise his own that are *in bonds*.
Ps. 69:33, emphasis added

He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.

Isa. 61:1, emphasis added

YHWH here and often is on the side of the prisoners against the imprisoning establishment. The opening of the prison is given narrative celebration in the book of Acts:

Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. (Acts 16:26; see 12:6–11)

This God is remembered as having acted against incarceration!

Well, you now know what the first response to the wonder will be: thank YHWH (v. 15)! Thank YHWH for *hesed*; thank YHWH for the inexplicable wonder of fidelity that exhibits YHWH’s power. The response of verse 16 reiterates the wonder in concrete terms: doors shattered, bars cut in two, the

force of God stronger than bronze and iron. It could not have happened, but the witnesses “say so.” They say they walked out, saved. The singing is thanks whereby the wonder of YHWH is enhanced and continued with abiding astonishment.

We sing because we remember our illness from which we were healed, and we must tell about the recovery (vv. 17–22). First, the description of the trouble is graphic (vv. 17–18). We were near death, having lost our appetites and refusing to eat. This commentary insists yet again on the old quid pro quo of sin/punishment that sin causes illness.¹¹ Indeed, even Jesus linked illness and sin so that he could talk and act about healing or about forgiveness; either way the situation is desperate, and the need for restoration is urgent (Mark 2:9). We, of course, think we know better than that; nonetheless we often continue to parse our ailments in that way along with Job’s friends. What counts for these witnesses is not the cause of the illness; what matters is the divine response of healing.

The second element is the same as in the preceding narratives, again quite terse (v. 19). They cried out to YHWH as their only source of help and comfort; what else could they do? By now we know the force and immediacy of the divine response (vv. 19–20). YHWH is ultimately attentive to the cries of need and pain. YHWH saved! The laments of Israel evoke divine engagement. Israel knows that and so cries out not only in urgency but with confidence. YHWH saves; YHWH heals; YHWH rescues from total obliteration. The final element of the sequence is now expected by us: thank YHWH (vv. 21–22)! Thank YHWH for active *hesed*; thank YHWH for miracles. Thank YHWH for an act of sovereignty whereby the negations of death are nullified. That move has now become routinized in this patterned speech.

In this third episode, however, there is a significant variation from the first two cases. In verse 9 in the first episode the conclusion was a reiteration of the rescue:

For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things.

In verse 16 in the second episode, the conclusion is again a reiteration of rescue:

For he shatters the doors of bronze,
and cuts in two the bars of iron.

But not here! If we had followed the pattern of the first two episodes, verse 22 would have said,

[He] forgives all your iniquities;
[he] heals all your diseases;
[he] redeems your life from the Pit.
Ps. 103:3–4

But we have an alternative in this third conclusion. Now the invitation to thank in verse 21 is instruction to *offer* and to *tell* in verse 22 (emphasis added):

And let them *offer* thanksgiving sacrifices,
and *tell* of his deeds with songs of joy.

The “offer” is a material presentation. On the thank offering, see Leviticus 7:11–18, included in the inventory of Israel’s sacrifices. In that inventory the term is *todah*; but the *todah* of offering is not completed without the telling, without the narrative that traces the drama from need to well-being, from cry to being heard.

Harvey Guthrie, following Gerhard von Rad, has seen that the *todah* becomes, in the reiterative practice of Israel, a normative recital.

It is probably evident by now . . . , that the cultic roots of the process [of credo recital] undoubtedly lay in *todah*.¹²

Thanksgiving becomes settled and routinized enough to become credo. But Guthrie goes even further:

We must finally understand, if we are to understand the Old Testament at all, that contact with God is made as a people lives a *todah* life, not as the finally true, abstract dogma is apprehended by the human mind.¹³

For good reason, Guthrie eventually is able to trace a line from *todah* to Eucharist, as Eucharist is not only a freighted rite but a way of living in gratitude. These psalm speakers, through the wonder of their healing by God, were inducted into such an alternative life of gratitude, a life given sacral specificity by the offering rendered. I remember, do you not, as a child when we had a “thank-offering box” from church. In it we put pennies to do good. But this *todah* is not about pennies. It concerns a material offering of significant commodity value. So in Psalm 116 one can sense the gladness of serious giving:

What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones. . . .

I will offer to you a *thanksgiving sacrifice*
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

in the courts of the house of the LORD,
 in your midst, O Jerusalem.
 Praise the LORD!
 Ps. 116:12–15, 17–19, emphasis added

In verse 15 the term “precious” is used for the life and death of the faithful in the eyes of the Lord. The term means “rare” or “weighty” as a gem, or splendid. As the faithful are *precious* to YHWH, so the offering back to YHWH must be *precious*. Thanks cannot be nickel-and-dime. Thus Micah muses about an appropriate offering:

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
 and bow myself before God on high?
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
 with calves a year old?
 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
 with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
 and what does the LORD require of you
 but to do to justice, and to love kindness,
 and to walk humbly with your God?

Mic. 6:6–8

We of course know this text. But we have not, I think, taken it as a question about how to render thanks, how to quantify gratitude. Micah’s conclusion, beyond commodities, is that God will have all:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
 that were a present far too small;
 love so amazing, so divine,
 demands my soul, my life, my all.¹⁴

Or as we used to sing at youth rallies,

Give of your best to the Master;
 Give of the strength of your youth;
 Throw your soul’s fresh, glowing ardor
 Into the battle for truth.¹⁵

Thanks is giving back what is precious along with talk. Thanks requires the best in response. We miss the richness of thanks when our gift is parsimonious or when it is given without talking. It is the force of our commodity society, opposed to gratitude as it is, that has shrunk our thanks to embarrassing modesty. Commodity ideology does thanks on the cheap, without a narrative,

for narrative specificity about shipwrecks and illness violates the symmetry of the market, in which there is no free lunch from anyone, not even from God. Serious *todab*—generous materiality and testimonial narrative—is a defiance of commodity ideology, an acknowledgment that our lives are situated in a different zone from the predominant zone of scarcity, greed, and anxiety.

It does not take very long to forget our ailment or shipwreck or emancipation from prison. It does not take much time for us to accept our new status of well-being and imagine that it is not a gift but simply a legitimate status that we ourselves have produced. It does not take long to conclude, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth” (Deut. 8:17). But gratitude, practiced as material generosity and narrative concreteness, keeps us from forgetting the gift of generous restoration. George Stroup specifies the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude:

Gratitude, or human thanksgiving, is never a fully adequate response to the prior giving of God. . . . There is no giving in human experience that is parallel or analogous to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Because Christian gratitude is a response to the prior giving of God, it is different in kind from all other forms of gratitude. To claim that gratitude is the creaturely counterpart to God’s grace is to claim that gratitude to God is shaped by the grace, the divine favor, the good will that calls into being and makes it possible. Gratitude, therefore, that is appropriate to God is a thanksgiving that reflects the surprising, costly, free gift that is its source and object.¹⁶

We sing because we know the threat of chaotic water, because we sense the waters of chaos that lash at our zones of safety and security (vv. 23–32). We sing because we have been exposed to the waters of chaos, and we did not drown. We did not drown because we found the faithfulness of YHWH able to curb and contain the violent threat. And we must “say so.”

This characterization of the storm at sea is longer even than the narrative of sickness healed (vv. 23–27). The speaker knows fully about the “mighty waters,” the surge of chaos, and dares, in retrospect, to identify even surging chaos as an action of YHWH, as a “wondrous work” (v. 24). There is no doubt here that even the tsunami that threatens gives evidence of the mighty power of YHWH so that the storm evokes “How Great Thou Art.” The verbs in these verses exhibit the actions of three agents:

- YHWH commanded and raised.
- The stormy wind lifted up, mounted.
- “They” melted their courage, reeled, staggered . . . like drunkards.

The collage of disturbing verbs—“commanded,” “raised,” “lifted,” “mounted,” “melted,” “reeled,” “staggered”—betray massive upheaval and helplessness.

The outcome is that they “were at their wits’ end” (v. 27). More literally, “All their wisdom was swallowed up!” Their wisdom, their rational capacity, their common-sense management had failed. Everything is out of control.

But at wit’s end, given failed wisdom, they take one more action: “They cried out to YHWH” (v. 28, au. trans.). They cried out to the *storm maker* who may yet be the *storm stiller*. Such a petition is not an act of wisdom. It is an act of instinct for those schooled, as were these Israelites, in the ways of YHWH. This urgent petition is a fallback in trust beyond all management skills or conventional rationality.

And, says this resolved evangelical witness, “He brought them out” (v. 28). The verb is the primary Exodus term. This is the God who has been managing the surging waters since Pharaoh died:

The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exod. 14:21–22)

Chaos is no match for this sovereign creator who is the emancipator. It is no wonder that they said in Mark 4:41, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The psalmist anticipates the evangelist in testimony:

He made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
v. 29

The outcome, the alternative to chaos, is quiet and safe harbor:

Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
v. 30

The God who stirs up chaos is the God who stills chaos and creates safe space for life.

What could they do but thank (v. 31)? What could they do but give narrative account and affirm it with a serious material gesture? We thank, yet one more time, for divine *hesed*, one more time for “wonderful works.” The wonderful work is safe harbor that trumps the preceding wonderful work of the storm. He has got the whole world in his hands! And then, as in the third episode, verse 32 as a conclusion for the fourth episode also offers a variation. Now, instead of a reprise of the restoration that has concluded earlier episodes, we have a surge of gladness that ends with hallelu-jah. And since it is performed by the congregation amid the elders, this surely is a Presbyterian action! It takes a village to give thanks! It requires many, many voices to express adequately the

conviction that the world is safely held by the Lord of chaos, king of kings and lord of lords . . . hallelu-jah!

We sing in the retrospect of this psalm in its two conclusions (vv. 33–42). We sing because we have now witnessed the creator who redeems, who makes and then remakes, who saves and rescues and heals and emancipates. We sing because this awesome, reliable agent deeply redefines the world. A flimsy world is for anxious management. But this world of deep trust requires not simply management; it evokes voiced active gratitude.

We sing the first conclusion of verses 33–35 because we see the wondrous power of God. Global warming causes deathliness and requires reparation. But hidden in these processes is the creator God who turns rivers into deserts (we see that!) and who turns deserts into good arable land. This is the God who presides over the agricultural enterprise of sowing, planting, reaping, and harvest. This conclusion alludes, does it not, to the cadences of the Genesis creation. It concerns “blessing” and “multiply”:

God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” (Gen. 1:22)

The world teems with sustenance!

We sing the second conclusion of verses 39–42 because we know about economic disparity and the endless contrast between haves and have nots. The God who presides over creation, it turns out, is the Lord of the economy. Right in our face—and in our singing—are the diminished, the lowly, those who live in oppression, trouble, and sorrow. And in an anticipation of social upheaval, the powerful are to be given over to contempt. So the psalm anticipates Mary in her song of social inversion, an inversion that comes for the benefit of the marginalized:

He raises up the needy out of distress,
and makes their families like flocks.

v. 41

The inversion of the economy is not everywhere welcome. The “wicked” who were out of sync in Psalm 104 are the ones who are stunned (v. 42). But those allied with torah, the upright, are glad and know the inversion is coming. The one who stills the storm is the one who provides means for those without.

The final verse of the psalm is a reader’s guide added by a librarian (v. 43). Don’t be stupid! Get wise! Notice . . . pay attention. When we notice and pay attention, we can everywhere see YHWH’s *hesed*:

- YHWH’s *hesed* for those lost in the desert
- YHWH’s *hesed* for those held in prison
- YHWH’s *hesed* for those sick to death
- YHWH’s *hesed* for those storm-tossed in chaos

The world is a vast arena for divine *hesed*. It is no wonder that that world constitutes a venue for thanks rendered as narrative and as generous materiality. Thanks voices divine *hesed*. Where there is no thanks, God's *hesed* will be unnoticed.

From the old precious inheritance of the church, we get a grateful response of thanks at the end of the devastating Thirty Years War. I treasure it with peculiar passion because it became the anthem of my tradition of evangelical German pietism:

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
 who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices;
 who, from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way
 with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
 with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
 and keep us in God's grace, and guide us when perplexed,
 and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God, who reigns in highest heaven,
 to Father and to Son and Spirit now be given:
 the one eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore,
 the God who was, and is, and shall be evermore.¹⁷

For ample reason this thank song was evoked at the end of the war with a horizon of thanks and gratitude as large as creation and as deep as the triune God. It is matched by a new hymn that paraphrases Psalm 111:

A grateful heart is what I bring,
 a song of praise, my offering.
 Among the saints I lift my voice;
 in you, O God, I will rejoice.

Your name is known in all the lands.
 You feed the poor with gentle hands.
 Your word is true, your works are just;
 in you, O God, the faithful trust.

With saving love you set us free,
 and still you dwell in mystery
 with wisdom none can comprehend.
 Your praise, O God, will never end.¹⁸

This hymn, to be sure, mixes thanks and praise. In that it is faithful to the tendency in the Psalter. It has enough specificity, however, that we may count it as

a voice of thanks. It is titled “A Grateful Heart,” an act that resists and subverts the primary claims for the self-sufficiency of commoditization, reason enough to sing it! A grateful heart is an alternative to the “hard heart” that a thankless culture will inevitably evoke.

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