

Uber God
 Reading from the New Testament: Romans 5:1-8
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 116

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Rare is the one who has not felt the heaviness of that fog, the bleakness of that chasm floor, the loneliness of trauma as you slog through the mire, disoriented and disturbed by signs that the crowd has moved on from your consuming tribulation, and the sense that even God is preoccupied with other concerns. Scripture doesn’t try to evade those tangibly cruel chapters of life. In fact, the Bible is rather candid about those experiences in the lives of its authors and characters, from the psalmist’s cry of desolation — *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest* — or the psalmist’s transparent anger — *Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!* — or the prophet’s lament — *Cursed be the day on which I was born ... Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?* — And let us not forget Jesus’ sense of abandonment on the cross — *“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”* that is, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

No one who reads the Bible can ever claim — *They just don’t understand what I’m going through!* Remember the old Nike ad? *Bo knows*

football. Well, an honest reading of scripture reveals that the Bible knows suffering and the Bible knows you. If you ever feel that your dark valley is unique, a pain unfamiliar to anyone, read from Ecclesiastes and wake up — *“So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”*

The dark valley of shadows is real and daunting. Faith is never a denial of suffering’s visitation upon us. Faith is the way through to the other side, whether that other side be the sunrise at the end of the valley, or the next hilltop looking back at the valley floor, or that eternal kingdom where all that is broken is made whole.

Our psalm today addresses the important question of what the path will be once we’ve climbed or been lifted up out of the valley. The cancer patient rings the bell after the last treatment. What now? The dividing wall of hostility has been breached between mother and daughter, father and son, that catharsis of seeing one another sans cynicism and at least without animosity if not with full-blown mercy. What now?

A job has been secured averting that looming financial cliff; the threat of violence has passed; a child is born after having almost given up hope;

you walked away from the terror of the accident with just a few cuts and bruises. What now? Whether you hiked up, rode the cog wheel train, or were lifted up on eagle's wings, the dark valley is behind you, so what now?

The Psalmist knows: *"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live."* This is a psalm of thanksgiving. It is thought to be originally written for individual use, but over time it was also inserted into the liturgy of the Passover meal in remembrance of God's deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian captivity, even though that is not alluded to in the psalm itself. The psalm begins with a declarative statement — *I love the Lord* — and proceeds to unpack what that means to the psalmist.

I love the Lord — The psalmist readily confesses that this may not have always been the case. The psalmist has emerged from what was a most dark and shadowy valley. *"The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol*(which is the realm of the dead) *laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, I pray, save my life!"* The psalmist had not been shy in articulating his distress — *I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'; I said in my consternation 'Everyone is a liar.'"* Obviously, the

psalmist was not a fun dude to hang out with in those dark days. The psalmist was no life of the party. Rather, the psalmist was the priest of buzzkill, a funereal presence sucking the joy out of any gathering.

I have to admit that have I yet to be smitten by the cinematic genre of the zombie. Yet, even so, I think I understand the metaphor of a walking dead. So many people seem to be living but not alive. They're breathing, they're functioning at some level, yet it seems the pall of death hangs over them. There is no life, no vitality, no thrill of anticipation, no spasm of joy, no compassion. There is only existence, monotony, irritation, animus. Existence is toil and trouble. Blame is the weapon of choice. A smile is anathema. My Old Testament professor, James Mays described it this way: "The living are not dead, but death conditions their living."

And let's be honest, men are the worst. Well fed, well housed, financially secure, the beneficiaries of maximum patience from those who care for them in spite of their perpetual moodiness. And yet, fed by a diet of rage radio and blame broadcasting, they seethe at the world and snarl at those who love them convinced everything is tainted and everyone, apart from them, is wrong. You want to shake them, Dude, wake up! There are

plenty of things to be concerned about in this old world, but in your particular setting, in your particular sphere ... you've got it pretty good. I'm not sure your life spreadsheet qualifies you to use the voice of Ecclesiastes or the Psalmist: *"So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me." "I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'; I said in my consternation 'Everyone is a liar.'"*

I think the world, specifically this present first world, needs the remedy of my favorite bumper sticker: Less barking - More wagging. Maya Angelou said, "Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good." That's what the psalmist has come to understand.

"I love the Lord ... For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling." Reading this Psalm, Old Testament scholar James Luther Mays identified at least 4 things that love does. *Oh Mabel, there he goes, talkin' about love ... again. Didn't we just go over this last week?* Yes, we did talk about love last week, and though I can't remember the scripture I selected for next week, I'm guessing that the subject of love will come up again. Why? Because it is the most important

word you will encounter in this life. *But haven't we exhausted the topic? Haven't we already learned what love is?* Well, if you read the news, listen to the neighborhood gossip, or go to a family reunion, you'll have to admit we haven't learned all that much about love yet.

Granted, love is a tricky subject to address, particularly here in the South where the word is tossed around like *Sweetarts* and candy hearts. *L... u...v you! — Don't you just love it; isn't it just to die for? — Ooo, I just love those sweet little chubby cheeks.* There is nothing wrong with that, but it is important to remember that love is so much more profound and complicated than sweet emotions. And let me tell you as a one time student of Dr. James Luther Mays, the Cyrus McCormick Professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary, noted Psalms academic — he was no gushing bundle of sweet emotion. He was a serious scholar's scholar, and thus as intimidating as God to a seminary student.

I chuckle when I hear folks dismiss religion or faith as anti-intellectual or naive. They obviously never met folks like James Luther Mays, John Leith, Izzie Rogers, or Walter Brueggemann, folks whose intellectual depth and wisdom would be unsurpassed by any scholar in any discipline. Mays

understood that a deep dive into the Scriptures and a critical understanding of the authors' concept of love was no less significant, and likely of much greater consequence, than the study of particles racing through an accelerator or an economist's dissection of market economies. Don't get me wrong, Dr. Mays was kind, but the dude was a serious scholar. Let me put it this way, I don't see Dr. Mays waving his arms and singing praise songs in a service down the road. Yet, he clearly understood in his reading of the Psalms what love is. In Psalm 116, Mays discerns that gratitude fueled love does at least 4 things.

First, love "calls on the name of the Lord." We've all been guilty of that social faux pas when encountering friends or acquaintances and forgetting to introduce the person we are with. It communicates a dismissiveness of the other, a sense that they don't matter to the encounter, or worse that they are an embarrassment to hide. Isn't it always important to dignify the presence of those to whom you say you belong, to acknowledge that any encounter would be less without them? Love always claims the other, wants others to know you belong to that person. Lord knows I understand that. 34 years ago yesterday, I intuitively learned the value of staying one step behind Donna in most encounters. *Ya, it's pretty cool. I'm with her.*

Knowing what God has done for the psalmist, the psalmist understands the privilege of the Lord's presence. *Ya, it's pretty cool. I'm with big G.*

Second, love finds rest in the beloved. Introverts know this. Rest is found at home with those you love and who love you. The heavy protective armor is laid aside. They get you, and actually choose to be with you, are comfortable around you, just as you are comfortable around them. And guess what, when we're doing what God intends for us here, this is that kind of place of rest.

Let me tell you what happens here on occasion. There's a meeting, and the participants are actually enjoying it. It's a meeting! The word *enjoy* is not typically descriptive of such occasions. Yet, this is different. They are at ease with one another. There is laughter and banter along with the excitement of getting something meaningful done together. And when the meeting concludes, a stay-at-home mom or dad with little children at home with a sitter or a spouse will laugh and say, "We can't be done yet, not until the toddlers have been put to bed." They love those children with their whole heart, would not hesitate to sacrifice their life for their child's sake.

They understand the privilege of it all. But the 24/7 ultramarathon of childcare is exhausting, and in this one moment, on this one night, with these church folks, there is a unique rest to savor that is different from other social occasions. There is a greater spiritual depth of mutual understanding that you're not going to get in the Instagram zone.

In a chaotic world there is rest and refuge, renewal and strength in worship, in Bible study, in fellowship, in service. The psalmist says, "*You have loosed my bonds. 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.*" Some of you know, and I hope more of you will discover this to be a place you understand as home. Such experience doesn't diminish but only enhances the home where you sleep. The psalmist says, "*I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.*" Dostoyevski proposed that, "*...Everyone needs a somewhere, a place he can go. There comes a time, you see, inevitably there comes a time you have to have a somewhere you can go!*" Every time we gather for worship, we are saying this is that *somewhere*.

Third, love lives always as if in the presence of the beloved. *“I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”* Do you have someone in your life who you love and respect to the point that it consciously alters your behavior, your mindset? Their place in your life actively influences the decisions you make, the priorities you set, the tone of your voice, the things about which you care deeply. Intrinsic to the code you live by is the desire to never disappoint them, never do something that you would have to spin or explain away with an excuse to them. And you live by that code whether you are in the same room or across the globe from them. The phrase, *no one will ever know*, is foreign to you because you would know and it would break your heart to disappoint them. Such is the perspective of the psalmist toward God. Knowing he is never hidden from God, the psalmist vows to honor God, which brings us to the fourth thing love does.

Love fulfills its vows. Dr. Mays proposes that a servant’s life is defined by belonging to another. Promises made are promises kept. *I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.* As we profess in our church’s *Brief Statement of Faith*, “In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives.”

At its core, love is gratitude. The Lord delivers the soul from death, our eyes from tears, our feet from stumbling. Therefore, let us walk before the Lord in the land of the living. That's what love does. Amen.