

Psalm Seventeen

Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.

Guard me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings,
from the wicked who despoil me,
my deadly enemies who surround me.
They close their hearts to pity;
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.
They track me down; now they surround me;
they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.
They are like a lion eager to tear,
like a young lion lurking in ambush.

Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them!
By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,
from mortals—by your hand, O LORD—
from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.
May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them;
may their children have more than enough;
may they leave something over to their little ones.

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

With family in British Columbia, we typically try to travel out west at least twice a year. Whenever we do, I try to fit in a hike or two. This being an interest shared by some of my in-laws, I am usually accompanied. Most of the time, these are relatively straightforward excursions, along well-marked and regularly-trafficked trails. There are all of the usual concerns and precautions, but seldom have I felt truly unsafe. The closest I've come, during any of those times, has been in the form of second-hand reports. A story about a climber who fell nearby. An avalanche warning. Signs posted which warn about a cougar that had been spotted recently. Or, once, hearing that hikers up ahead had just seen a bear cub step out in front of them.

I have to say that most of my life, thus far, has felt like that. Relatively straightforward, along well-marked and regularly-trafficked trails. Difficult, monotonous, and painful at times, to be sure, but seldom have I felt truly unsafe. Rarely have I felt truly threatened.

Because of that, I have often found psalms like this one somewhat difficult to relate to, or inhabit, as prayers. There may be some relationships that have broken down in the past, violent outbursts from people I was providing care to, or angry words from people that I've generally upset, but I wouldn't say that I have any enemies. Not in the way that the writer, here, seems to have had.

And so, for the most part, psalms like this one have seemed like a second-hand report, as it were. And unlike the specificity of wildlife sightings, or warnings about hazardous climbs or snowfall, the details of the dangers the writer faced here remain somewhat vague, being veiled in poetic language. We are told that the threat, in this case, was that of adversaries. Foes with closed hearts and open mouths who are set on death-dealing and destruction. People who, like animals, circle round and crouch nearby (vv. 9-12).

While it may be the case that, for many of us, today, these seem like second-hand reports, we can recognize them as the experiences of traveling companions and trail-mates - *those who've walked ahead of us, or who tread paths elsewhere*. Because while it may seem like a strange way of speaking to some, we do hear reports like these relayed to us, both by saints in centuries past, or those in other places today. We can hold and pray these words with them, and for them.

And because there have been times in our lives that have come close, or may yet come close. Meghan and I once stayed in an off-the-grid cabin in the New Mexico desert. Miles from the nearest highway, let alone anything else, we were as isolated as we've ever been. Along with the rental agreement, we were required to sign a waiver acknowledging the various risks of a wilderness stay. We were young, and not worried. These were second-hand reports after all, we thought. Except, when, along one of our afternoon walks, I nearly tripped over a rattlesnake. My stomach sank and I nearly jumped back, as I saw it, and heard it shaking. In that moment, I experienced something of the panicked urgency that runs through this psalm like a current. The sudden alarm, anxiousness and alertness that we see in these lines. *What do I do? Do I yell at Meghan, or whisper and point? Do we stand still or run away? Do we call for help? Is there anyone who could even help us, if I did?*

Maybe there have been times in your life when you've come close, or times when you might yet. Times when the threat, as the writer describes it here, becomes real. When you feel exposed to danger, susceptible to suffering, or vulnerable to attack. When, walking along mindlessly, you are suddenly stopped in your tracks, as second-hand report now becomes something you encounter yourself. When, in a moment, the words of this otherwise foreign prayer now become your own.

In those times, we might indeed follow the lead of the writer, here, who does call for help, and is confident that such a cry will be heard. Along with them, we can look to our God of steadfast love, who guards and shelters us. (vv. 6-8). The God who, even in those times might hold our steps fast to the path, and keep our feet from slipping as we carry on along the trail (v.5). - NS