

Psalm Thirty-Four

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

In my work with people with cognitive disabilities, I have often supported people who struggle with sensory processing and integration. For some of them, a “normal” environment filled with day-to-day sights and sounds can at times result in sensory overload. For others, their bodies actually seek more stimulation and experience intense discomfort when that is not available.

So, within the field, there has been a growing movement towards developing dedicated sensory rooms, which can be tailored or adapted to individual needs, personalities and attributes. They often include tactile, visual, and audio elements. Scents, as well as foods and drinks, can also be incorporated if they have a therapeutic function. People are invited to enter in these rooms on their own, and to explore, and to find calm.

As a formal practice, sensory rooms began emerging in the 1970s. The concept originated in Holland, with the spaces originally referred to as “*Snoezelen Rooms*.” *Snoezelen* is a word that was made up specifically for that purpose, by combining the Dutch words *snuffelen* (meaning to “smell,” “search” or “explore”) and *doezelen* (meaning to “rest” or “relax”).

As I read it, Psalm 34 is like a kind of sensory room. As readers of this Psalm we are invited to explore and to rest. We are prompted to enter in and to look at (v.5), listen to (v.11), and taste and see God (v.8). Of the five senses, only smell and touch are not mentioned in these lines. As with my work, the writer who leads us in is one who seeks to support and to help us discover something that will either provide us spiritual stimulation or calm, depending on what we most need.

The writer, whom we are told is David, is one who has sought such a place for himself, having undergone a series of unsettling experiences. As is often the case, we are not provided specifics - though there are mentions of fear (v.4), shame (v.5), trouble (v.6), pursuit by enemies (v.16), and suffering from a soul in anguish (v.18).

The Psalm does, however, include a superscription which mentions a particular episode from David’s life – a time when he was on the run from Saul. In that story, David seeks asylum in the Philistine city of Gath. His identity, however, is quickly discovered by the residents and officials there, leading him to fear from his life again. In response, David “*pretended to be mad when in their presence,*” and was thus able to flee to safety (1 Samuel 21:13).

It is difficult to know what to make of David’s imitative behavior in that narrative and the language that has been used to describe it. In some ways, we might find both to be upsetting and offensive, given the experience of those living with mental illnesses and cognitive disorders. While it is presented as a humiliating act of desperation, it leads to troubling questions about identity and appropriation.

With that in mind, I would also note that, in drawing the comparison that I have, here, my intention is not to in any way claim the identity or experience of the people I support, but to honor them, and the work that is being done by many to support them.

However we view it, the connection with the story of David’s flight from King Achish is meant to give a concrete context for the primary message of this Psalm. We are invited to reflect on the reality that, when called upon, God brings people out of experiences of distress and into places of refuge and safety, (vv. 8, 22). “*He answered me and delivered me*” (v.4b). “*The Lord hears and rescues them from all their troubles*” (v.17). - NS