

Psalm 138

August 17, 2023

A Sermon for Every Sunday

Amidst a culture of critique and despair, we are invited to notice God's activity and give thanks.

Cover your ears. Because this Psalm is full-throated, wide open, unabashed, and unashamed thanksgiving to God.

The Psalmist does not hold back from opening their heart and mouth wide to sing God's praise – before the gods, before the kings of the earth, before their wrathful enemies, and before anyone who might just be within listening distance.

God has heard the call of the Psalmist and answered. God has landed on the scene to strengthen the very essence of the Psalmist's being.

God's greatness has not meant distance.

God's hand has protected and guided the Psalmist in the midst of trouble.

Though the Psalm does not give us any detail about who or when or where or what or exactly why...all the things we want to know... this is a major key, raucous, full-volume song.

So much so, that if you are like me, it creates some dissonance.

If you've ever emerged from the darkness of a movie theater into a parking lot bathed in the sun, moving from darkness to light with no sunglasses, you might understand this Psalm.

If you've ever had a young child shaking you awake, ready to run at 500-miles-per-hour before the sun has come up, or a dog excitedly wagging their tail while you are still 97% asleep, you might understand this Psalm.

This Psalm seems like sunshine and cotton candy. It is unbridled excitement. But that's not the world we usually encounter. We live in a day and age where we are taught to see only the worst and voice our complaint. I think about my own first formation in seeing the worst: the Muppet Show. I know that sounds odd, but it's true. If you remember the duo of Statler and Waldorf (for those of you who don't remember, go ahead and Google them), you'll remember the two puppets who were old men. They sat in the balcony of the theater, watching all the acts during the Muppet Show. Every now and then, the camera would cut to them after an act and they would interject by heckling the performers, hurling their critiques, and raining down their criticisms. It was funny, of course, and not at all serious. But this was a powerful formation for how to be in the world. Statler and Waldorf taught some of us at an early age how to criticize, how to be cynical, and how to look for the worst in the world.

That's not the only formation, of course. For any of us who still watch the evening news, we know that the news is 28 minutes of doom and gloom from around the neighborhood, the country, and the globe. And then after those heartbreaking 28 minutes and the last commercial, we get a minute and a half of something heartwarming so that we don't entirely give up hope on humanity. And let's not get started on social media culture and how it's cultivated our worst impulses to find and amplify the worst, to criticize, to tear down. So it's no surprise that when we encounter Psalm 138's unbridled song of thanksgiving, that it can feel a

little too syrupy sweet. Major key in a minor key world. Because we've been shaped to dwell on the bad news rather than seek out the good. It's a whole lot easier to focus on the worst and complain than it is to find the good and give thanks.

In 2018, Diana Butler Bass released a book entitled *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. Bass discovered the power of gratitude many years ago when she had a conversation with a friend not long after she had been fired from her first college teaching position. In the middle of their conversation, the friend responded that he had learned gratitude from a hard situation. Bass asked: "You can learn gratitude? Isn't it just a feeling? How do you do that?" The friend responded, "Tell me one thing you're thankful for. Just one." After struggling to name something, anything, and as her mind filled with fears and struggles, she finally blurted out, "My friend Julie." The friend said, "And that's the beginning. Think of one thing each day. Do that. Just one. Write it down in a journal," he said. Bass set to it. She began to fill her journal. At first it began with complaints, but she was faithful in finding one single, solitary thing every day for which she was grateful. Slowly, she says, her journaling began to transform. In addition to the complaints and struggles, she found that she was able to name more and more ways to give thanks as the days went by. More and more things for which she was grateful. She says she found what she calls "days of outright surprise and joy, appreciation for simple pleasures, for the kindness of others, for the richness of life."

Now we might indict Bass with a Pollyanna attitude. Surely, she is sticking her head in the sand. Or, she gets to wax eloquently on gratitude because of her privilege as a white, educated woman of means. Surely, she's avoiding the real effects of trauma or the systemic conditions that inflict harm. Maybe she's guilty of "always looking on the bright side of life" or "finding silver linings" or "keeping a positive attitude." Maybe we should chalk it up to the newly named phenomenon of "toxic positivity": only displaying positive attitudes and pushing down any negative emotions as a coping mechanism. But that's not the case. She's not ignoring the tragedies of life. She's keeping her heart open wide enough to find the good. Bass acknowledges that there is a psychological benefit to the practice of gratitude. Psychological professionals she talked with attest that the practice of gratitude builds resiliency for when hard times come. This is an important feature of gratitude for the world we inhabit. But there's something more at play here. She says that when she started to look at her past and present and paying attention to what she could be grateful for, she began making sense of her life and the world differently. In a keen insight, she says "Seeing with soft eyes opens a wider vision of present circumstances, lessens fear and anxiety, and alerts us to new possibilities for our lives."
(2x)

She doesn't express this in theological language, so allow me to do some translation. I think she's saying that when we begin to pay close attention to how and when God's presence, grace, and gifts show up in our lives – even in the midst of acknowledging our heartache and pain – we are transformed. In learning gratitude, we are awakened to God's activity and to God's future for us and our world. When we develop a habit of attending to the ways that God shows up, we acknowledge that God is still speaking, still caring for us, that God is worthy of our thanks – and that a different world is possible.

The Psalm-writer knows this truth – as does the community that collected and organized the Psalms. You see, this is a community that knows and remembers its own trauma. While Psalms 138 and 139 are oriented to thanksgiving – singing in a major key, its neighbors sing a different song. Flip just one Psalm back to Psalm 137 and you find a heartbreaking recollection of the trauma and dehumanizing experience of the Babylonian exile: “By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” Psalms 140-143 are psalms of lament. “Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.” No sticking your head in the sand here. No toxic positivity. The Psalms do not ignore the whole range of life.

I wonder if the original writer of this Psalm had been among those in the Babylonian exile, among those who sang Psalm 137, but is now back home in Jerusalem. If so, I wonder what the Psalmist had written in their gratitude journal during those days of exile. As we open their journal, we read the entry for Monday: Our captors are cruel. Another day and I am unbelievably heartsick for home. But I saw God’s hands in the sky that turned orange-pink after the rain. Tuesday: I wasn’t sure if I could go on another day. Everything that could go wrong did. And then, I experienced the warm, divine embrace of my friend. Surely it was God who held me as I wept in their arms. Wednesday: I saw a glimmer of God’s future in the wide, hopeful eyes of the children playing and laughing in the street today. Thursday: God’s care was in the meal we shared with friends tonight. As we ate, one of our elders told the story of God’s power in the Exodus from Egypt. It was as if God held each of us in our seats as we leaned back and listened together. Friday: Rest is here. We can breathe, if only for a moment. Your steadfast love and faithfulness never fails, God. Your outstretched hand is in our very breath.

So when the Psalmist finally returns home with a gratitude journal full of the smallest glimmers of God’s presence, grace, and gifts, the Psalmist has a wider vision of a new and different present. Because they had noticed flickers of God’s hands in the midst of an awful life situation, they are now ready to proclaim the fullness of God’s care in THIS moment.

This is the same kind of gratitude that I hear in the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” otherwise known as the Black National Anthem. As the song traces out the indignities and tragedies that African Americans have experienced, and as it recalls collective survival and determination, the song’s final verse turns to gratitude and a call for God to answer. It simultaneously remembers with thanks and invokes God’s protection and support as the words proclaim: “shadowed beneath thy hand (did you hear that?), may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land.”

Amidst a culture of endless critique and despair, the Psalmist invites us to notice God’s presence, grace, and gifts, and to be grateful. So I have been looking for God’s hands recently. I have been trying to unlearn what I’ve learned and begin to cultivate gratitude. I have been

trying to look at the world with “soft eyes.” I am trying to attune my mind and my body to notice the places I have felt God’s outstretched, delivering, guiding, supporting, and creating hands. And in turn, I am giving thanks.

I see the pictures of children and youth all ready for their first day of a new school year. And I’m grateful with my whole heart that God is raising up compassionate children who want to create a better world than the one they know now.

I hear the voices of teachers who are up against all sorts of obstacles but eager to go another year. And I’m grateful for the ways that they are looking at the beginning of the year with hope and expectation that they can make a difference in our world. God, I sing your praise for teachers.

I listen to the sound of live music and I marvel at a God who endows us with creative gifts. God, your steadfast love never fails.

I bear witness to a community that is rallying around a 41-year old friend who has had a sudden Stage IV cancer diagnosis. God, when one of us calls out in times of need, you form communities of care to show up and to hold us.

I recall the crowds protesting another senseless murder, giving thanks for those who heed the Spirit’s prompting and are emboldened to move us from complacency, to call us to accountability, and usher us into deeper paths of love and justice. God, the kings of the earth hear the words of your mouth.

I talk with the group of pastors who tell me that they know the odds are against them...against their small churches that everyone says should be dying...but that you are showing up to do new things as they take risks together. O God, you regard the lowly!

Whether I’ve failed yet again as a spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, teacher, or co-worker, I sense God’s hand in the forgiveness extended out toward me. God, you preserve me when I am my own worst enemy.

I wonder where you sense God’s hands stretching toward you. When you begin to look around with “soft eyes,” I wonder what you notice. And I wonder what you will write in your gratitude journal. Even when it’s so, so hard and maybe you are ready to give up. Even when you’ve learned grumbling more than gratitude. Despite all that is going on around us, I wonder where God is showing up when you call...and what praise and thanksgiving you can lift up. If it’s just one thing, even the smallest thing, I wonder what stories you have to sing about God’s deliverance. And I wonder how you will sing now...today...about God’s steadfast and unending love.