

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 12, 2021**

**“Walk Before the LORD in the Land of the Living”
Psalm 116:1-9**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Psalm selection this morning is very short, only 9 verses from Psalm 116...yet it tells a story of death and life, death and deliverance; it tells a story of grace and gratitude, of the grace of God to rescue and the grateful response of the one who has been rescued. And as we explore this psalm, I'd like to invite you to reflect on the ways that you can connect—in your life of faith, in your own struggles, in your own memories—with this story of death giving way to life with God.

Our psalm is song of thanks, a “hymn of thanksgiving” (Dahood), sung by someone whom God has rescued. Rescued *from what*? Well, it's clear that the psalmist had faced some “predicament of life-threatening trouble” (Mays)—but we don't really learn the details. Some interpreters think it may have been about a serious illness (Dahood); others wonder if this was about war (cf. Alter) or maybe some sort of captivity (cf. Kraus). We're not told these specifics in the psalm, but there's a clear theme to whatever it was the psalmist faced—and *that theme is death*. The psalmist came face to face with death, with Sheol. (In the Old Testament, ‘Sheol,’ as you may remember, describes something like an underworld—or, maybe better, that place where death reigns.) Listen to what the psalmist remembers:

“The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish” (v. 3).

It's a frightening image of becoming entangled in death, maybe reminiscent of Jonah (cf. Roberts), who prayed:

“The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head” (2:5).

It reminds me of an experience, that maybe you've shared, of swimming in a lake as a child, and feeling my feet (seem to) get tangled up in reeds and underwater debris... Or as Jason Byassee, who teaches at the Vancouver School of Theology, puts it: “The evil envisioned [here] has a tentacle-like character, stretching up from below and entangling, dragging downward.” It really is a frightful image.

This is about far more than death, in the narrowest sense of the word as the cessation of life: this isn't just about mortality, but about the wider power of death, the power that diminishes and oppresses life. The powers of death can be felt painfully among the living: think of how death has, at times, threatened your life, or even reigned in your life—or in the lives of those you love... Addiction, depression, disappointment, all these can insert death into the midst of life. And it's that power of death that the psalmist has experienced and remembers: as one biblical scholar puts it, here death is imagined “as a sphere of power that invades the realm of

the living and entangles life. Where distress and its tears, and anguish and its stumbling, grasp the living, one is already in the sphere and power of death” (Mays).

And when the psalmist became trapped by those awful “snares of death,” facing the powers of death, what did the psalmist do? Blink and you’ll miss it: it’s only one verse... Powerless before the powers of death, ensnared and entangled by death, the psalmist did one thing: the psalmist called out to God!

“Then I called on the name of the LORD,”
the psalmist remembers,

“O LORD, I pray, save my life!” (v. 4).

In this desperate moment, as the psalmist felt the tentacles of death coiled all around, the psalmist cried out a short, direct prayer (in Hebrew, it’s only four words): “O LORD, I pray, save my life!” And the entire psalm is a testimony to God’s faithful—and, in the fullest sense, life-giving—answer to that brief prayer.

Somehow—and again, we don’t really know the details—but somehow, it seems, the psalmist experienced God’s rescue, as God delivered the psalmist from the powers of death. And, having been rescued by God, the psalmist loves God—not sparingly, not dutifully—but joyfully: “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” (vv. 1-2).

Now, for the psalmist, life and gratitude, being alive and being thankful, these combine joyfully as the psalmist sings to a faithful God. The psalmist is alive—and thankful to be alive; the psalmist is living—and grateful to be living. Having come so close to that awful power of death, the psalmist wells up with gratitude, overflows with thanksgiving, for life, for the gift of being alive:

“Return, O my soul, to your rest,”
the psalmist sings,
“for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
I walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (vv. 7-9).

Jason Byassee—the theologian in Vancouver I mentioned before—he writes about how this entire psalm announces death giving way to life. “The theme of the whole psalm,” he writes, “is the undoing of death.” Death had entangled the psalmist, ensnared the psalmist, but—by the grace of God—the powers of death are unwrapped, unfastened, untied. And for the psalmist, this means joy *in life*—in this new chance at being alive, at living: “The psalmist is ecstatic to be alive,” Byassee writes. The psalmist is “surprised and delighted to be alive.” He adds: “Religious faith has often been associated with a world-denying sort of escapism.” Yet, he writes, “The psalmist insists on the goodness of being alive. Death is the Bible’s great enemy. And God’s victory over death is complete—just not yet consummated. The upshot is that life is God’s gift to be enjoyed.”

This psalm tells the story of death giving way to life, of death and deliverance, of experiencing the powers of death then celebrating—gratefully—God’s life-giving rescue... So where does the psalmist end up, at the end of our Psalm in Unison? At the end of our selection, what’s the psalmist doing—and where? The psalmist had been ensnared by death, fastened to death, tethered to death...but God broke the power of death, undid death, and allowed the psalmist to do what? To “walk before the LORD in the land of the living”—or, as one translation renders it poetically and beautifully, to walk “in the Fields of Life” (Dahood). The psalmist discovered, in the face of all the powers of death, that God comes near with the power of life—and now the psalmist can live, really live, in God’s presence, “walking” in God’s presence “in the Fields of Life.”

And reading this psalm in the church, it takes on new layers of meaning as we reflect on it and pray it in and through Christ. As Christians, we bear the name of the one who also felt “[t]he snares of death encompass[ing him],” who also knew “the pangs of Sheol la[ying] hold on him,” and who likewise “suffered distress and anguish” (v. 3), throughout his life on earth and especially on Good Friday; one who also “called on the name of the LORD” (v. 4); one who also rejoiced on Easter that God the Father “ha[d] delivered [his] soul from death” (v. 8); one who also now, and eternally, walks “in the Fields of Life” (v. 9, Dahood). The pattern of this psalm—death and deliverance, death and rescue and joyful life—this was the experience of the psalmist, and this was also the shape of Christ’s life and death and new life. And I wonder whether this psalm also, in some ways, gives expression to the shape of your life—and your life of faith?

When have “[t]he snares of death encompassed [you]; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on [you]” (v. 3)? When have you “suffered distress and anguish” (v. 3)? Maybe for you, it’s in the past, when the powers of death threatened you—and maybe you, like the psalmist, cried out to God, who “delivered [your] soul from death, [your] eyes from tears, [your] feet from stumbling” (v. 8). And now, today, you’re alive—thank God!—and you can “walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (v. 9), with joy and gratitude to the one who delivered you from the powers of death to the joy of life.

Or maybe, for you, these struggles are not in the past but in the present. Maybe “[t]he snares of death [are] encompass[ing you]” now, “the pangs of Sheol la[ying] hold on [you]” now; maybe right now you’re “suffer[ing] distress and anguish” (v. 3). And if so, then might you—like the psalmist—call on God with an expectation of God’s kindness and God’s mercy, God’s presence and God’s deliverance? To any in the midst of struggles, may this psalm be for you a song of hope, a pattern for hope, a witness to how God can yet undo the entangling of death, so that—where there was death—there may be instead life and gratitude. For those struggling in “[t]he snares of death” now, may you find hope to look toward that day when the present struggles will become part of the story of God’s rescue; may you look toward that day when, because of God’s kindness, you too will be able to pray with the psalmist:

“For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.

I walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (vv. 8-9). Amen.