



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Washing Over the Shores of Heaven

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Do you ever wonder what your priests were like as young people growing up? For me, even as a child, I believed in calling out things I thought were wrong with the sermons, the theology of the hymns, even the announcements.

It's no wonder then, throughout my life, my family had to sit in the very back row of the church because I was always whispering to anyone who would listen to me arguing about those things where I disagreed.

For example, when I was about eight years old my priest's sermon was about the parable of the mustard seed that tells about great things that come from small beginnings. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell this parable about a tiny seed that can grow into a huge tree and shelter birds in its branches. My priest's sermon, however, was about how delicious mustard is so that heaven must be great. Eight-year old Sam and Sam twenty-five years later thinks that's remarkably weird and bad theology.

And I believe we should call attention when we spot things like this from religious thinkers.

The tumultuous changes and hardships of the world right now invite plenty of anxiety – a global pandemic that is getting worse in so many places, climate change, protests calling for racial justice. Some people may think God is punishing us, or that God has abandoned us, or sometimes even that God is saving others, but punishing us specifically.

We are celebrating the holiday season at the end of a tough year. How do we think about Christmas when we're this anxious? How are we to be joyful, hopeful, grateful, and watchful after months of protests, politics, disagreements about masks, and learning new ways of doing school, work, or church? We've had months of expecting it will all get back to normal soon, with no real normal in sight.

Let me tell you about one of the psalms that never comes up in the lectionary – Psalm 28. It is not a happy psalm. It is a heavy lament with enemies, evildoers, and pleas to be spared from being dragged away with the wicked.

And here's the important point. Several verses break the pattern of laments. These vivid laments suddenly become, "Blessed is the Lord. . . my refuge and my shield. . . the saving fortress of God's anointed. . . Deliver your people! Shepherd and carry them for always!" (Psalm 28:6-9)

Religious commentators leap at the chance to suggest these verses were added later to fix the lament and show how God came through. And yet, this is when and why we need to argue with bad theology. Nothing from the Hebrew language or history of the text suggests that the praise and thanks were added later. These biblical commentators think it is weird to be anxious, frustrated, even suffering and still find ways to celebrate or be thankful.

We know the opposite is true. We know from our own experience, especially this year, that moments of desperation or deep longing are exactly when Christians have turned toward and leaned on stories of God's faithfulness and love.

We know that every generation of downtrodden brothers and sisters in faith has found things to bring them hope and joy – has found things to celebrate and be thankful for – in the midst of even great, sweeping change and anxiety.

Some of us have loved ones we will never see again, and we live in the hope of their Resurrection in Jesus Christ.

Almost all of us have loved ones we will not see over the holidays, and praise God we have the sense to keep one another safe.

Every one of us will know some degree of reasonable anxiety or suffering. We can and should admit when those thoughts and feelings bubble across our minds and hearts. We just shouldn't believe those feelings are all there is.

We don't want to think like these biblical commentators unable to imagine a complex emotional response to the complexities of this world. We **want** a complex emotional response to the world!

- We want to see, in every darkness, some promise of light.
- We want to feel, in every suffering, some future hope of healing.
- We want to know that our lament will wash over the shores of heaven and break against the rock of God's salvation.

In the midst of everything we know about the world right now – or about our own lives right now – we also know what the author of Psalm 28 tells us: God will deliver, God will bless, God will shepherd and carry us forever.