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(RE) ORIENTATION Psalm 33

Once upon a time, way back in the 90s, I remember going to the mall. Like, for fun. With friends. These were the days before cell phones. One of our parents would just drop us all off and say, “meet me here by these doors in three hours.” And off we’d go to shop for low-rise bell-bottoms.

I’m totally dating myself here. Do malls still exist? Does anybody still go there?

But—as some of you remember—one of the first things you’d do when you walk into a mall—especially a new mall, especially a big mall—is find the map by the entrance. All the stores and hallways and levels plotted out. And somewhere on that map, a red dot. YOU ARE HERE.

It helped you catch your bearings. Helped you figure out where you were, and where you needed to go.

Maybe you’ve explored new places this summer. National parks. Amusement parks. Campgrounds, forest preserves, museums, zoos. Maybe you’ve found yourself pausing for a moment or two in front of a map to find your bearings.

You are here.

(Ah)

Then, with a bit more clarity, and peace, and renewed sense of adventure and purpose, you can set out for where you want to go.

Some of you have likely heard this before, but....

Walter Brueggemann, in his writings on the Psalms, suggests that there are three kinds of places that human beings find themselves in—and that there are, correspondingly, three general types of psalms.

Sometimes we find ourselves in places of *orientation*, where everything makes sense. Life is orderly, predictable, comfortable. Psalms of orientation echo this sense of order, grounding it in creation and in the acts of God in the past. They paint a picture of the good life, the way of wisdom. They trust in the goodness of God.

Sometimes, we find ourselves in places of *disorientation*. We are disoriented by tragedy, by illness or grief; by evil done to us—or by evils that we ourselves have committed. Psalms of disorientation cry out with raw human emotion, from the depths of our souls:

How long, O Lord?

Why do the nations rage?

Have mercy on me, O God!

(That rawness doesn't always come across in our worship—in our public confessions and laments—but we find ample examples of it in the Psalms.)

And sometimes, says Brueggemann, we find ourselves in places of *reorientation*, on the other side of the lament or the liminal space. Perhaps our circumstances haven't fully changed, but we've gained perspective. We are able to look back and give thanks for what God has done. Psalms of reorientation are psalms of thanksgiving and praise.

You can make a solid case for Psalm 33 as a psalm of orientation, especially given the creation language here.

Psalm 33 opens with a call to worship—which was our call to worship this morning.

“Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous;
Praise the Lord! Sing to him a new song! Shout for joy!”

There's an exuberance here that is not part of our typical worship at Hope (when's the last time you actually *shouted* in worship?). We will keep stretching ourselves, and singing new songs, but you still might have to step into other cultural or denominational worship spaces to get a sense of the joy and energy implied in these opening words.

Who is called to praise? The righteous, the upright.

If you look back in your Bible, you can see how the end of Psalm 32 is echoed in these words. We often only look at one Psalm at a time, but there is always a vibrant conversation going on between the Psalms that helps us understand them better.

Psalm 32 is a psalm about confessing sin, finding forgiveness, and learning to walk in wisdom.

And so when Psalm 33 mentions “the upright,” it does not mean those who are without sin (as if those people exist!) but those who in humility recognize their sin, name it before God, and receive God's grace. “It is fitting for the upright to praise him.”

Why?

“For the word of the Lord is right and true.” The psalmist calls forth praise first and foremost because of the character of God. These verses read like a litany of divine attributes. “He is faithful in all that he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice.”

My students sometimes think that justice is a political word, that it belongs to a particular political ideology, and then they read that version of justice back into the scripture. No. In scripture, justice, rightly understood, belongs to God. God loves to do what is right and fair and good and true and all that God says and does comes out of his unfailing love. His heart for wholeness. His *hesed*.

In the end of Psalm 32, God’s unfailing love, God’s *hesed*, surrounds those who trust in him. Here, the earth is full of it.

Red dot. You are here. You are surrounded by, immersed in *hesed*. Whether or not you even realize it, you live in a world that is full of the “never-stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever” love of God.

It’s orientation language. We enter this psalm through praise, and we’re given a map of a beautiful, orderly world, created and sustained by a loving God.

Psalm 33 testifies to God’s omnipotence and omniscience. God is all powerful, over creation, over the nations, over armies—even over death. And God is all-knowing, seeing every heart, every deed, and every plight. His eyes are on those who fear him. This is not an acrostic psalm, but with 22 verses that parallel the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the scope of Psalm 33 is intentionally comprehensive. This is who God is. This is why you should praise him.

But there is something... unfeeling? matter of fact?... about much of Psalm 33. It almost reads like a list of facts. We miss the personal voice, the sense of story, that we see in other psalms. And without that—maybe this is just me—it’s hard to inspire exuberant praise.

What if we came at it this way? ;)

We have by now surpassed 150 days of the war in Ukraine.

I don’t know this because I’ve been counting. I confess that I haven’t been following the conflict very closely—at least not with the gravity and attention it deserves—and I have often failed to keep Ukraine in my prayers.

But I recently stumbled across a writer on social media—a friend of a friend of a friend. A Christian woman in Ukraine. And she has been counting the days.

When the war began, she felt a deep need to pray—to lament and intercede—but how do you pray when walls are literally crumbling around you? So she turned to the psalms.

A psalm a day.

And—like a preacher, holding the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other—this woman has faithfully posted her prayers and reflections each day since February 24. 150 days. 150 psalms.

Sometimes, in her posts, the psalm fades into the background. Sometimes some other scripture or song lyric gives better voice to the cry of her heart.

But often—surprisingly often—she finds some congruence between the words of the psalm and the needs of the day. Expressions of righteous anger, cries for justice, praise for acts of deliverance and grace, the tender witness of creation in times of turmoil, words that open up a new perspective.

The psalms have helped to hold her steady—and hold steady her faith—in these dizzyingly difficult days.

Parts of Psalm 33 may seem dry and removed to us, but here are the words in Psalm 33 that stuck out to this dear sister in Ukraine:

“The LORD foils the plans of the nations;
¹¹ But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever.

No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
¹⁸ But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
¹⁹ to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.

²⁰ We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

She has been living this psalm. She has been waiting, through action and intercession, for God’s power and God’s justice to show up and intervene in Ukraine.

We wait in hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield.

You can make a solid case for Psalm 33 as a psalm of orientation. But you can also enter into Psalm 33 as a psalm of reorientation. A path to finding God and place and peace after—or even in the midst of—a period of disorientation.

And isn’t that most of us, in some way, right now?

The rate of change over the past couple years has not been sustainable. We've navigated numerous iterations of work life, family life, schooling, and public health, all amidst social and societal dynamics that are themselves disorienting. The dust is settling now (I hope) but let's be real: many of us are still recovering. We're still trying to find our bearings.

And maybe that's true of many spaces right now:

Our institutions.
Our economy.
Our nation.
Our denomination...

The time seems ripe for reorientation. And maybe that's where Psalm 33 can help. Because I don't think this is a psalm for those whose lives are comfortable and predictable. I think this is a psalm for those who long for a renewed sense of peace and order. Those who need a fresh imagination for the power and presence of God.

In a word, those who need hope.

Brueggemann puts it this way:

"Psalm 33 is a new song that sings about a new world. It is a world about which Israel always sings, the world that Yahweh is now creating. It is a world ordered by God's justice over which God presides with faithfulness. To such a world the only appropriate response is confident and sure praise to the one who makes that world available to us."

A disciplined song of joy, for all the reasons that Psalm 33 provides, can help us find our bearings. It gives us words to remind ourselves—and each other—that this is the world we live in. It invites us to reorient our lives around God as the highest good.

And as we sing, the truths begin to echo in our heart and mind and voice, in our families, our communities, our church, and beyond. The songs capture our imagination and deepen in our convictions. "Worship indeed is world-making." (That's Brueggemann again).

And that's not just for Psalm 33. All of the psalms, each in their own way—and especially together—are world-making. They simultaneously tell us where we are and empower us to live more fully in that world. A world where God reigns, and shalom is coming.

I don't know what August means for you this year, but as many of us start saying goodbye to summer and make preparations for a new academic year—I invite you to consider making the psalms a regular part of your rhythms.

Perhaps a psalm a day.

Because the psalms will orient you, give voice to your disorientations, and help reorient you to the world as it actually is.

It is not despair that wins. It is hope and joy and song.

Therefore “we wait in hope for the LORD.”

There’s a shift that happens in the last verses of Psalm 33. Having rehearsed (rather impersonally) many truths *about* God, it’s personal now.

*We wait. We trust.
Our help and our shield.*

Those who entered in song (V1-2) have found faith and belonging in the community of God.

And as the psalm draws to a close, God becomes personal too. Reflecting on all God’s attributes and actions leads the psalmist directly into prayer. “May *your* unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you.”

You are here. However disorienting the rest of your life may be, you are here. Held in *hesed*, anchored in hope.

That’s worth singing about.