



26 October 2024

Pentecost 23 (Psalm 34:1-8)

**Choosing life**

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Two weeks ago I reflected on the first part of Psalm 22, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ‘Where are you, God?’ I love the way the psalms carry raw emotion and seem to give permission to tell it like it is, whether it is to express tough feelings or to articulate joy and hope. Today’s psalm portion is of the latter kind, offering thanks and praise to God. We need both lament and celebration, complaint and praise.

The context of this week’s psalm, Psalm 34, is told in the superscription, some words before the psalm which depict David in a drastic situation, “when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away,” they say. In the midst of adversity the psalmist, seems to find praise and joy. David praises God for being there when he was in a life-threatening situation —perhaps his encounter with King Achish of Gath, later remembered as Abimelech.<sup>1</sup> This gives us a setting to ponder the meaning and intent of the psalm.

Nancy deClaissé-Walford

notes that Psalm 34 is also an alphabetic acrostic. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Acrostic poems were the works of highly skilled literary artists and functioned in ancient Israelite literature in a number of ways. Acrostics were most likely memory devices to aid in recitation; in addition, literarily, they summarised all that could be said or that needed to be said about a particular subject, [in this case fear and praise] summing it up from alif to tav, from A to Z.<sup>2</sup>

The other day I woke in the middle of the night anxious. In my mind, I decided to search through my day, through my life for those things for which I am grateful, and to list them. This shifted my mood and my attention and made for a more positive experience. I prayed my thankyou’s then meditated before falling asleep again.

One of the InterPlay<sup>3</sup> practices which is important is ‘looking for the good’, even when relationships are challenging, not criticising or judging each other but looking for the good in each other. One of my friends, a doctor found this difficult. ‘Aren’t we meant to critique so that we can do things better?’ He asked. Once he immersed himself in this practice though, he realised that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-psalm-341-8-2>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> <https://interplayaus.com.au>

this way worked too. 'Looking for the good' seems to help people to grow, seems to give people the courage to seize the day. 'Taste and see that God is good'. That is the invitation as we reflect today.

Where do you see the good? What do you want to thank God for, to celebrate? It is the little things, the dailiness and the way that we see them that changes the world.

Young holocaust victim, Etty Hillesum, as she sat at her desk in Amsterdam preparing herself for her journey to Auschwitz, thought of the jasmine that no longer bloomed outside. And she realised that spring remained inside of her, and it would continue even in the barracks.

"Somewhere inside of me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as it ever did," she wrote. "And it spreads its scent round the house where you dwell, oh God.... I bring You not only my tears and my forebodings on this stormy, grey, Sunday morning, I even bring you scented jasmine. And I shall bring you all the flowers I meet along my way, and truly there are many of those."

When she wasn't offering jasmine to God, she was offering God a song.

On the train to Auschwitz, she threw a postcard out of the window, which was found by farmers who mailed it for her. On the postcard, she wrote, "We left the camp singing." She entered the gas chambers on November 30, 1943.<sup>4</sup>

She also wrote,

"You have made me so rich, oh God,  
please let me share out Your beauty with open hands".

"My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your Heavens, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer."<sup>5</sup>

How can this be, gratitude in the face of death? How does this speak into your current situation? Does it resonate or challenge? It is certainly a counterbalance to the lament of Psalm 22 we heard a fortnight ago.

Like Etty Hillesum, the writer of Psalm 34 invites praise and thanksgiving:

I will bless God continually: God's praise shall be always in my mouth.

Let my soul boast of God: the humble shall hear it and rejoice.

O praise God with me: let us exalt God's name together.

Why?

For I sought God's help and God answered: and freed me from all my fears.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.boundless.org/adulthood/giving-thanks-in-a-concentration-camp/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://faith.yale.edu/media/a-prayer-for-thinking-hearts>

God was there, with the psalmist  
and in verse 6 we hear:

Here is a wretch who cried, and God heard me: and saved me from all my troubles.

saved me from all my troubles? Doesn't feel like it,  
then, verse 8

O taste and see that God is good: happy are they that hide in God! (or we might say, happy  
are they that are enfolded in God's embrace)

Even in difficult times, there is always something to be thankful for, something to praise God for,  
perhaps just a tiny thing, a pansy growing through a crack in the concrete, the smile of the person I  
passed on my walk, or that I can smell, that I can taste and see.

How do we live into this, I wonder? How can this attitude of gratitude support us?

Psalm 34 encourages us to experience God for ourselves and to open our senses and know the  
goodness of God that is all around us. 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is good'. Rest, savour, look,  
listen, touch, taste, turn your attention to the good.

Rachel Naomi Remen declares:

Blessing life may be more about learning how to celebrate life than learning how to fix life. It  
may require an appreciation of life as it is and an acceptance of much in life that we cannot  
understand. It may mean developing an eye for joy. It is not necessary to sit in judgment in  
order to move things forward, and our anger may not be the most potent tool for change.  
Most important, it requires the humility to know that we are not in this task of restoring the  
world alone.... blessing life is about filling yourself up so that your blessings overflow onto  
others<sup>6</sup>.

In her book 'My Grandfather's Blessing' Remen tells the story of when she was a little girl sitting at  
her parents' kitchen table with her grandfather, memorising phrases from his old books and  
discussing the nature of life. She was only five or six at the time and when her attention wandered,  
her grandfather got out a tiny little goblet he had given her, which came from Russia. He would  
search around the back of the fringe and pull out some special sacramental wine. He would pour a  
thimble full into her tiny wineglass, and then some into his beautiful silver ceremonial chalice  
which had been handed down for generations. Before they drank, they would always make a toast.

At that stage Naomi only knew the ritual of singing "happy birthday" and lighting some candles  
but this was much better. They used the Jewish toast *l'chaim* which her grandfather said meant "To  
life!". He always said it with such enthusiasm. Then little Naomi asked her grandpa, "Is it to a happy  
life, Grandpa?" "No" he said "it's just to life."

At first, this did not make a lot of sense to little Rachel, and she struggled to understand his  
meaning. "Is it like a prayer?" she asked uncertainly.

"Ah no, Neshume-le," (that's what he called Rachel. It means something like 'precious little soul')

He said, "We pray for the things we don't have. We already have life."

"But then why do we say this before we drink the wine?" He smiled at his granddaughter fondly.

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<sup>6</sup> in Rachel Naomi Remen, 'My Grandfather's Blessing, stories of strength, refuge and belonging'

"Grandpa!" she said, suddenly suspicious. "Did you make it up?" He chuckled and assured her that he had not. For thousands of years all over the world people have said this same word to each other before drinking wine together. It is a Jewish tradition.

She puzzled about this last for some time. "Is it written in the Bible, Grandpa?" She asked at last. "No, Neshume-le," he said, "it is written in people's hearts." Seeing the confusion on her small face, he told her that 'L'Chiam!' meant that no matter what difficulty life brings, no matter how hard or painful or unfair life is, life is holy and worthy of celebration. "Even the wine is sweet to remind us that life itself is a blessing."

Naomi reflects later, 'It seems remarkable that such a toast could be offered for generations by a people for whom life has not been easy. But perhaps it can only be said by such people, and only those who have lost and suffered can truly understand its power.'

'*L'Chiam!* is a way of living life. It seems less about celebrating life and more about the wisdom of choosing life.'

... Despite loss and pain and difficulty, I have seen a number of people choose life again and again, even when they are dying. The same joy Rachel saw in her grandfather's eyes is there in them all, is it Meister Eckhart's spark?

'Taste and see the goodness of God', Perhaps you would consider choosing life!