My First Rodeo

Psalm 4

1 Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.
2 How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah
3 But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.
4 When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Selah
5 Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the LORD.
6 There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"
7 You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.
8 I will both lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

The Word of God for the people of God!

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Are there any rodeo fans here? I'm not sure why I relate rodeos to this Psalm. I haven't been to a rodeo in over 50 years. But I grew up next to that culture.

I remember my first rodeo. I was eight or nine. My grandmother took us every year to the Ft. Worth Exposition and Fat Stock Show. It still is the oldest continuous running livestock show and rodeo in the country, dating back to 1896.

Like Willie Nelson, "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys." When we went to those rodeos, there always was an appearance by a famous movie cowboy. I remember seeing Roy Rogers and Rex Allen.

Years later, I graduated from high school and went to Barber College and worked my way through undergraduate school and the first few years of marriage as a barber. We lived in Mesquite, Texas, a Dallas suburb, and the home of the Mesquite Championship Rodeo. It played every Friday night from April through October and attracted some of the leading rodeo cowboys across the country.

The owner of the barber shop where I worked was a huge rodeo fan. In fact, he owned a beautiful sorrel Quarter Horse—a champion horse—that he rented out to some of the local cowboys. The rodeo was owned by Jim Shoulders and Neal Gaye, both of whom were world champion rodeo cowboys and when they were in town, they got their hair cut in our barbershop, as did most of the local cowboys. So, I was more or less saturated with rodeo culture.

We attended the show occasionally, cheering for our favorite cowboys. When a bull rider or bronc rider lasted the full 8 seconds, or a calf roper tied his calf in

under 8 seconds, his victory felt like our own.

We like it when our team wins. It makes us feel like winners, even though we never sat on a bull or stepped on the playing field or court.

The fourth Psalm expresses the joy of one who has experienced victory firsthand; but it's a mystery. It's one of 34 unattributed Psalms, and names no specific events or people, so we have no points of reference. But there are some clues.

It's written in verse form, and the word, "Selah" at the end of the 2nd and 4th verses is probably a musical notation. It comes from a Hebrew word that means to "raise voices in praise" or "make the instruments louder," so, corporate worship may be indicated. It may have been a victory march, or maybe like a school fight song.

But although the Psalm begins and ends with thanksgiving and praise, the middle verses let us know that the victory came hard. Some scholars speculate that this is a Psalm of David following the insurrection and death of his son Absolom.

There are hints of institutional and systemic injustice: apparently some false accusations by those in power: (verse 2) ***How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?***

The nature of neither the conflict nor the victory is shared, but the credit is given to God.

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! "Right:" frequently translated "justice"—God of my justice—God who is my vindication.

You gave me room when I was in distress. "You gave me room..." There's a sense of being able to breathe again, of having space to think. We all tend to overschedule ourselves, and we allow our children to do the same. It's stressful; unhealthy, hard on relationships. But today I'm thinking specifically of teachers. More than a dozen teachers are regular participants in our congregation. Teachers are consistently and presumptuously pressed into "extra" work (without "extra" compensation), work that places extra stress on the teachers and their families. But, again, we all experience stress. We long to experience the Psalmist's calm sense of being able to lie down and sleep in peace.

Verse 6 says the victims are many, and the Psalmist's plea to the powerful and the wealthy is an appeal to a sense of community, to a change in behavior, a call to think about what they're doing and put things right, for the benefit of everyone, not just themselves.

And (still in verse 6), when the Psalmist says the many pray, "***Let the light of your face shine on us...***" the collective 'us,' in context, suggests there's a connection between God's light breaking into our communities and the presence of justice and truth and thus peace. Community... One wins, and everyone feels like a winner.

In the Resurrection, God raised Jesus, and the message of Easter is that because Jesus was victorious over death, we all are winners; we all are awarded the "Crown of Righteousness." In the Resurrection God puts gladness in our hearts.

But it would be too easy—it would contradict to our experience—to blow off our troubles with a trite "God is in Control…" like a naïve Pollyanna who just wants to pretend that all is sweetness and light. That's not our experience.

There's a whole religious construct that challenges the Pollyanna approach. It's called Theodicy, and asks, "If God is in control… if God is loving and just and merciful, why is there suffering? Why is there injustice?" "Why does a loving God allow suffering?" to which the truly faithful response is, "Why do ***we*** allow it?"

I do not question that God is in control. The question is, "How does God exercise control?" I simply do not believe that God is some cosmic "Wizard of Oz" who sits behind a curtain of clouds pushing buttons, throwing levers, and pulling strings to make things happen in specific ways at specific times to specific people.

It's one thing to put our trust in God; it's another thing altogether to sit back and expect God to make everything right for us, so we don't have to get dirt under our fingernails.

A more fruitful way of putting it is that "God empowers us…"

We like our team to win because it makes us feel like winners while we're sitting in the stands. On December 28, 1975, the Dallas Cowboys were playing the Minnesota Vikings for the divisional championship. Down 14-10, with 32 seconds left to play and 50 yards from the goal line, it didn't look good. Then came the famous "Hail Mary" pass from Roger Staubach to Drew Pearson. The Cowboys won, and thousands of fans sitting on couches at home celebrated as if they had won the game!

Jim Shoulders was the winningest rodeo cowboy of all time, with 16 world championships, including World All-Around Rodeo Cowboy five times, World Champion Bareback Rider four times, and World Champion Bull Rider seven times. Fans cheered when he was introduced, and went nuts when he stayed on a bull for 8 seconds, celebrating as if they had won the event.

When he came into our barber shop and sat in my chair… when I was cutting the hair of a world champion… somehow I felt a little bit more important.

But all these wins are vicarious wins. We feel like winners because our favorite team or our favorite Olympic athlete or our favorite rodeo cowboy wins.

The message of Easter is that in the Resurrection we are not vicarious winners. We are winners, not because God stepped in and did God's intervention thing and fixed sinful humanity and therefore we all get to go to heaven, but because ***"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in***

you." **(ROMANS 8:11 NRSVUE)**

We sell ourselves short if our faith is only about getting to heaven. Most Christians in most denominations are comfortable with that part of the faith. In the Judeo/Christian Scriptures there is infinitely more about living lives of justice and mercy and humility before God here and now. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

And throughout those same Scriptures is the promise that God is with us, empowering us to manifest God's presence—to be God's kingdom—on earth as it is in heaven.

- *In creation God put God's image and likeness into humanity.*
- *At the table on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus told his disciples, "All these things that I do, you will do; indeed, you will do greater things than I do."*
- *At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they discovered abilities that had always been in them and only now were released.*
- *In Paul's epistles to the churches in Corinth and Rome and Ephesus he lists specific ways God's Spirit, instilled in humanity at creation, empowers and releases human abilities that previously had gone undiscovered in the predictably human tendency to pray for God to intervene and fix our mess.*

We're no longer spectators in the grandstand or on our couches in front of the TV. Like the Psalmist, this time, we're in the game.

Invitation to the Table

In today's Lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke, the risen Christ has appeared to the Disciples and after the touch and see moments we read, "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Can you imagine the intensity with which the Disciples were paying attention?

Jesus concludes the mind-opening moments with, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations."

That's what we do around this table: we remember that Jesus suffered; his body was broken and his blood was spilled. But we also remember that God raised him, as Peter proclaimed in his Pentecost sermon, "to become both Lord and Christ."

At this table we proclaim that in Christ our own minds are opened, and we see "beyond the mind;" we understand faith in a completely different way; we see life in a way we've never seen before.

Jesus closes this teaching by reminding the Disciples "You are witnesses of these things, and see I am sending upon you what God promised." Later, it will be Luke that reports the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

As we gather at the table today, remember: our minds are opened; we are God's witness, empowered by God's Holy Spirit and nourished by this feast. Come and receive the Gifts of God.

Pastoral Prayer

Risen Christ, the light of your love shines on, and in that light, we see and recognize the places where you are present. As the bewildered disciples pondered the stories of your appearance, you penetrated the darkness of their fear and doubt with your word of peace. You showed them the horrible marks of evil pierced into your hands and feet. You opened their minds to understand that to conquer death, you only have to die.

Open *our* minds today, as you opened theirs. Increase our understanding, and bring to us the sense of your living presence as we go into this new week. Renew in us the faith you call us to have, the faith that is not afraid to reach out in your name and to share the treasure you have given us.

Thank you for the witness of your servants yesterday who participated in the "No Cost Rummage Sale;" those who planned and prepared, those who donated items to share, those who organized them and displayed them, and those who came and participated both in the offering of helplful items and in sharing words of grace to enrich the lives of so many in our community who struggle to make a life for themselves and their families.

Bless our congregation with vision for the future and insight from the past. Guide us each day as we minister to one another and to the world you created, the world you so loved that you gave your only Son to show us your way of abundant life. Help us each day to bear witness to your name and grant us grace to perceive and accept the Spirit that empowers and enables us to be faithful to your calling, in the name, and in the power of the Spirit of Christ. Amen.