

Sheer Grace: Our Dwelling Place in All Generations

The psalter, the songs of the assembly, begin as habit but become habitat, a place in God we cannot lose.

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As always, it's a privilege to be with this group and a humbling experience to address you. I am grateful for the invitation. You should know, however, that my credentials as a speaker at this year's institute are suspect. For one thing, I have no birth certificate. (That's true. It's a long story about clerical inefficiency in the state of Wyoming in the latter days of World War II. I had an "interesting" time getting my first passport.) More to the point, we've been singing, pondering, and celebrating the Bible's magnificent, old hymnbook, and while my academic area is Bible, and most narrowly the Hebrew scriptures, it's the narrative portions into which I've poured nearly all of my efforts over the years, not the psalms and other songs. I am a paid-up member of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, but I assure you, I'm in the organization's little-known "speaking-only" membership category. I do not play a musical instrument in public. One night a year, on Christmas Eve, in the darkness near midnight, when all of Lorraine Brugh's student singers have left town, I join the choir.

Nevertheless, I've been given the last word among the plenary and workshop speakers on the Psalms, and as one commissioned to do a kind of latch-note, I'll do my best to honor the contributions of the speakers who have already addressed us, and then we'll pause, reassemble here, and do the most important things: rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

We have had such rich fare up to now—old and new ways to sing the psalms, and presentations that have opened us to the depths of the riches we find in them. About the only kind of psalm rendition we haven't heard or sung is what the Irish band U2 does with Psalms 40 and 116. But to duplicate that, it takes a stadium filled with 20,000 fans who sing along. (You can hear it on the web. It will give you gooseflesh.) We've had some spontaneous music among us as well, if not unexpected. Several cell phones have praised the Lord in our midst, as did the familiar music of Microsoft as Dirk Lange wrapped up his presentation yesterday. Also, the siren that sounded yesterday morning as Susan Briehl began her homily on John 20 here in the Chapel during the university's Morning Prayer service reminded us that the world has its songs, too.

With Father Michael Joncas, we examined some of western Christianity's ways of setting psalm verses to music we can sing. Some of those ways made the psalms sing a new song by restoring their ancient qualities—helping us to sense, for example, the rhythm of the Hebrew text. Other settings fitted the ancient poetry into the music of 21st century musical drama.

But all of them made these old psalms the songs of the church, made them sing a new and different song—a Christian song. Which reminds me of an old maxim my teacher Robert Bertram was fond of stating. "Christians are a people with a curious habit. They read other people's mail and then behave as though it were intended for them." We have done that with the entire Hebrew Bible, including the psalms. At our worst, we have sometimes acted like we know better what those scriptures mean than those who wrote them and first received, read, and collected them.

And so, yes, we sing Psalm 2, the ancient psalm of enthronement, embellished with antiphon and doxology, to make it a song in praise of Christ, our king. This is dangerous business, because the next thing we hear ourselves singing is how God will use our king to disinherit the nations, break them with a rod of iron, dash them to pieces like smashed pottery, and if you don't kiss his feet, he will be angry and incinerate you. (That's what Psalm 2 says about "our king.")

There could be a whole plenary, or at least a workshop, on this topic—how to use that kind of song responsibly. The only thing I know to do is to turn such psalms upside down, and to remind ourselves that our king is a crucified king, and precisely as crucified King, he has already taken his place among the kings of the earth who have been disinherited, beaten with rods, smashed to potsherds, and dispatched to hell for incineration. It was for just such a reign he came among us, and among all those other nations.

If we want a psalm that expresses Christ’s own vision of ruling, we should sing the part of Psalm 33 that says:

- ¹⁶ A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
- ¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

But mostly that’s a minority voice, not only among us, but among the songs in the Bible. Just like we do, the ancients loved to celebrate outside the palace fence and to sing, “Pharaoh’s army got drowned; Oh, Mary don’t you weep.”

Most of you know that LBW and LSB didn’t even include some of the more dangerous pieces, like Psalm 137, in the collection for the church’s use (because of the dreadful curse against the Edomites and their babies at the end). I have never sung or spoken Psalm 109 in Christian worship, a poem meant to be prayed against one’s accuser:

- ⁸ May his days be few; may another seize his position.
 - ⁹ May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow.
 - ¹⁰ May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
- (Psalm 109:8-9)

The early church used this psalm—it’s one of the scriptures cited in Acts 1, when reporting the death of Judas. The only use of it I ever witnessed among Christians was in the basement of Concordia Seminary’s library in St Louis when I was a graduate student. A fellow-grad student put a small sign next to the books piled on his carrel desk, sitting as it did out in the open, with no protection: “If anyone tampers with items on this desk, I will pray Psalm 109 against him.” (Among our kind of people, that worked.)

We do, however, often use the beautiful Psalm 139, as we’ve done several times in our days together, but like every other setting of Psalm 139 I know, Father Joncas’ wonderfully singable setting stopped at verse 18. We did not sing with him (or with Diane and Mark Sedio this morning):

- ¹⁹ O that you would kill the wicked, O God. . .
- ²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
- ²² I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
- ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
- ²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:19-24)

What if God heard that prayer, and commenced killing the wicked, putting the bloodthirsty far, far away? God would likely, and rightfully, begin with me, with us. I tremble to imagine the scene.

Eugene Peterson, in his *Answering God*, a book on praying the psalms, suggests we should pray these because they are true to what’s in our hearts, and by means of these psalms we can release or hand over our poisonous instincts to God. We thereby let God handle them and don’t take matters into our own hands. My own instinct is to “cross” these texts, to pray them in the presence of the crucified

one, which amounts to the tactic of turning them upside down. Christian scriptures teach this tactic. One of the most oft-quoted Hebrew bible texts in the New Testament¹ is this psalm verse, one we looked at this morning with Diane Jacobson:

²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118:22-24)

What kind of day has the Lord made? Read the psalm again. The day celebrated as so marvelous is one on which enemies surrounded me or us, blazed against us until our only refuge was in God. And even though we die at the hand of our enemy, God does not abandon us to death. **THIS** is the cornerstone, that it had to be like that. That *he* had to die. That we must die with him. And *then* live, thanks to the one who does not abandon us to the grave. **THIS** is the day the Lord has made. . . a day of crucifixion, become a day of ruling in God's peculiar, new, cruciform way! This is the Lord's doing, and marvelous in our eyes.

That set of tracks, that cruciform pattern, runs through my soul and kills me, over and over, and now, thanks to Dirk Lange, I have a new way to think about it. Until yesterday, I assumed I'd never have a tattoo, and now I know I've had one for a long, long time. And furrows in my mind and heart, dug there by the untold number of times I've sung Psalm 141, "Let my prayer rise before you as incense," or Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence," or Simeon's song in the marvelous, six-scene operetta known as Luke's birth narrative, "Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. Mine eyes have seen your salvation."

Thank goodness for the shattering voice of God that, as we sing in Psalm 29, slays us and silences our empty words and wakes us and gives us words with which to pray for things that give us life, not more dull, sleepy oblivion.

What language do the psalms teach us that we wouldn't have without them?

We might not, without some teaching, have the guts to stand before God with the words of a lament psalm, and to say to God, "Look at me! Don't you see what's become of me? You say you're my God, our God, and that you're gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and even that you repent of the evil you threaten, but look at what's happened! Do you really want the neighbors, the Egyptians or anyone else, talking about this, clucking their tongues and all? Think about it, God." (Does such boldness give you the shivers?)

The psalms also give us the words and posture of thanksgiving—Psalms 105, 106, and 107 (and 118) teach words I heard countless times at home and at church dinners. "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, and his—thanks, Diane—*hesed* endures forever." O give thanks (הודוּ, from the verb הָדָה)! It's actually the command to throw up one's arms. It's the posture of receiving, of giving back to God, of letting go, or simply giving up. It's also the name of the people of blessing, echoing ancient mother Leah's ambiguous cry, *Judah*! The name she gave her fourth son, the one she knew wouldn't gain her any favor in Jacob's eyes. It's tattooed on her children as their name for all time.

My own children are at a point in their lives when they do not pray the hours, or a daily office, or a weekly or even a monthly office. I worry about the furrows in their hearts, or lack thereof. However, when we sang "Abide with Me" at my mother's funeral in December, my 21-year-old daughter asked, "Why do I know that song?" I got to tell her, "I sang it to you every night of your life until you became too big to rock to sleep." Had I known Dirk's metaphor then, I could have told her, "You have furrows

¹ Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4.

on your soul about which you don't yet fully know. They'll be there when you need them." Thanks to many summers at Holden Village where she memorized "Holden Vespers," she knows the *Magnificat*, too, which has made more furrows she'll one day discover. I'm grateful, especially when I recall that it was the hymns of the church that got me through the empty, faithless years that descended upon me in college and through part of my seminary studies, when I thought I knew all the answers, but then learned I'd never heard most of the questions. I couldn't believe, but I could still sing.

Friends and colleagues, we must find ways to teach to our children and students psalms and hymns that will not merely make them high for a moment, but will carry them all the way to their deathbeds. We must beg the Spirit to silence the racket in their minds and to furrow their souls.

But with what kinds of translations, paraphrases, and choral transformations shall we do this? As Diane Jacobson taught us, we have trouble enough being faithful to the original texts even when we try. And our young—and admit it, even some of us geezers—don't want words put into our mouths, or to sing someone else's songs.

I love Diane's opening question: What if we dreamed in "scripture?"—i.e., in the language of the faith? When it's Spanish or Chinese, it takes an immersion experience. And yes some of us have immersed ourselves for long enough in Psalm 139 that we can hear with Luther both the threat of God's judgment and grace of God's promise in that same song. But for how much longer will there be Christians who dream in "scripture," and know the nightmares that linger there as well as the dreams of hope—all in the same words? It all depends on how well we translate these old songs for our children, and stick with those young people long enough to make those songs their own, so they know what song to sing on days they want nothing more than to flee from God. Thanks to Diane, and all who work at the Book of Faith Initiative, and other, similar efforts. For all kinds of reasons, you do indeed have "the best job in the world."

So, what can I, the non-musician, add to what Michael, Dirk and Diane have taught us? Some questions, perhaps. Here's a mystery to ponder: We have only 150 psalms saved in the Book of Psalms (though admittedly we still sing quite a few that come from other portions of scripture), and remember, that collection comes from something close to two millennia of Israelite history, or a mere 1,300 years if you count only things that come from time of Moses and Miriam's song and after. That's barely more than one song saved per century. Of all the songs we sing today, how many will be left, still sung in some language or another, in, say, 3017, on the 1,500th anniversary of the Reformation? I'm both grateful and sad that lots of songs will disappear by then. But which will be saved, and why?

Well, I'm no seer. So, back to the present. Even we non-musician, narrative types know the order of things. Human beings sang before they told stories. Indeed, in many instances the most important stories we tell grow out of songs, or from the imagination that songs have cultivated in us. Some say Homer's *Odyssey* has functioned as the parts department for a goodly portion of western storytelling. The analogy holds for sacred story. When I entered graduate study in Bible, two of the foremost Hebrew Bible scholars of the era, Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, who had written a joint doctoral dissertation in 1950 on what they called "Ancient Yahwistic Poetry," convincingly argued the theory that a goodly share of Pentateuchal narrative grew up around "The Song of Miriam" (Exodus 15), "The Blessing of Jacob" (Genesis 49), "The Blessing of Moses" (Deuteronomy 33), and "A Royal Song of Thanksgiving" (2 Samuel 22 = Psalm 18). I suspect they were right.

The more familiar one becomes with all four of the New Testament's Passion Narratives, the more evident it becomes that that story is arguably fashioned on a foundation that includes Psalm 22.

Do you suppose our species sang even before we learned ordinary speech?

Some of you who have music as your vocation are no doubt versed in the literature I only discovered as I pondered the significance of all the ancient songs we have in our canon. I began to wonder where singing and music come from—how does it happen that human beings sing at all, or make music with devices other than their voices? The Bible accounts for this, directly at least, only by noting that one of Cain’s descendants, Jubal, son of Lamech, “was father of all who play the lyre and the pipe” (Gen 4:21). Books I found in the university’s library informed me concerning the theories and debates among those who study the evolution of the human brain and the development of both language and singing.² Some believe singing precedes the making of words, others that music-making is secondary to speech. Among the former are those who theorize that we didn’t so much learn to imitate the birds and gibbons (small, two-fingered monkeys who sing duets), but we have in us the same capacities. (Birds and gibbons do “sing,” I suppose, although if I’m not mistaken, their “songs,” pleasant as some may sound to us, all mean either, “Come here, I want to mate with you,” or, “Get off my turf or I’ll peck your eyes out.” I was going to follow that sentence with the observation that if that’s where we learned singing, we’ve come a long way. Then I recalled that most of the iPods in the world are pretty much filled with versions of those same two songs.)

Singing is partly speech or speech-like, but it seems to me that it’s also related to the multiple ways we find that our voices go off on their own, disengaged for a moment from their rational, word-making function, and engage in laughter, weeping, screaming, groaning, sighing, expressing shock in ululation, the ‘ah’ of contentment, the ‘oh!’ of surprise, and the squeal of delight. Whatever music is, it comes from somewhere deeper than words, and yet some of it we can describe with words, and some of it takes up our words and makes them sing, and in so doing allows words to carry things they can’t when merely spoken.

Such music-borne words we call *psalms*. To the theses that previous speakers have offered at this institute concerning the sacred psalms collected in scripture, I will add just a couple more. The first is my own theory about the origins of humankind’s capacity for making music. Whatever it is that we do when we sing, it is different than what sparrows and gibbons do, so it’s among the things I believe are part of being made in God’s image, or what we can understand as having been blown into the dust that we are, and to which we shall return, when God made us. Of all living things, only into humankind does God blow God’s own breath, and for many years I’ve told students that having the Spirit of God blown into us means having the uniquely human capacities for justice, mercy, and love. But the more I think about it, I believe that’s where singing comes from, too. It’s the gift of the Creator who, I’ll lay you even money, sang the universe into existence. And if there’s any truth to the phrase that God is “enthroned on the praises of Israel,” (Ps 22:3) then singing may even help explain why God bothered to create a world in the first place.

A second, companion thesis appears in the title for this talk that appears in the program, “**Sheer Grace: Our Dwelling Place in All Generations.**” I confess to having snuck a pun into that title. Some of you know that one of the most common Hebrew words for “song” is שִׁיר (*shir*). Every “song of ascent” in the psalmody, for example, is a שִׁיר לַמַּעְלוֹת (*shir lama’eloth*). So my title means to speak of the grace, the gift that comes in songs that become for us not only accompaniment for a moment here and there in this or that liturgy, a habit, so to speak, but also a habitat. A place to live.

The world of mere phenomena is real but unlivable. Psalms and stories make it livable. At least as powerfully as stories tame the *tohu vebohu*, the chaos all around us, and create a meaningful world in which we purposefully live and work and finally die, so also the songs of the faith, the psalms, serve as

² Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and N. L. Wallin, B. Merker, and S. Brown, editors, *The Origins of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

a gift, a kind of grace in which we dwell, or as John's gospel would say, abide, and because these songs are the Spirit's song long before we know them and come to live in them, they serve as yet another way the Spirit clings to us when we can no longer cling to God, yet another way that we abide in God, our refuge, our dwelling place in all generations.

Place-making, I'll remind you, happens also to be the metaphor inherent in the Hebrew word for salvation: *ישועה* (*yeshua*), from the verb *יָשַׁע* (*yasha*), which means to make room, to give place or space. And one of the ways God does that is through song, because sometimes when there is no place to go, we need a place, as in the wilderness, the no-place-place where there is no language but murmuring and surely no songs to sing, or in exile, when we hang up our lyres on the willows and weep, for one cannot sing in such God-forsaken places as this. Into such places comes the Spirit.

Stories of this gracious work that the Spirit of God does by means of songs appear in every generation. One of the oldest, of course, appears in the ancient book of Jonah. What do you do when trapped in the belly of a monster, when the darkness of Sheol has swallowed you? You sing. You sing whatever the Spirit of God gives you to sing, and you leave your words carved on the wall there, so whatever prisoner comes next to that place can feel them etched there, evidence that even there he or she is not alone, and the song will lift that one, too, from the pit.

In this season we have just concluded, we have seen again, in three of the four gospels, that Jesus himself dies singing the psalms of his people, our people. Mark's gospel makes perfectly clear that to have such a song at the ready in such a moment of darkness is a gift of the Spirit. When Jesus warns his disciples about the impending trials and persecutions they will suffer, he advises them not to make speeches, but to say only what the Spirit of God gives them (Mark 13:9-13). Then Jesus, as the story progresses, lives out his own advice. He is silent through most of the trials in Mark's gospel, admitting only to the identity conferred at his baptism: Son of God. And he says but one thing out there on Golgatha, "My God, my God, why. . .?" That's the perfect literary ending for Mark's depiction of Jesus' utter abandonment, but also, as we know, it's the opening line of what we call Psalm 22. For one thing, singing is an alternative to all the cursing and taunting everyone else in the scene engages in, and it brings the centurion to make the very confession for which Jesus has been executed. But as a psalm of lament, it's also a song of trust and hope, and that song takes the crucified one to a different place than the one to which the nails have pinned him.

When I teach this, I sometimes ask my students to close their eyes and sing along with me if they know the words. Then I quietly begin to sing, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. . ." Many join in, and when we've finished I let them linger in their thoughts for a moment, then open their eyes. Then I ask them how many of them stayed in the room while we sang, and how many found that the song took them elsewhere. Never yet has anyone said they stayed in the classroom.

I don't know "where" Jesus went when he sang, "My God, my God, why. . .?" I believe, however, that whenever a child of God sings one of those songs, every believer whoever sang or will sing that song in some desolate place, as well as all who have practiced it so it's ready when they need it, join in. Imagine the choir that joined the Christ as he died outside Jerusalem. It's no wonder the curtain of the temple was torn in two, or why, as Matthew adds, the earth shook and the graves were opened.

In Luke's version, Jesus dies praying a different psalm, the one we know as Psalm 35. That, too, is a psalm of lament, but it was also among those appointed already in Jesus' time as an evening song. And as I've taught my students for many years, taking a clue from a resource I can't at the moment lay my hands on, that verse, "Into your hands I commit my spirit, O God, thou faithful God," was something Jewish moms taught their babies to say as a bedtime prayer, as some of us learned, "Now I lay me down to sleep."

Among other stories of how the psalter has served those in darkness, I think of a latter-day personal narrative shared by Claus Westermann, professor of OT at Heidelberg University for many years, when he visited Seminex during my grad school days. Westermann was a seminarian when WW II began, and like many students he was forced into the German army, where he ‘served’ for five years, much of the time in Russia, working as a translator. He said he was either bored or terrified most of the time. To keep himself sane in both states, and because thankfully he had memorized or partially memorized many of the psalms, he first prayed them, and then began to study them, and even began to write notes about what he learned, on paper he could steal or get by trading his meager share of bread. When the war ended, he wrote his dissertation under Walther Zimmerli in Zurich. Its title: “The Praise of God in the Psalms,” a foundational work on what came to be called *Formgeschichte*, analysis of the literary forms found within the psalter. He had furrows in his soul. In the belly of the beast, he had a tattoo that helped him remember who he was.

Psalms show up in similar places all through the literature of Jews and Christians. I think of the scene near the end of Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*, when Father Rodrigues, about to go on trial, finds himself crouching in a filthy, dark cell whose walls and ceiling he can touch without moving. He runs his hands over the walls and at one point finds letters scratched into the surface. His finger traces them. They spell LAUDATE EUM. “Praise Him.” The words of a psalm. Some Jonah was here before him, and he must have left this place singing.

I think of the character Ernie, the last in the line of *Lamed Vov-niks*, the 36 “just ones,” in Andre Schwarz-Bart’s novel, *The Last of the Just* (Atheneum, 1960), who arrives in Auschwitz with a group of children whom he has comforted through the long, terrible trip in a boxcar. As they stand together, stripped naked, in the strange room where they expect the cleansing water of a shower, Ernie leads them in singing (373). “O Lord, by your grace you nourish the living, and by your great pity you resurrect the dead, and you uphold the weak, cure the sick, break the chains of slaves. And faithfully you keep your promises to those who sleep in the dust. Who is like unto you, O merciful Father, and who could be like unto you. . .?” they sing together, as one by one the voices go silent in death. Their song, known as “The Eighteen Benedictions,” is pieced together from the psalter, including pieces you may recognize from Psalms 22 and 35.

Many of us have sung our loved ones over to the other side, learning in the process why we practiced some of those songs all our lives—so they would be ready in such a moment, and we need not cast about for words at a time when words fail us. I have shared in the workshops of previous Institutes how the psalms and hymns of the church played a blessed role in assisting me and my family at midwifing the birth of my father into the waiting arms of God. This past December we buried my mother, who had outlived her entire extended family and nearly all her friends. Besides her children, the only familiar voices left to comfort her were the songs she knew by heart, so many of them psalms.

Countless Christians and Jews have shared in their last moments a spoken or musical rehearsal, often by heart, of the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” We will all walk the valley of the shadow, although we would never have such a helpful preview of that part of our journey without this song, nor would we have the precious images of God’s presence with and care for us there. You may get to preach on this in a couple weeks, on Easter 4. If you’ve never heard this, let me share something I first learned from Kenneth Korby, once a colleague here, now deceased. At the end of Psalm 23, most of us learned to say, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life.” But the KJV most of us recited this morning at Diane’s prompting followed the Latin, not the Hebrew (thanks again, Diane; that “mercy,” is also *hesed* [חֶסֶד] in Hebrew). “Follow” is a translation of the Latin (*subsequitur*) and hides the image the Hebrew would give us. The verb is *radaph* (רָדַף), which means to pursue, or chase. It describes the work a shepherd’s sheep-dogs perform—surrounding the sheep,

making sure none stray off or get lost, and all of them make their way, yes, to the Lord's house. The home place.

Among those good and faithful sheepdogs are the gifts of the Holy Spirit's songs. Except for Mary Magdalene's recognizing Jesus' voice, and therefore him, when he spoke her name in John 20 (thus fulfilling his promise, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."), I couldn't find an image or story of the shepherd's singing, faithfully calling the sheep home. But I will share, as a penultimate word, a poem of George Herbert, one of those 17th century "metaphysical poets." It's a tribute and thanksgiving for the role the church's hymnody played in his life:

Church-Music³

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: when displeasure
Did through my body wound my mind,
You took me thence, and in your house of pleasure
A dainty lodging me assigned.

Now I in you without a body move,
Rising and falling with your wings:
We both together sweetly live and love,
Yet say sometimes, *God help poor Kings*.

Comfort, I'll die; for if you post from me,
Sure I shall do so, and much more:
But if I travel in your company,
You know the way to heaven's door.

The last word I shall give to a friend. A few years ago, down the street at Porter Hospital, I had the blessing of some long, honest conversations about life and death and eternity, what we could say with confidence and what we couldn't, with my friend and colleague David Truemper, long-time director of this Institute, as he lived out his last few days in the fall of 2004. I wrote down a summary of part of one conversation, and particularly of David's thoughts and expressions of faith, and I first read them here in this room as part of a Reformation Vespers held here on the day after he died. Let me share them again:

From the perspective of my deathbed, the promise of "Life Everlasting" that I've named in the *Credo* and trusted since childhood has become more precious than ever. Yet it cannot be what we so commonly and easily assume—a mere extension, even an endless prolonging, of our days. The prospect of more and more days, even on the other side of some boundary, now seems more burden than hope.

The ancient psalms help us to understand the promise more truly. The one we call Psalm 90 prays that God would teach us to number our days, so our hearts might learn wisdom, beginning with the truth that our days are full of iniquity, fly like a dream, and come to an end with a sigh. But that same song begins with a promise. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations."

There is the promise of life everlasting—not time of any sort, however new or long, but a place. We dwell in the Lord. That is enough. Or as the apostle put it, "Our lives are hid with Christ in God." Here, in the communion of those who have died with Christ in baptism, we find our resting place. There we abide, for now, and for eternity.

I believe in the life everlasting. Amen.

So, dear friends, do we believe. And that life everlasting commences, even now, with our singing.

³ George Herbert, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 59.