
Christian Toughness

Psalm 23 (translation by Ellen Davis, June 5, 2020) and Matthew 9:35-38 10:16-20, 26-28

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 14, 2020 by Dr. Ellen F. Davis

This is the biggest challenge with the Psalms: They afford us absolutely no critical distance. As an academic theologian, I need critical distance; it's my stock-in-trade. My job is to create space for myself and other to look at matters of faith from arm's-length, but the psalmist will have none of it. The psalmists are all-in folks; rarely do they stand back and talk about God. Instead they jump in and talk to God, and if any of us is so incautious as to open the book of Psalms, then they just grab hold and throw us right into the middle of their conversation. And what's more, they use our voice – my voice – to do it. Have you noticed that insistent first-person-singular – “I” – that runs all through the book of Psalms? It puts into my mouth words I do not necessarily intend, saying things that may not jive with my mood at all. So, for instance, in today's psalm: “Even though I walk through a valley dark-as-death, I shall not fear evil.” Speaking for myself and probably all of you, that's a bold-faced lie. Our nation is in that death-dark valley right now, and every sane and honest person who can comprehend the news is scared. I am scared of anyone who is not afraid of COVID-19 with its unjust distribution along color lines, escalating violence in intimate situations, or violence against total strangers, almost all of them unarmed, many of them people of color. I am scared of anyone who is not afraid of callous, vainglorious, muscle-flexing national leadership, of those who imagine they can secure their own power by fomenting more rage and division within our country, of those who isolate our nation from the global community as we all face deadly threats of pandemic and climate change, both of those threats exacerbated by racism and ethnocentricity. “I shall not fear evil” – can any responsible Christian say or pray those words today? Are they anything more than bravado, stupid complacency, or just plain naïveté?

Maybe. Here's a precedent: During the German Blitz bombings of Britain 80 years ago, when the life of a nation hung in the balance, Psalm 23 was read very often at Communion services¹, with these familiar words:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me;
thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full. (vv. 4-5)

If that assured tone seems to set this psalm at odds with dire times then and now, equally it makes this prayer an outlier within the Psalter. Most psalmists express their anxiety freely, in dozens of laments. However, in this case, instead of feeling free to express anxiety, the psalmist seems free from having any anxiety to express, even while walking in death-valley – and that might help us. If anything in this psalm could loosen the grip of our anxiety, even a little, then it might strengthen us to face as Christians the times in which we live. It could enable us to grow in the virtue that theologians have traditionally called “fortitude.” In plain language, that means Christian toughness – the kind of toughness that is the very opposite of hard-heartedness. Fortitude is toughness grounded in utter

¹ Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 12.

reliance on God and firm commitment to God's goodness and life-giving justice. In short, it's the kind of toughness that leads to love.

Getting tough in good faith begins where our Psalm begins, with total reliance on God: "The LORD is my shepherd; I want for nothing." It is easy to sentimentalize that line; we've all heard a gracious plenty of Good Shepherd Sunday sermons on Psalm 23, describing God as a gentle caretaker of us, the little lambs. That interpretation has its place, but right now, it just does not seem like enough. Moreover, the psalmist expects us to hear more than that. I say that with assurance, for in ancient Israel, shepherding was an exceedingly common metaphor for kingship. In story, song, and on public monuments, the ruler was depicted as the great shepherd of the people; in the Bible, Moses and David are the main examples, "leading Israel like a flock" (Ps. 77:20), as another psalmist says.

So the king's scepter is a shepherd's staff par excellence; in Hebrew, the same word shevet means both staff and royal scepter. "Your scepter and staff give me comfort," our psalmist says to God, and when the ancients repeated that prayer, they were making a claim at two different levels. First, the pastoral level: God tends me as a shepherd tends sheep. But they were also making a statement about the sovereignty of God: God is the Sovereign-shepherd of my people. It is entirely likely that Jesus had this psalm in mind when he told his disciples, "I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves... but it's okay. They can kill you, sure, but they have no power over your soul (cf. Matt. 10:28). Just remember this: Adonai ro'i, God is my Sovereign-shepherd; I want for nothing." Jesus calls his disciples to the practice of fortitude, of bravery grounded in confidence in God.

For centuries both Jews and Christians knew from bitter experience that if you live out the claim that God is my true Sovereign, then you can expect trouble from others who want to assert their own power. Through the centuries and still today, many oppressed peoples, including Christians enslaved on this continent, have practiced fortitude in the face of power wielded by people brandishing Bibles, who claimed to be followers of Christ Jesus. They live the psalmist's reality: "You lay before me a table, in front of my enemies! You give me my daily bread, even when the forces of death are arrayed against me."

Christian fortitude is not the same as the exercise of mere might, though Christians often confuse the two, with terrible consequences. Fortitude is not might claiming to be right, asserting force and then asserting that God is on our side. Those who practice fortitude aren't out to coopt God's power. Instead they have been chased down by the justice of God, just as the psalmist says:

Surely goodness and covenant-love will pursue me all my life long,
and I will dwell in the LORD's house for length of days.

Getting tough in good faith is what happens to you when you have been chased down by God's justice. But be warned: being caught and held fast by the covenant-love of God is a position of risk. That is why the high and mighty can never show fortitude. Bullies cannot be truly brave, because they

have no commitment to goodness. But paradoxically, angels cannot really be brave either; for though they are truly good, they are not subject to harm.²

Therefore Christian toughness is the work of ordinary saints-and-sinners, people like us. Sustained by the steady flow of goodness that comes from God, we are empowered for the struggle between that life-giving goodness and the destructive, even deadly forces of ignorance, blindness, and malevolence. It is a daily struggle, and most of the time not a very public one. For that reason, it is important for us to be especially attentive to those whose struggle may be monumental yet not visible to us, important to say, “I’m thinking about you,” or to ask, “How are you doing?” The answer may be instructive. I’ll read you a testimony on the practice of Christian fortitude that came to me recently in a message from a friend, a Duke graduate and ordained Baptist minister who serves as chaplain at one of our nation’s most distinguished Catholic universities. An African-American, she writes as follows:

I don’t have the words to express adequately my heartbreak, rage, exhaustion, and fear over the last few weeks. I started [daily walks] a few weeks ago, and am consumed by how to present myself so that I am not mistaken as a threat. I am conscious of keeping my hands free so that my cellphone is not mistaken for a gun. I am careful to be at home ... when the sun goes down so that I feel safe. I always carry an ID in case something happens to me and I cannot speak to identify myself. I open my palms as police cars drive by so that they can see that my hands are free. I am getting stronger physically, but wearied mentally.

Yet, there is hope. I’ve been meeting all day about how our office can do and be better. More present to students and to one another. We are reconfiguring our staff to meet our campus and societal needs. Our president and the Dean of the Law Center wrote compelling statements decrying white supremacy and reintegrating [reiterating?] their support in sustaining a just environment. And, I nap almost daily. 😊

She closes with news of her family:

My brother in law is on the mend [from COVID]. My parents [in the Bronx] are well. My father celebrated his birthday yesterday. My mother has enough food to feed a small army. My brother is managing well despite being laid off. We are as well as we can be right now. I am exceedingly grateful.

Did you catch those several notes of heartbreak, hope, and gratitude for the ordinary (or not-so-ordinary) blessings of healing, another birthday, enough to eat, sleep? My friend points beyond the outrage and fear she rightly feels, toward the chief goal of Christian toughness: genuine healing of the community, reconciliation based on justice. Getting to real reconciliation is not for the faint-hearted. “Do not think,” my wise spiritual director once said, “do not think that getting to reconciliation is easier than remaining in alienation.” But as followers of Christ, reconciliation is the journey we are commanded to make. In a time and place of racial tension and violence not less acute than ours,

² “An angel cannot be brave, because he is not vulnerable” (Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, p. 117).

Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, was often in the streets – that diminutive, unarmed black man facing a line of South African police. It was his practice to call out to them, not with a taunt but with a gracious invitation, even a recruitment speech: “Come and join us! Come on over to the winning side!”

“Come on over to the winning side!” Maybe that invitation to threatening opponents gives us a way of reimagining the scene in our psalm, when God sets the banquet table for me, soothing my sun-beaten face with oil, pouring the wine – and this extravagant show of divine hospitality is happening right in front of “them that trouble me.” Now, why would I imagine that the table is set only for me and those who are already my companions? The God whose mercy knows no bounds is even now in Christ “reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses...and committing to us” – every one of us – “the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). Here is that word: Come on over to the winning side, the side of God’s justice and covenant-love. That is the word that every Christian needs to be taking out to the streets and onto the internet, into our neighborhoods and workplaces, churches and classes – and first of all speaking into our own hearts, until we believe, truly believe that everyone belongs on the same side, which is not a side at all but a circle, an endlessly expanding circle of reconciling love. Amen.