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Psalm 116

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Psalm 116

(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 116

In this Psalm someone who has been saved from death (verses 3, 8) resolves to go to the Temple (the House of the LORD, verse 19) in Jerusalem to offer his sacrifices and thanksgivings. This will make Psalm 116 a relatively easy Psalm to adapt to New Testament use. We have all been saved from some life-threatening danger; or we know friends who have had such an experience. This Psalm leads us in our gratitude to God for rescue and safekeeping.

We should notice that consistently throughout the Psalm the Psalmist addresses God as "LORD," that is as YaHWeH (vowels assumed). Remember that Yahweh is the identifying Name by which an otherwise virtually unknowable Creator God makes Himself known to Israel. He made himself known as the God who had called Abraham and entered into a covenant of promise with him. It is under this Name that he reveals his determination to honor his promise to Abraham and his descendants. He rescues Abraham's descendant nation through a powerful display of his compassion for them in the Exodus, and He brings them to Sinai to call them and set them apart as his own People. The basic passage is Exodus 3:13-17:

^{13} Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"
^{14} God said to Moses, "**I AM WHO I AM.**" And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, '**I AM** has sent me to you.' " ^{15} God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD (translation for, **I AM = YHWH**), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. ^{16} Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The LORD (**YaHWeH**), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, 'I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt; ^{17} and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt.'"

Look also to Exodus 33:18-20 and Exodus 34:6-7. If you wonder why I keep stressing this, the reason is two-fold. It was only by invoking the name "Yahweh" that Old Testament Israel could protect itself against the ever-present threat of idolatry. Only by worshipping the God who had actually revealed himself to them by His Name could they lay claim to the goodness of the God who really is, and only so could they praise that God for their salvation.

I admit to having a fear in our day of the generic, all-purpose god. While it makes good political sense to have such a generic god for life in a society where many different gods are worshipped, it invites religious disaster. If "God" is a blank form, which everyone may fill in according to his/her own notion, this in effect has everyone creating a god in his/her own image. And if we create a god in our own image to suit our own needs and pander to our own predilections, then we shall inevitably create not only a false god, but indeed a god who is far too small to be an effective, all-powerful and all-wise and all-gracious God. The Biblical antidote to the wickedness and folly of idolatry is always to identify and call upon the Creator God who is, the **I AM, Yahweh of the Exodus**, and in the New Testament the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Vv. 1-2

- ¹ I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.**
**² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.**

The LORD had proven his faithfulness to the Psalmist in his time of need, and thus the Psalmist expresses his thankfulness and pledges his devotion.

V. 3

- ³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs (LXX = dangers) of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.**

The LXX is the Septuagint, the translation into Greek from the Hebrew Old Testament, dating from about 200 B.C. The title and its Roman numeral acronym "LXX" refer to the legendary seventy (two) Jewish scholars that completed the translation under the sponsorship of Ptolemy II in Alexandria, Egypt.

Death is pictured as a determined hunter who sets traps and nets and snares (or land-mines?) to catch its victim. Sheol is the dreaded realm of the dead, the dangerous grave, pictured here as an aggressive pursuer who inflicted pain on the Psalmist.

V. 4

- ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I beseech thee, save my life!"**

This is the heart of the Psalmist's prayer. The verses that follow praise the LORD for his mercy.

Vv. 5-6

- ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.**
**⁶ The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.**

When we call the LORD *righteous*, we mean to say that he can be counted on to do the right thing. The right thing for God is not a matter of conforming to some norm above and outside of Himself (What could that be?), but it is a matter of doing that which He Himself has pledged and promised to do. That is why so frequently you find God's graciousness and his righteousness paired, as in this verse. God has promised to be good and gracious; therefore it is right for Him to do so.

The gracious and righteous LORD preserves the *simple*. The simple person is not the simpleton, the stupid one. Other Bible versions differ: NIV suggests "simple-hearted," Good News "the helpless," NAB "the little ones." The Hebrew word suggests those who are inexperienced and are not able to care for themselves. The Psalmist speaks an axiom of faith when he states that the LORD preserves the simple. And out of his own experience he can confirm that axiom; when I was reduced to being a simple one, one who was low, one who was helpless, God saved me.

V. 7

**⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.**

Your rest is your resting-place. It is the same word that is used in Psalm 23 for the still waters (literally, the waters of rest), the place beside which the good shepherd leads his flock. For the soul to return to its resting place is a way of saying, "Be at peace, rest assured." There is no reason for fear, because the LORD has shown himself to be gracious. It reminds me of the father or mother, who consoles the frightened child, "It's all right, go to sleep."

Vv. 8-9

**⁸ For thou hast delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
⁹ I walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.**

The LORD has delivered my soul (the life within my body) from death. He has wiped away every tear from my eyes (Revelation 21:4). God keeps me from stumbling, a picture in which death is portrayed as the final, fatal slip.

Verse 9 is a positive statement of the mercy of the LORD. Instead of being enslaved to death, I am now up from my deathbed; I now walk in the land of the living. I am alive again! But also, now that I have had a close brush with death, my life is in a renewed way a walking before the LORD; that is, I am now far more conscious of obediently living under the LORD's gracious surveillance.

The Psalmist was undoubtedly thinking of having been protected from what appeared as certain death, rescued from some desperate strait. On our side of the death and resurrection of Jesus, these words now hold added meaning. In Christ we shall walk in the land of the living after actually dying. That is the great Easter hope that is the reason for using this Psalm during the Easter season.

Vv. 10-11

**¹⁰ I kept my faith (in the LORD), even when I said,
"I am greatly afflicted (utterly crushed)";
¹¹ I said in my consternation (I too hastily said),
"Men are all a vain hope (NRSV: Everyone is a liar)."**

Here the Psalmist recalls how, though he felt utterly crushed, he nevertheless kept on believing in Yahweh. So low did he feel that it spilled over into an ungracious estimate of his fellow human beings. This adds a dimension to the mercy and bounty of the LORD; for despite the Psalmist's uncharitable and unjust judgment of others, Yahweh in his goodness delivered him anyway.

Vv. 12-13

**¹² What shall I render (give back, repay) to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?
¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,**

The question of verse 12 is rhetorical, not a request for information. The cup of salvation may be a libation, an ancient ceremony in which the worshipper poured out a cup of wine in honor of God. It is called a cup of salvation because the libation was made to thank God for deliverance (salvation) from death. Notice that in the parallel, verse 17 speaks of offering the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Both here and in the parallel verse 17, such calling on the name of the LORD is not in order to make a request, but to praise Yahweh for what He has done. How can we ever possibly repay God? We obviously cannot. What the Psalmist therefore does to “repay” God is to praise and thank God. You may recall that Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Creed enumerates all the many blessings we receive from the Creator God. Luther then states, “For all these blessings, it our duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him.”

V. 14

**¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.**

Both here and in the identical verse 18, the verb “pay” translates a Hebrew verb which means to be whole or complete. So the meaning of verses 14a and 18a is, “I will offer to God all the sacrifices I promised to make.” When we are in a jam, there is no limit to the promises we are prone to make in exchange for rescue. And when we have been delivered, it is always a temptation to scale back the extravagance of those vows. Here the Psalmist declares his willingness to discharge the full vow he has made.

The Psalmist engages in public celebration and worship. Public worship mutually encourages all believers. That is the pinnacle of the praise of God, to do so in the presence of all God’s People.

V. 15

**¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.**

This is a hard verse. Why should the death of his faithful ones be so precious, in the sense of costly, in the eyes of Yahweh? I offer two possible interpretations:

- a. It costs the LORD dearly to see those who love him die. It grieves and pains him in ways we cannot even imagine, for every death represents the frustration of His will that the human being, the crown of His creation, should enjoy fullness of life. Death is a hateful interloper in the Creator’s domain.

Perhaps the Psalmist is recalling his own near death experience, and he is thinking that the death of the LORD’s faithful ones, especially his own near death, is too costly for God to allow.

- b. In the light of the fuller revelation yet to come with the New Testament, we may also read this as meaning that the LORD finds the death of His faithful ones so precious, because He now, perhaps at length, takes them to Himself when they die. The death of His saints is precious because their death has become the gateway into His welcoming presence.

V. 16

**¹⁶ O LORD, I am thy servant;
I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid.
Thou hast loosed my bonds.**

The Psalmist is quick to remind the LORD that he is one of his saints, from his infancy a life-long servant of the LORD. He learned to love the LORD already from his mother, who had also been a servant of the LORD. That Yahweh has loosed his bonds, untied him from the fetters of near death, is a reason to rededicate himself to Yahweh as His servant.

Vv. 17-19

**¹⁷ I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.
¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,
¹⁹ in the (outside) courts (where the altar for sacrifice stood) of the house
of the LORD (the Temple),
in your midst, O Jerusalem.**

Praise the LORD! (= Hallelu - jah{weh}!!)

The prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 116:

God of power and mercy, through the Passion and resurrection of your Son you have freed us from the bonds of death and the anguish of separation from you. Be with us on our pilgrimage, and help us offer you a sacrifice of praise, fulfill our vows, and glorify you in the presence of all your people; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Guide for reflection:

1. This Psalm invites us to think of our own life, especially that time of our life in which we also experienced deep anxiety about our life and received unexpected deliverance from death or other life-threatening perils. You might think here also of others, of a friend or a relative perhaps, who is the "I" of this Psalm.
2. Verses 12, 17, 13, 18-19 likely are familiar to you, because these verses have been excerpted as one of the offertories of the Eucharist in both Lutheran Book of Worship and Lutheran Worship. For us Christians the cup of salvation in the Eucharistic context will be the cup of the Lord's Supper with its wine as the blood of Christ shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. Thus we give thanks to God for

our narrow escapes and repay Him, not in any commercial sense, or with the thought of making restitution, but by returning to the source of our salvation. Thereby we receive not only the healing of our bodies, but the full salvation, body and soul, which is what God intends for us and what He has promised us. This makes of the Lord's Supper not a propitiatory sacrifice to earn salvation, but a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the salvation already given to us by God for Jesus' sake.

3. Verses 1 can be said, "I love the LORD." This invites the question of self-examination, "Whom am I really loving as my Lord?" This is an exercise, then, in applying to our lives the First and Great Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before (or beside) ME!" Or, "Thou shall love the LORD, thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength."

Verse 1 can also be read, "I love the LORD." This invites the question of self-examination, "How shall I go about loving the LORD?" perhaps especially in the light of Luther's explanation of the First Commandment, which reads: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." The Psalmist does not give us any clue as to what those vows were which he proposed paying to the LORD. But it is clear from the Psalm that at the top of our response to His salvation, we ought to give thanks, and moreover, give thanks in the presence of the People of God.

Nugget

O LORD, give me grace to believe in you and to serve you so that I shall never be afraid of you, but may face even eternity with quiet confidence in your unchanging and abiding love, saying to my soul:

I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.

I know not where His isles lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 - 1892)

Walter E. Keller

April 18, 1999 – **The Third Sunday of Easter**