

TODAY WE HAVE PSALM 119

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Psalm 119:1-8; 12, 14, 18-19; 33-40

Kind of a strange title today, isn't it? You'll find out in a minute what it's about, and yes, for you English majors, that is indeed a nod to Henry Reed, whose WWII poem "Naming of Parts" addresses a question human beings have asked since antiquity: whether violence, the compulsion to dominate, is an aberration, or a divinely ordained aspect of the human condition.

Reed's poem sets side by side the training of young soldiers, in the virile prime of young manhood, out in a field learning to fire their weapons, with the season of spring bursting all around them, the season of fecundity and birth. In echoes of the Biblical promise to Noah, in which "summer and winter, seedtime and harvest, shall not cease," spring surges forth powerfully and inevitably, quite heedless of the mechanistic processes of war and death. It's a chilling juxtaposition, with the mechanical, value-neutral language of weapons and war side by side with the sap-rising exuberance of Creation in springtime. The poem makes clear that Creation transcends both human-created national borders and human definitions of loyalty and enmity, of "us" and "them".

So, today we have Psalm 119. Well, some of it.

How many of you know Psalm 119? It's by far the longest in the Book of Psalms; in fact, it's the longest *chapter* in *any book in the whole Bible*. In my Bible at home it's six and a half pages long, two columns per page.

And, as you heard bits of it, it's repetitive, very repetitive—and the reason isn't clear in English. It's an acrostic; actually several of the Psalms are acrostics, so that when you were reciting them or singing them, you could know your place better and not leave any lines out.

The most common acrostic is formed on the Hebrew Alphabet, with each successive line beginning with *Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, He*, and so on (the order was a little different from ours). But this one is more complicated—it has 176 verses, in chunks of eight lines each, each eight beginning with Aleph, then Beth, and so on. Twenty-two letters, eight lines apiece. No wonder the scholars think it's a very late composition. It isn't ascribed to King David—it's really a literary conceit that could only have been composed by someone with a lot of time, and it reads more like the Book of Proverbs than most of the other Psalms. Especially in Hebrew.

And more than that, it really couldn't have been written before the Babylonian Exile, because it was in the period of exile, when Solomon's Temple had been destroyed and Jerusalem laid waste, when the Jewish people learned to value the Scriptures, the Word of God, as their spiritual Temple, their Holy of Holies that could not be destroyed even if the Temple was razed and the scrolls themselves were burned.

Yes, today we have Psalm 119. And it's February, which is Black History Month, and I think that because people of color have had to study so much White History, it's a good idea for White folks to learn more about Black History, too. And so, for these reasons as well as any that might suggest themselves to you, today I want to tell you a story from the lore of the Underground Railroad.

It's a story about a family of Quakers who lived on a farm in Ohio. Like many Quakers, they were part of the Underground Railroad. This wasn't too surprising, since Quakers had, even by then, a long history of being not only persecuted, but prosecuted, for putting the Law of God above the laws made by human beings.

This devout family had just received another fugitive, and barely had they squared him away wherever they hid people on their farm, when a posse rode up from across the river, Kentucky maybe, or Virginia, demanding, "Christians to Christians," hospitality for the night.

So, to deflect suspicion, the Quaker family did so, in spare rooms in what must have been a spacious farmhouse. Early in the morning, they went to the fugitive, gave him food, and sped him on his way to the next “station.” Barely had they returned to the house, caught their breath, and sat down to breakfast, when the posse came thundering down the stairs, all set to charge ahead in righteous pursuit.

But the father, calm and mild as only a Quaker can be, said, “Good friends, such Christian men as yourselves will certainly want to join us in family prayers and a little breakfast to nourish you for your Christian mission.” And of course, given their putative shared Christian values, the posse couldn’t say no.

“Our family custom,” the father went on, “is to read one of the Psalms aloud each morning, and... Today we have Psalm 119.”

All 176 verses of it.

And the posse of righteous men, zealous as they were, you see, for the Law, had no choice but to sit down and stay for the whole long reading, six and a half pages of it, and of course the fugitive got a nice head start.

Good story, isn’t it?

Now, here’s the thing.

This story can only have taken place *after* the Dred Scott Decision. Before that, once they got over the Ohio River, or the Potomac, or the Missouri, even, and into one of the Free States, the fugitives were free. The Quakers wouldn’t have had to hide him, or pretend to collaborate.

But by the 1850s, The Abolition controversy was heating up. In an attempt to make peace by imposing order, the Supreme Court ruled, on the Constitutional basis of property rights, and also relying on the “neutrality” of the Constitution on slavery, to uphold legislation that said a slave was still the property of the master, even across State lines, *even in a free State*, and that the master therefore had the right to pursue into the free States. Thus, it became a crime for citizens of the free States, as well, to harbor such a fugitive—moving the Jordan River from the Ohio to the St Lawrence; and those Quakers, and everyone else along the Underground Railroad, even in the north, were criminals—as, of course, the Patriots had been in the Revolutionary War before them.

Well, that new law, contested and judged to be Constitutional right up, in 1857, to the highest court in the land, is now considered by just about everyone—even Justice Scalia!—to be at the very top of the list of the all-time worst decisions the Supreme Court has ever made.

But it wasn’t considered any such thing by many people in 1857. Here’s why: Justice was, in this case, indeed blind: blinded by custom, by convenience, and by culture. Why do I say that? Because the Southern States, which were so adamant about States’ Rights, liked Federal statutes just fine when they suited their own convenience.

More than that, they were even selectively blind to the Word of God. There are actually a couple of verses in the Bible that don’t seem to have made any impression, even though in those days, for North and South alike, verses from the Bible, especially the Books of Moses, would still have carried considerable weight in the legislature and the judicatory. But nobody seems to have paid any mind to Deuteronomy 23:15-16:

Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.

Now, of course, in those days all they had was the King James, and to be, I suppose, fair, it is a little less clear in the King James Version:

Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

...Except that “servant” was a common euphemism for “slave” among slaveholders in those days, and people then knew their Bibles much better than we do today. And they had at least Cruden’s Concordance, so they could even have looked it up if they’d thought to.

But by the late 1850s, the White majority in this country had become highly polarized on the subject of slavery. Many people in the Southern States, and the Northern ones, too, especially the industrialists and merchants who depended for their wealth on Southern agriculture (cotton, chiefly, and sugar, and tobacco) were claiming by then—even if earlier they had thought of slavery as wrong but, like fossil fuel today, inescapable economically for the foreseeable future—they were claiming, by then, that slavery was God’s will, and part of God’s ordained social order, along pretty much the same line of reasoning that held that war, for example, was, although tragic, part of God’s plan for bringing in the Kingdom, which of course in their minds was synonymous with “Manifest Destiny.”

But as I think you know, the spirituals that have been handed down in the Black church tell a different story. *Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus...steal away, steal away home; I ain’t got long to stay here...* As the owners were congratulating themselves on how the slaves had so easily been tamed to the master’s religion, the slaves were singing, and planning, and encouraging one another, *in code*. They were singing about stealing *themselves*, which indeed was what the law said they were doing when they escaped and fled Northward. Yes, spirituals are songs about a better life “over Jordan,” but that doesn’t just mean after death, the real hope is for deliverance right here in this world, just over that river. “I ain’t got long to stay here!”

So every verse about a river, “chills the body but not the soul,” every verse about “heaven,” and “campground,” and “home;” and *especially* every song about a train, “runs to heaven and then right back,” like all the “conductors,” running souls to freedom and then right back, they’re all about salvation *in this world*. “Swing low, sweet chariot” is “Swing low, sweet *Harriet*, coming for to carry me home....” “I look over Jordan and what do I see (coming for to carry me home)? A band of angels coming after me—coming for to carry me home!”

And how about all those songs where the leader, usually the preacher, calls out to the congregation? “Keep your lamps trimmed and burning...for the time is drawing nigh...Sisters, don’t grow weary; brothers, don’t grow weary; children, don’t grow weary, for the time is drawing nigh...*Name*, (Yes!) don’t grow weary! *Name*, (Amen!) don’t grow weary! *Name*, (Hallelujah!) don’t grow weary, for the time is drawing nigh!” You knew, if the preacher called your name, to keep your lamp trimmed and burning, that you were next, some night soon, to ride “that old Gospel train.” You knew that “Sweet Harriet” Tubman was coming, any night now, with her band of angels, to carry you home.

Okay, let’s step back, and in the time we have left, look for a minute at what is actually going on in the 119th Psalm. What might we find, besides a reading long enough to bore even the pious and give our fugitive a head start?

Meditate, when you read it, on what the written Word of God meant to the Hebrew people, bereft of country and every treasure except the Torah, who had come, in years of exile, to understand and love the Law as their Light Eternal, showing them the way into the very heart of God. “Thy Word,” says Verse 105, “is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path....” Law, Teaching, Way, Path, Commandment, Precept; and yes, even *Justice*...and although it’s hard to read all of it at once, we can look at just a few couplets, to help us begin to glimpse what it really means to “obey the Law of God.”

In the first few verses, we applaud in our ignorance the idea that if we walk in God’s ways, not only obeying the rules and prohibitions but living in the spirit of the Law, then life will be free. We hear the first gentle beckoning away from legalism: “Happy are those who seek the LORD *with their whole heart*”—that is, with all their mind and strength and will.

But then we hear a voice breaking through. “O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!” It’s the beginning of that well-known awareness, “the good I would do, I do not do, and the evil I would not, that is what I do.” But only then do we come face to face with the love and boundless grace of God, and know

that the obedience we tout in Verse 1 only skims the surface of the deep intimacy we know as we confess our dependence on God.

“Teach me, O LORD,” we cry, “the ways of your statutes...Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.” That constant quest for deeper understanding animates our journey toward wholeness. Ellen Blue of Phillips Theological Seminary adds: “The reminder to turn our eyes from “vanities” points to the Christian struggle to grasp what ‘sin’ really is. Is it a simple matter of failing to obey God’s rules, or is the nature of sin rooted more deeply, in our hearts, and not only in our deeds—or the times we fail to act?”

Verse 36, where we beg of God to “turn our hearts to your decrees, and away from selfish gain,” helps us to see, with Augustine, that sin viewed most broadly is *simply a refusal to choose the way of love*. As this Epiphany season draws to a close, and we head up the mountain to next week’s Transfiguration, we remember that the glory of God revealed in the Law was what caused the face of Moses to shine so brightly that he veiled himself out of love for them, lest he blind them with that radiance. And it wasn’t his own radiance, but the radiance of the Law shining from the face of one who had climbed the mountain not once, but twice, to receive it.

So yes, above all, study of the Law of God is study of the Loving Will of God. As the Reformers made so clear, above all else in Scripture and in life is the Law of Love. As Rabbi Hillel said just a generation before Jesus, “Love God, love neighbor. All else is commentary.”

Today we’ve had Psalm 119—or dipped into it, anyway. I commend it to you, in little pieces at a time, maybe eight verses at a time, for meditation. Just let it wash over you.

And, since I brought it up, I commend to you that poem of Henry Reed’s (some of you remember it from English class), as we struggle to follow God’s law, find Christ beyond Caesar, the Shalom of wholeness beyond the repression of dissent, as we seek to worship our Creator and treasure God’s wonderful creation, and every creature in it, especially every daughter and son of God, in everything we do, enjoying God and glorifying God forever.

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this
is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms

Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece,
and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got;
and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens
and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For to-day we have naming of parts.

Now unto the one who is able to give us far more than we can ask or imagine, to that one be glory and honor in the church...and in the world God so loved as to come among us, Love Incarnate, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. Shall we follow him, then?

AMEN.