

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph  
 April 30, 2017 at Plymouth Congregational UCC of Fort Collins, CO  
 Psalm 116: 1-4 and 12-19: “A God of Great Reversals”

Won't you join with me in prayer? God of all of the movement in our lives, I pray that the words I speak and the meditations we share will all be good in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Many scholars identify psalm 116 as something they call a “Psalm of Reversal.” One such scholar writes in *the Women's Bible Commentary*, “The mood of the book of Psalms moves back and forth from assurance to doubt, from contentment to pain, from joy to despair and back again. But those who speak from peaceful secure, and prosperous settings in life often have different things to say to God and different ways to say them than do those who are in the midst of crisis, trouble, pain, or struggle. A significant portion of the book of Psalms consists of songs of reversal...sung by **survivors** who attribute their present wellbeing to God's intervention in their lives...acknowledging that their survival is a gift of Grace from the hand of God.”<sup>1</sup>

In my preparation for this sermon these past weeks, what stuck with me from my research is this idea that many of the Psalms, like #116, are Psalms of Reversal sung by survivors. The grain of blessing in this is the idea that God's blessings are not linear or unidirectional. Rather, like life itself, God moves with us both when we feel like we are going forward and when we are stuck in reverse.

Have you ever taught someone how to parallel park? On one of my first dates with my now husband, I taught Gerhard how to parallel park back in Georgia. I knew that we were on the right track after even that task went well! In parallel parking, we are only successful when we are as grateful for the reversals as we are for the forward movements. We cannot only go in one successful direction without also accepting that reversals and changes of direction are also forms of success and surviving. Only when we learn to go in reverse with determination, with precision, and with God's help can we find our comfortable and well-spaced parking space in life. Today's Psalm is a Psalm of celebration for God's help in that successful parallel parking exercise of life. Today's Psalm is a Psalm of a reversal- a situation turned around in healing and hope.

Psalms are by definition communal, liturgical, ritual, songs and poems that came from worship settings used by the ancients of our faith and their ancestors to say to us: “No matter who you are or where you are in life's journey of GREAT Reversals, there is a Psalm/ a Song and a way to speak to God for you. REMEMBER, “...those who speak from peaceful secure, and prosperous settings in life often have different things to say to God and different ways to say them than do those who are in the midst of crisis, trouble, pain, or struggle.” Unlike Parallel Parking, there is no wrong way—the Psalms are our assurance of this. The Psalms and their diversity of moods and tones remind us: You are a survivor; I am a survivor, we are survivors by the grace of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen A. Farmer, “Psalms,” *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringle, edit. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 147.

If the world “Psalms” were a verb (to Psalm), it would mean, “to express oneself in fullness and authenticity before God and with the support of your community.” Our goal then as church is to Psalm effectively and regularly. How are you Psalming today?

The core message of our Psalm 116 is one of survival and reversal. “You have loosened my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.” These words have the same fundamental feeling and purpose as the famous anthem and declaration by Dianna Ross and others who popularly sing, “I will survive... as long as I know how to love... I know I’ll stay alive... I’ve got all my life to live and I’ve got all my love to give. I’ll survive. I will survive.” As long as I live by God’s grace, I will be a survivor in all things. Is this your Psalm today? How are you surviving by love in this life of reversals? Anxiety and hate don’t work for successful survival—regardless of how we are tempted by culture and our friends to rely on them. Only love and grace can bring true survival.

“Those who speak to God from a place of assurance and hope have different things to say and a different structural way to say them than those who are in pain, crisis, loss, tragedy, confusion, denial, or graduation and retirement.” We are entering tomorrow, May Day, into the great month of reversals and changes. The month of May is the month when the world and community turn upside down in Fort Collins and towns like it every year. [Remember the feeling of being a student and what May meant.] The assurance that comes to us first is that while we may have different Psalms to sing and different ways to say a prayer to God at different points in our lives of reversals and changing directions, whether in crisis, love, pain, or pleasure... there is no wrong or inferior Psalm. All Psalms like all prayers and different needs for God at different times of life are created equal.

Our Psalm today is a Psalm of a survivor. “What shall I return to God for all of his bounty to me?” It is a song of gratitude and grace and hope to God from someone who made it, someone who lives, someone who is a survivor. Think of this as the Biblical version of Destiny Child and Beyoncé’s “I’m a survivor. I’m not going to give-up! I’m gunna make it. I will survive. I won’t give up.”

Psalm 116 is Beyoncé’s Psalm—as a survivor who has embraced God’s great reversal in her life. Psalm 116 is the Psalm of the Survivor. I love this part of the Bible for exactly this reason: There is a Psalm for every season. God is a non-linear God who is with us in the times when we cannot even seem to find God in our lives, when we are celebrating, when we are surviving, and when we have survived—survived an unfulfilling or political job, survived a divorce, survived an illness, survived the death of a child, survived depression, survived whatever it is we are faced with by God’s presence and grace. God is a God of Great Reversals—life is not linear leading to Stepford Perfection! The same scholar I quoted earlier also writes in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, “[The Psalms] represent the full range of human emotions in conversations with God. In all but a few cases, these deeply human (DEEPLY HUMAN) utterances are addressed directly to God.”<sup>2</sup>

**Many of us who grew-up in the church were led to believe that the Bible was monochromatic. We have all seen or heard of churches and times in history where and**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 145.

**when, in the name of Christ, the Sacred texts were complicit with the ways and methods of the political Church, the Bible stories became silent bystanders to abuse, and Scripture became a bland affirmation of what we already knew and experience as life without responding for our need for God's assurance of survival. Today, we reclaim the text as our survival guide.**

**In fact, the Bible screams out with you in pain, jumps with you in joy, questions with you in times of discernment, asks the universe for salvation with you when you feel like all is lost, and lifts up to God Psalms of Reversal and gratitude when the world turns and God shifts in new and totally radically wildly unexpected ways! Expect the unexpected, Christians. God is a non-linear God of Easter.**

What sort of great reversals are happening in your life right now? Moreover, how have you prayed, sung, or otherwise engaged God in those reversals. By reversals, again, I mean those big shifts both good and bad in life—or sometimes both—the full range of human emotions. Retirement, graduation, promotions are all reversals (shifts) that require prayerful joy and careful discernment. I would offer that the Psalms might act as a resource and a guide in all of that. **I would even say that it is the reason for religion, for church—to be together in vulnerability, authenticity and to reclaim the stories of survivors of the past for our needs here and now.**

In this Eastertide, this season after the story of the resurrection and before the ascension, we celebrate, in many ways what I think of as the Season of Survival—survival even past the point of death and at the doorstep of the unknown sky of possibility. That is why the creators of the lectionary have given us this particular Psalm for today.

One of my greatest mentors, teachers, and my and your last associate minister, The wonderful and compassionate Rev. Sharon Benton, was published in 2013 in a book of liturgy called, *From the Psalms to the Clouds: Connecting to the Digital Age*. This was a publication of the Pilgrim Press of the UCC of some of the best and most creative liturgy writers from across our denomination. The book is billed as a retelling of the Psalms and worship resources for our time. Sharon is one of the major contributors to that book like how was a major contributor to many of our lives, and it was this book that she chose to leave on her desk when she left her office for me to move into as her mentee and successor.

In that book, she wrote a Psalm of her own for Eastertide that I believe responds to Psalm 116 with words of our time and meaning for today as we all discern, celebrate, and wonder how to be survivors in God's world of reversals and all forms of human emotion.

From Rev. Benton:

From deep within our tombs we hear you call, O God:  
Rise up!  
Rise up from death into new life.

We have found new life in this spring season,  
In children joyfully squirming among us,  
In each deep breath we breathe.

We have found new life in people's struggle for  
 Just government throughout the world,  
 And in nations' continued support  
 Following natural disasters.

From deep within our tombs we hear you call, O God:  
 Rise up!  
 Rise up from death into new life.

We follow your voice in our hope to overcome  
 Illness, grief, addiction, fear.  
 We follow your voice in our hope to heal your creation,  
 Make whole our connection to all that is.

From deep within our tombs we hear you call, O God:  
 Rise up!  
 Rise up from death into new life.

**Resurrecting God, you call us to follow Christ,  
 To rise up from our tombs that hold us in death—  
 But you do not expect us to do so alone.**

**It is you who fills us with life beyond all our daily deaths.  
 It is you who strengthens us to bring life to others.**

**It is you, Holy One, who we hear call within our tombs: rise up!**

**And so we do. We have. We are here. Amen.**

-The Rev. Sharon Benton

Pastoral Prayer:

God of Great Changes, Reversals, and Survival, Like our Psalmist says this morning, we will praise you before your people this day for all of the ways that you are with us in our lives of survival. Help us today to bring you gratitude for grace, thanksgiving for healing, and hope for surviving even the most dire and scary times of life.

Bless, O God, today the hearts and souls of those for whom we pray with the same rooted hope, the same determined and ageless sense of your workings in and through our lives... bring them courage, give us strength, we pray God.

Non-linear God of Reversals bring your strength to...these your beloved who are looking for survival of different circumstances:

[Names of those for whom we pray]

Non-Linear God of Peace... we offer likewise gratitude for the survival shown by saying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray: Lord's Prayer

