

Psalm 108: I Will Awake the Dawn

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I memorized this Psalm fifty years ago. It was the job that did it. It was a summer job; I was working for the city of Kalispell, Montana—the town in which I had grown up, and was now getting ready to leave. High school graduation was behind me, and college ahead—in three months I would board the Great Northern Railroad and head out for Seattle.

A single phrase got me started: “I will awake the dawn.” My job for the town that summer was in the department of street maintenance. As U.S. Highway 93 entered the south town limits, Main Street in Kalispell was divided by a wide grassy boulevard. After four city blocks, the boulevard expanded into a park, in the middle of which was the county courthouse. There the street split and curved around the park, and then was joined together again, but still divided by the boulevard for another four blocks, at which point asphalt and cement took over the street and the Norway maples gave way to Wheeler’s Jewelry and the Conrad Bank, the Woolworth Five and Dime and Montgomery Ward, the Jordan Café, and the Stockman’s Saloon.

It made for a welcoming entrance to our town, and I was always proud of it. Unlike many western towns that give the appearance of being as unplanned as a teenage pregnancy, our wide streets, ample boulevards, and generous planting of trees showed every sign of being the result of a thoughtful and affectionate courtship between the first settlers and the land.

My job that summer was watering those grassy and tree studded boulevards. And my workday began at one o’clock in the morning. I started early so that the bulk of my work would be done while there was a minimum of traffic. With the help of an alarm clock, I would get out of bed in the middle of the night, and be out on the street watering the grass and trees by one o’clock. After four hours of working in the dark, I would begin anticipating the arrival of daylight. Some nights seemed to last forever—would the sun never come up? Come on you old lazybones; Sun, get up!

And then I found my text: “*I will awake the dawn!*” My job expanded exponentially—beginning with the modest responsibility of keeping the grass a welcoming green through a mostly rainless summer, I now found myself in charge of praying the sun up and over the mountains.

And then, as so often happens with these wonderful scriptures that we have been given, a word or phrase that we’re merely toying around with works its way into our lives. Instead of using it for our amusement, or edification, or whatever, it begins using us.

I was being playful with the phrase “*I will awake the dawn.*” But soon the two other wake-up phrases got noticed:

Awake my soul (v. 1)
Awake, O harp and lyre. (v. 2)

Was I awake? Truly awake? I was out of bed; I had my eyes open; I was going

through the motions of my work. But was I awake—*God*-awake? Was my soul awake?

If I were awake, surely I'd be thanking and praising and singing. That is what awakened men and women do, after all:

I will give thee thanks to thee, O Lord, among the peoples,
I will sing praises to thee among the nations.
For thy steadfast love is great above the heavens,
Thy faithfulness reaches to the clouds. (vv. 3-4)

I felt like I had those summer nights all to myself. It was my first extended immersion in silence and solitude. The whole town asleep and I alone awake, alive and alert to the movements of the summer constellations, with the words *steadfast love* and *faithfulness* resonating through the phases of the moon, rising on the incense of the fragrant night air. There is something about getting up and going out in the middle of the night that seems to give you an edge on the rest of the world. The monks know what they are doing when they get up at two in the morning to pray Lauds, the first office of the day. All summer long I kept vigil, present to hear the first birdsong, catch the first hint of light coming up from behind the Swan Range of the Rocky Mountains. I was the closest I ever came to becoming a monk.

Wakefulness is the first thing—awareness. All our spiritual masters tell us that. *Awake my soul!*

But that kind of thing is just a little too good to last. It never lasted long in the monasteries; neither did it last on the late night streets of Kalispell.

I watered my boulevards with a fire hose. I had fifty yards of fire hose wrapped around a reel and attached to a huge wooden cart. I would attach one end of the hose to a fire hydrant, unreel it to its full length, and then play the sprinkling nozzle slowly back and forth across the grass. Whenever I was watering the median strip or the boulevard on the opposite side of the street from the hydrant, my hose would be exposed in the street. I had a little sandwich-board sign that I propped in the middle of the road a hundred yards or so in either direction from where I was working, warning vehicles to slow down. When they read my sign and heeded it, I had plenty of time to get my hose out of the road and let them go through. But not everyone honored my sign. Mostly it was the truckers who ignored it. They would roar into my silence and solitude, and I would dive to the curbside for safety, leaving my hose behind. And they would hit it—these huge steel juggernauts, logging trucks and eighteen wheelers—and the hose would spring leaks in three or four places. It was old hose, donated to the town from the fire department when it was no longer fit for the serious work of firefighting, and it couldn't take much abuse. I would run to the fire hydrant, turn off the water and spend the next hour or so repairing the leaks.

This didn't happen every night; several nights would pass without incident. And then it would happen again. I would be meditating, relaxed in the stillness, at ease in the rhythms of my work, awake to God, praying,

Be exalted O God above the heavens,
Let thy glory be over all the earth. (v. 5)

And then without warning one of these diesel fueled apocalyptic machines would be upon me and my prayer would shift gears to

That thy beloved may be delivered
Give help by thy right hand and answer me! (v. 6)

I never got used to the intrusions. The night always seemed so large with God; my work always felt so fitting, so appropriate, so congenial. For it wasn't long into the summer before I was feeling quite proprietary about these streets and grassy boulevards. My mother had been born in this town only fifteen years after it had been established. My immigrant grandfather, who died before I was born, had laid out the first cement sidewalks. The homes of my several aunts and uncles were safe houses through the years of my growing up. There was hardly a street corner or alley that was not marked by the memory of a fistfight or infatuation or adventure. This was *my town*, and I had this wonderful summer of nights to touch it and smell it and care for it. The appreciation was heightened by the sense of approaching departure.

As the summer unfolded, Psalm 108 continued to guide me in praying my experience. One night about midway through the summer, in early July, I noticed that halfway through the Psalm the subject changed from me to God. The first half of the psalm is all I and me: *My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready...awake my soul...I will awake the dawn...answer me. I and me, nine times. I loved that. I was given a grammar in which I could express myself with a vocabulary tailor-made to my experience. Maybe that's why I liked it so much. I was a seventeen-year-old adolescent, full of myself and my town. I loved saying I and me. I still do, as a matter of fact.*

Then, abruptly, it is God who is speaking:

God has promised in his sanctuary,
"With exultation I will divide up Shechem
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.
Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah my scepter.
Moab is my washbasin;
upon Edom I cast my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph." (vv. 7-9)

This is promised land language: "*I will divide up...I will portion out.*" When Israel entered the land promised to them by their God, the tribes assembled at Shechem, the geographical center, and each tribe was assigned its portion, its God-promised place.

Spirituality always occurs in place—it is never an abstraction, never a generality, never a technique. Place: Shechem; Sinai; Galilee; Bethany; Montreat, North Carolina; Kalispell, Montana. Geography is every bit as essential to the Christian life as theology.

In the midst of relishing my place, I realized that it wasn't my place at all—it was God's place, God's exuberant provision of a place where I can experience salvation and sanctity—in exultation *I will divide up Shechem...*

Poets characteristically love place names, the punchy actuality of named place, and the poet of Psalm 108 obviously did: Shechem, Succoth, Gilead, Manasseh, Ephraim, Judah, Moab, Edom, Philistia. Place names are the very best words we have for evoking feeling, inciting emotions of desire or dread. It is impossible to reduce a place name to an etymology or point of a map, confine it to a location. A name is a verbal magnet that pulls facts and memories into its orbit and makes us feel at home, or— and this happens, too—makes aliens of us.

One of the delights of coming to a new place is hearing and learning and saying its names. An early pleasure when I arrived for my college years in Seattle was getting to say all the new place names: Yesler, Ballard, Magnolia, Tacoma, Issaquah, Puyallup, Snoqualmie. Later I moved to New York and acquired the wonderful names of Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, Secaucus, Mamaronek, Chappaqua, Tappan Zee. Just a few years ago I moved to Canada, to the city of Vancouver, and found myself immersed in another set of musical runs of place names: Coquitlam, Kitsilano, Kerrisdale, Shaughnessy, Squamish, Galiano. And now I'm back home again in the country in which I grew up and find that the old names have not lost their evocative power: Kila, Elmo, Hungry Horse, Creston, Coram, Jocko, Lolo, Kootenai, Salish.

But whoever had laid out my town was not a poet. All the streets and avenues were numbered: 1, 2, 3, 4. The only street in the core town that had a name was Main Street, and there was precious little poetry in that.

And so I took it upon myself to christen the streets with names worthy of their significance in my life. I didn't go so far as to cross out the numbered street signs and spray-paint them with proper names, but I *said* them night after night: Shechem, Succoth, Gilead, Manasseh, Ephraim, Judah— interleaving the geographies. These were the streets on which I had first followed Jesus; at East Seventh and First Avenue my little sister died and I heard my first stories about heaven; at the corner of West Fourth and Second Avenue I was baptized. This was sacred landscape, and I was not about to let a secular surveyor who had done his best to reduce it into real estate have the last word on it. So, Shechem, Succoth, Gilead, Manasseh, Ephraim, Judah...and Shiloh, Beersheba, Shunem, Cana, Chorazin, Gaza...Jezreel, Ziklag, Gezer. I had learned to walk and talk, played, gone to school, made friends, worked, sinned and repented, read and prayed and loved on holy ground. God had provided this land not primarily for farming and mining and logging, but for salvation. A holy land requires the proper names to evoke its character. Numbers don't do it.

There are nine place names in the list, but I didn't find much personal use for the last three. Moab, Edom, and Philistia were enemies, and I didn't have a very strong sense of enemy in those days.

Except for those trucks, those bully trucks hurtling out of the darkness and puncturing my fire hose. I would yell after them, Moabite! Edomite! Philistine! They never heard me, of course, but there was considerable satisfaction in having access to some biblically sanctioned invective.

Of the three names, Edomite, with support from Psalm 137 and the prophet Obadiah, eventually rose to the top as my invective of choice. Those who crossed me, irritated me, made life difficult for me, were labeled as Edomites. I would mutter it under my breath, "You stupid Edomite! You good-for-nothing Edomite! Edomite scum!"

It was twenty years before I got the final movement of this prayer into my praying life. I had been a pastor for fourteen or fifteen years and one day realized that I had quite missed the point of how Psalm 108 pulled the name Edomite into the prayer. When I was young, I was so delighted I had a word I could use to curse people I didn't like, or who didn't like me, that I failed to pay attention to how the psalmist used that word. By now I had acquired extensive experience with Edomites. Edomites continued to take me by surprise, just like those truckers did, invading my practice of the presence of God, my work in the name of God, my relished rhythms as I participated in the glory of God in my congregation. It is always a surprise to us pastors, isn't it, when we realize how many people there are who do not want us to do our work, who have no idea what we are doing, who think nothing of interrupting us with their noisy agendas—Edomites.

The noticing took place gradually, but eventually it forced me to remove Edom from my vocabulary of invective and install it in my vocabulary of petition.

Here is how Edom ends up in the prayer:

Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?
Hast thou not rejected us O God?
Thou does not go forth, O God, with our armies.
O grant us help against the foe,
for vain is the help of man!
With God we shall do valiantly,
it is he who will tread down our foes. (vv. 10-13)

I have a long way to go before I assimilate this final movement of the prayer and live it from the core of my being. But at least I now see the lay of the land: Edom is not the enemy I curse or shake my fist at or avoid or dismiss—Edom is the enemy whom I, with God's grace and help, visit and embrace.

Edom starts out as a negative: Edom is not the town I grew up in that is filled with memories of salvation, of relationship, of community; Edom is not a name I say with affection as I revel in the expansive God-revealing night skies; Edom is beyond my understanding in the purposes of God, beyond my affection, beyond my abilities to deal with.

But Edom doesn't stay a negative. For years now I've been learning to pray *for* instead of *against* Edom. Not very well many times—the sense of outrage and invective continues to linger, and all I can come up with many times is that God will *tread down my foes*. But I keep at it, praying to the God who in Jesus is teaching me to love my enemies, my dear Edomites, praying that God will *lead me to Edom*. When I started praying this prayer fifty years ago, I didn't know this is where I would end up. Prayer often involves us in what the sociologists call “unintended consequences.”

So what do I do with Edom? I ask God to bring me to Edom—the place, the person, fortified against God.

Who lead me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?

God will—and God does—over and over and over again. The person, the task, the threat, the frustration, the institution, the circumstance to which my first impulse is to curse—you stupid Edomite!—becomes, through the wonderful praying of Psalm 108, the occasion for going beyond my strength or understanding or inclination to search out the purposes of God where God is working them out, not where I am cozily domesticating them.