

Psalms of New Orientation
Psalms 23 and 114
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We know one another and ourselves by the stories we tell. When I was teaching English to Indochinese refugees in Oakland some years ago, as a way for me to get to know my classes, I asked my students to write stories of how they came to America. One man named Huong wrote about living under Communism in South Vietnam after the fall of the democratic government. He was sent away to a camp where he was worked hard, fed very little, and brainwashed. He wanted desperately to leave the country, so one night he secured a boat and with all his savings bribed the officials watching on the coast, while he and his wife and children escaped from the shore into the open ocean. The waves were treacherous, and when they lost sight of land, they had only the stars to navigate by. The family's future was totally at risk, but at least they had left the past behind them. They traveled on *hope*, that is, until a boat with pirates intercepted their path and came aboard, stole all their money and food, and raped Huong's wife and daughter. Devastated, nearly defeated, they sailed on, eventually landing in Indonesia, where they found shelter in a crowded refugee camp. There they were fed boiled pumpkin each day. (You can imagine when I brought a pumpkin pie in to school for Thanksgiving, Huong turned up his nose.) Huong's family stayed in the camp several months and then finally flew to Maine where a sponsoring church welcomed them. Maine was a long way from Vietnam, far from home and much too cold. So after a year, Huong and his family relocated to Oakland, CA, where I met them in my English class. I admire people like Huong and the courage it must have taken to leave home, risk death, suffer tremendous fear and loss, and come to a strange new land. Huong's story represents the experience of so many people who have risked danger and endured suffering and hardship to come to America. His is a story that led to new life. It's a story of transformation.

If you had to reduce the Bible to two stories, I think you'd have to pick the Exodus from the Old Testament and the Resurrection from the New Testament. Both are stories of transformation. The Exodus out of Egypt to the Promised Land is a paradigm of risk and endurance that leads to transformation--when you think of the people. But when you think of God, it is the story of faithfulness and deliverance. Psalm 114 retells the tale, rather like a ballad that sings an age-old story, one that everyone remembers. The Exodus is, in fact, the narrative memory of the Israelite people. Jews retell the story every Passover, and it helps them know who they are—a chosen people, called by God out of slavery and into freedom. We share this story with Jews, and like the Resurrection story, the Exodus story illustrates God's transforming love.

The psalmist's version of the Exodus in Psalm 114 is a poem, rich in imagery and symbolism. "The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back." Here the waters act as persons, like enemies retreating. Both the Red Sea and the Jordan River play active roles in making room for the Israelites to leave their place of oppression and then arrive in their new home of freedom. Then in the next line of the psalm, we have more figurative language: "The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs." Mountains and hills don't skip! And yet what vivid language to convey this amazing story of deliverance. Mountains and hills skipping in joy! Nature became all topsy-turvy, and something very new was happening! And the final line of the psalm spells

out the miracle of God's transforming power: "Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water."

The Psalms of New Orientation delight us with such transformation! We've been talking about Psalms of Orientation, those that convey a calm and an equilibrium. And then last week we spoke of the Psalms of Disorientation, when we cry out to God, "O Lord, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the Psalms of New Orientation, God turns a rock into a spring of water! Something hard and stuck, God loosens and frees! Miraculously, the old is no more! Instead of a rock, we have a flowing stream of pure water, cleansing and refreshing, renewing. Here is God's "New Orientation."

The history of God calling Moses and leading the Israelite people across the sea, through the desert, up the mountain, and finally over the river offers a mythic pattern that enslaved peoples have resonated with over the generations. The Exodus symbolizes the human journey with God into freedom. African Americans use the Exodus story as the archetypal journey out of slavery in what is known as liberation theology. Our closing hymn today by James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," is known as the Black National Anthem. This hymn, written in 1921, acknowledges the struggle for freedom in the African American community, and it affirms God's hope for all time.

I have seen this transformation in my own life. Some of you know parts of the story that led to my going into the ministry. Now after being here nearly a year, I want to tell you this story, so that you will know more about my family. As I anticipate becoming ordained this week, I can't help but reflect on this story. It's hard to choose from which point to start. This time, I think I'll start with when our son Eric was in high school. Eric was a great kid. Bright, likable, generous. He played basketball and tennis. He worked hard in school, got himself into UC Berkeley and there he participated in a program called Summer Bridge, helping the homeless. He collected clothes at churches and prepared meals for the hungry. Eric tried to get every church in Berkeley to donate one room to house a family that was homeless. It wasn't a very realistic plan, but we couldn't help but admire him for his good intention. One time when Eric came home for the holidays, he arrived in a flimsy, baggy windbreaker. It was cold and I asked him where his good jacket was. He said he had given it away to someone in Berkeley whom he had met on the street. He said simply, "The man was cold." Eric tried to get us to sell our excess furniture that vacation and give the money away. He wanted to give away his own bike—we convinced him that having a bicycle was not really an extravagant luxury. It was, after all, his only means of transportation. This pattern continued, and actually we thought it was admirable. We didn't see that Eric had symptoms of mental illness until several years later. It wasn't until Eric was 26 and moved back home, that we could tell he was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. Eric committed suicide September 10, the day before September 11. Sorrow engulfed our family. Now, nearly 9 years later, I see that God has carried us through these years. It sounds like a cliché to talk about the light at the end of a tunnel, but I have to say there has always been that light there for me. Even when I was surrounded by darkness, I knew there was a light ahead for me. The light came very directly in the form of a call to ministry. When I was reading a book about families dealing with death, I received the sudden thought that I might be a person who could talk to families at times of crisis and grief. Suddenly the light that was distant seemed very bright, and I saw things clearly before me. I talked with my family and the ministers I knew, two

of whom will be standing with me for ordination. I applied to seminary and, 8 years later, here I am, ministering to you, as you are right now ministering to me. In the darkest time of my life, I felt God's presence and God's call to move in a new direction, in a direction out of darkness and into light. It has been a journey that has been freeing and hopeful. One of the remarkable blessings in this journey has been that I find myself thinking about Eric's life now—I don't only think about his death. That's why my story today started with the idealistic, caring young man. Out of tragedy, out of all of our sorrows, God gives us a new perspective, a new hope—it is like a spring of fresh water.

Jürgen Moltmann, a widely read German theologian, offers what he calls a “theology of hope.” It is hope, not only for individuals, but also for the Church as a whole. In an industrialized society, in a culture with a focus on the individual, in our lives of busyness and stress, the Church can lead the way to creating community and the hopeful anticipation of God's future. Moltmann writes, “Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation *in* suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise *against* suffering” (*The Theology of Hope*, 21). Our church can be for one another both consolation for those who experience suffering, and it can be the protest that God's promise gives against suffering. There are people here, perhaps sitting in the chairs next to you who feel alone or afraid. There are those who are facing illness, broken relationships, grief, loneliness, or anxiety. As a church we can console people feeling hopeless and we can also protest against hopelessness. By our openness to God, by our openness to one another, we can affirm that suffering never has the last word.

You may have followed “Alicia's Story” in the San Francisco Chronicle several years ago. It was the journal of Alicia Parlette, a young woman who had metastasized cancer. She wrote entries for about 2 years, and each account told of the treatments, the disappointments, the pain; but also the hope of her experience. I emailed Alicia in 2006 and asked if I could share her story with my congregation. She wrote back about visiting her home church, a Lutheran Church in Walnut Creek. When she spoke of going to church, she said, “It was so healing, just being in that room. I think sometimes the most important thing about church is to not wait until you're ‘ready’ (or ...desperate,...), but to just go and be *open*. A bit like life, actually.” By attending church, we create the community that brings *consolation in suffering* and *protest against suffering*. Alicia said, “Just go and be *open*.” Alicia died this year on April 11. Her writing helped many people understand that people living with even terminal cancer can live with hope.

We need to be *open*—even vulnerable—in order to receive God into our lives. There are events all around us that tell us God is here: the changing seasons, a hopeful new treatment plan, a friend who really wants to know what you are feeling, a note of appreciation in the mail, the birth of a child, the peaceful death of a loved one, a surprising outcome to a project at work, a secure feeling of a friend's promise, the healing that happens over time, a partner's daily presence, friends to hang out with, a new church to attend....Some of these events we barely notice. Sometimes we only see darkness; we don't see the light. But if we yield to God, God's new hope breaks through. That new hope gives us a new reason for living. It is the hope of Resurrection; that out of death comes life, that no matter what happens, life goes on in new ways. God changes us so that we never return to the place where we were in Egypt, but instead God fulfills the promise to bring us milk and honey on the other side of the Jordan. Even though the memory of the journey does not completely fade away, life in Canaan will be surprisingly good.

"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 they comfort me." God does not desert us. God has a "new orientation" in mind for us.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in the garden. There she found something she couldn't have expected: new life. It became a new life orientation for her, a new reason to keep on living. "In the Garden" is Shirley's favorite hymn. We're going to miss you, Shirley, but we trust that retirement will bring you a new orientation, new experiences and more time to enjoy the things and people you love.

May we all be open to God's transforming love—may it free us and may it give us new reasons to appreciate all we have.