



Tasting God

Psalm 34:1–8

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What is the best, the most memorable meal you've ever eaten? For good reasons, not culinary-disaster ones! I don't mean your favourite foods, either; I mean meals, which are made good by more than what you put in your mouth. I've had a few truly memorable meals, so far. I'll give you my top three only, otherwise we'd be here all morning!

There was this restaurant over in London, back when I was living there, called The Auberge, which was one of my favourite places to eat. We had a meal there to celebrate finishing my doctorate, my parents and my supervisor and I. It was brilliant, start to finish; the stand-out dish was the confit duck, but the best part was the waiter, who appeared and disappeared like a magician, bearing everything from canapés to little chocolates at the end, whisking away plates and replacing them with new courses before we could even notice.

Or - in a church fellowship hall in Matanzas in Cuba. We were there on a mission visit, to learn about the church and what it was like to be Christian in Cuba. The ladies of the church fed lunch to the whole bunch of us, but the best part was dessert. Little bowls of fresh grated coconut, which still is the sweetest, nuttiest, most delicious dessert I've ever had, offset with tiny cups of very strong Cuban coffee. So wonderful, and so kind.

And if I'm just limiting myself to three, I think it'd have to be the lobsters my aunt and mother and I had in Newfoundland. We were doing a road trip from St. John's to St. Anthony, which is the northernmost and westernmost part of the island. We were staying in a little cottage near Gros Morne National Park, and got a tip on where to get lobster for our dinner, down at the harbour. So we had three of the freshest lobsters I have ever eaten: from ocean to boat to pot to plate in a span of hours. Melt in your mouth, just amazing with a little clarified butter.

Have I whet your appetites yet? Should I just say "amen" and we'll go find some lunch?

I'm no food critic or travel writer - they have real artistry when it comes to describing meals and places to eat them. But I hope I've been able to invite you into my memories, letting you sort of experience those meals with me, by way of imagination and by sharing something I appreciated and enjoyed.

Psalm 34 tries to do exactly the same thing. Not an invitation to think about lunch; but an invitation to praise.

The psalmist, David, in this case, invites everyone who hears his song to praise God with him, body and soul, constantly and exuberantly: "O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt his name together!"

But David knew that some people need more than an invitation; some people need to know why, and what they're getting into, before they start to do something. And over the course of his song, David gives his reasons: he looked for God, and God answered and helped him; he cried, and God was listening, and God heard him.

Psalms are hymns, songs to be sung to God or in worship; they are music and poetry together. And that means that psalms are works of art, and can't really be just read or thought about. Art is something we experience, that we engage with and respond to. All art, and especially music, has the power to sink deep into our minds and memories, become part of us and in that way, to shape us.

How many of you have had a hymn float up to the surface, when you needed to hear it most? How many of you have found expressions of your own faith and spiritual journey in the hymns and spiritual songs we sing? Like "Abide with me" or "Be still, my soul" in times of need and sadness; or an awe-filled "How great thou art" in times of wonder; or a faith-inspired, "Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart" in a moment when you're feeling a need to express your commitment to Jesus. But we don't only sing those hymns when we're feeling like or experiencing something similar to what's being sung about in the hymn.

Like our most familiar hymns, the psalms are likewise meant to place us, imaginatively, in a particular situation or scene; something new or something familiar, but not necessarily what we're experiencing ourselves right then. From there, the psalm draws us in, takes us on a journey through the world of the song. If we engage fully and let go, we depart the psalm at the end as different people, or at least people with a new experience of God, one we've borrowed from and shared through the psalmist.

This psalm is attributed to David, as I said, from his days before he was king of Israel. He wrote it in response to a very specific and unusual series of events in his life, a little of which we read together today from 1 Samuel. It's kind of a long story, very complicated and in the end, quite sad. David had been a close family friend of King Saul, the king of Israel, part of the king's inner circle and loved and trusted by Saul and his family. Now, we find David running away from a murderous King Saul, who is determined to see David dead.

David had a growing reputation as a leader and a warrior of considerable merit, and he was loved and respected by many of Saul's people, including Saul's own son, Jonathan. Saul grew jealous, and angry, and even threw a spear at him; things went downhill from there, so David now is fleeing, as fast and as smart as he can, to get away from Saul's wrath. So David has this idea of trying to get across the border and serve a foreign king, as an anonymous sword-for-hire. He goes to Gath and approaches the king there.

This decision...was interesting. Goliath, the great, giant warrior David killed as a boy, was Goliath *of Gath* - it's not like they'd never heard of David in that country. David goes, and is immediately recognized - surprise, surprise - and they make fun of him, calling him "king."

So David decides to get himself out of this situation by pretending to be crazy, which King Achish for some reason falls for, and David makes his escape. Today, when we read about what David did - faking mental illness - I mean, it's in poor taste, if not outright offensive, and just plain ridiculous. It is a little better than David's last escape plan, which resulted in the deaths of several priests by Saul's hand; at least in this case, only David's safety is at risk.

God must have really loved David and wanted him to be king some day, though, because in spite of his ridiculous, offensive plan, God sees to it that David makes his escape.

From there, David goes to ground in the cave of Adullam, about halfway back to Jerusalem. And we see God's hand again upon David and his life, because David's able to draw together the outcasts of Saul's kingdom, the distressed, the indebted and the embittered, and unite them - shape them - into a cohesive unit.

And it is here and in this moment, that David drafted his psalm.

Do you think it's odd to write a beautiful poem in the midst of struggling for one's life? As battle looms large? Think of our own powerful poem, written at war: In Flander's Fields. Or our closing hymn this morning, "I know not why God's wondrous grace" - did you know it was written at the end of the American Civil War? That was one of the bloodiest civil wars in modern history. By the end, over one million soldiers, civilians and slaves had been killed. Daniel Whittle, who wrote the hymn, served as an infantry officer for most of it. The vast loss of life, the violence, four years of battle and bloodshed, and even being wounded himself, must have had a profound impact on Major Whittle. And yet, at the end of it all, he could still write this uplifting hymn of trust and hope, a hymn that encourages us to experience his deep love and trust in God even among all the unknowns - the "know nots" - of our faith journeys.

So perhaps it's not that strange after all, to be so deeply moved by dire and deadly circumstances, that poetry and song - that art - is the only way to truly express and share the experience. But this is not a psalm that can only be sung when one's escaped from a murderous king.

David cleverly used a Hebrew poetic style to suggest a larger meaning. It's not a style that we're familiar with today, like a sonnet or a rhyming verse. It's called an alphabet acrostic, where each line in the original Hebrew begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from aleph to tav...from A to Z. David is communicating that he intends the experience of this psalm - of praising God - to extend beyond the immediate meaning of David's escape to always and everywhere, every praise-worthy experience in our lives.

"I will bless the Lord at all times," David wrote; "his praise shall continually be in my mouth." This perpetual state of blessing the Lord is not only for the Lord's sake, though, nor even for David's. It's for those nearby, the people listening, who needed to hear it most. The next verse makes it clear just who David is inviting into this psalm, into his experiences: "my soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad."

David's intent is to rally the "humble," which, as the psalm continues, includes the afraid, the ashamed, the distressed, the persecuted, the unhappy and the vulnerable. His beautiful psalm acts as a joyously sung testimony, bearing good news, one "poor soul" encouraging another.

There is an old, well-established and well-tended raspberry patch on our family farm. Planted by my grandfather when they moved to the farm, back in the fifties, we Webbs have been tending to it, and picking and eating raspberries, year after year, for over sixty years. From those raspberries, my mom makes the best raspberry jam. When I was going to Knox College in Toronto to train to be a minister, Mom would always send jars of jam and jelly back with me for my breakfast.

I was feeling pretty low and unhappy myself one January morning. Post-Christmas, grey and slushy sort of weather in Toronto, not the clear, cold crisp winter of home. I was sort of morosely spreading jam on my bread and bit in, and it was just...summer on the farm, right there on a damp, grey winter morning in the city.

Brilliant red, smelling like flowers, with a sweet and tart raspberry taste that exploded in my mouth, and filled my senses. In one mouthful of jam, there was memory, of home: of summer sunshine and the smell of the garden. There was history, both personal and family. And there was love: because it was made by someone who loves me, who gave it to me out of love. Funny to think of the taste of raspberry jam as a blessing from God - but it was, on that low, unhappy morning. A blessing that uplifted and encouraged me, that reminded me then and now of all the gifts worth celebrating that God gives: memory, family, home, history, and yes, even grey slushy mornings where the need to praise can burst as bright on one's tongue as a fresh raspberry.

One of the most challenging and needful tasks for every Christian is to compassionately support and faithfully witness to those who are sorrowing, grieving, hurting and even angry. We are very accustomed to being kind and gentle, a strong shoulder for someone who is stumbling. And that is good.

But occasions of great joy, of deep peace and wondrous, happy personal encounters with God - those times also need to be witnessed to, need to be pointed out, named and celebrated, by us, and through our wise guidance, by others, too.

Psalm 34 tells us what to do in circumstances worth celebrating: a wild and ridiculous escape from a hostile king, a favourable medical test result, rain after a droughty month, forgiveness where there has been anger and hurt, a brand new baby girl in the family, a peaceful moment watching the morning sun, even a really delicious jar of jam, made with love.

It's not a question of whether to bless God for these things, but how.

David makes it clear that the gifts from God worth celebrating are many and our praise all encompassing, not just for us, not just directed at God. And just as a little aside, evangelism - inviting other people into faith in Jesus - these days, it's best done not by telling someone what Jesus did for them, but by sharing, letting them imaginatively join you in your experience of what Jesus does for you, each day.

Authentic, personal faith stories - like David's deeply personal, very specific and exuberantly invitational psalm - that's the best way to witness to what we believe, to what we know to be true about God. The power of praise - like David and his psalm, like Major Whittle and "I know not why God's wondrous grace" - the power of praise coupled with that deeply personal, messy, real story, that's what moves people, what makes God and our faith in him unforgettable to us and to those we share it with.

So how do we do it? Well, psalm 34 suggests how and to who, as well, and even why. Like David, we can form our praise into something beautiful. Not necessarily a hymn or poem or artwork, though if you have creative gifts, they can certainly help you. But...there's another hymn, actually, called "There is a balm in Gilead." I can't remember exactly how it goes, but one of the verses says something like "if you can't preach like Peter, if you can't pray like Paul, go home and tell your neighbour that Jesus loves us all."

We can all show praise for God through how we live, making our lives, even the uglier, hiding in a cave, moments, a beautiful testimony of praise. Like David, the "to who" is to the humble: the afraid, the ashamed, the distressed, the persecuted, the unhappy and the vulnerable...and everyone feels at least one of those ways, at least sometime in their lives.

That's certainly what David did, in the cave of Adullam after his great escape; for the humble of Israel - the outcasts, the indebted, the embittered - he sung his praise in a way that encouraged and rallied those around him. He gathered them into his experience which was worthy of praising God over.

And if we do that, if we form our praise story into something beautiful, even simply a life that praises God, and if we tell the humble, inviting them into our praise, to praise what God has done for us with us, then they, too, might taste and see that the Lord is good.

That's the key to doing joy and praise well, to encouraging people to praise God, too: invite them into our own unique personal experiences of celebrating and loving and praising God, continually. Like David, in that cave full of outcasts, with God's help we too can transform our own blessings into joyful, faithful testimony for our friends and neighbours to hear, one poor soul to another. And we can share our joy and awe and praise, lifting their spirits, so that they, too, might join in celebrating the goodness of God. Thanks be to God, amen.