

Sundowning

Psalm 107 is a psalm of lament, a song sung by a disoriented soul watching the light drain out of the world and the shadows of death and pain pour in.

By [Elizabeth Myer Boulton](#)

July 26, 2010

During the day, her mother's confusion was manageable, more or less. They would wake up, have their tea and toast and walk around the house, noticing which flowers were waxing and which were waning. After their mid-morning nap, they would have lunch and then settle into a long game of cards or—her mother's favorite—dominoes.

"My mother is fine all day long," she'd say to the doctor. "But at night she gets so agitated, so confused. She sees things that aren't there. She thinks the house is being broken into, and when I try to help her, she backs away from me like I'm a stranger."

The doctor nodded. "We call that 'sundowning,'" he said. "When the sun goes down, dementia rises like the moon." He suggested some calming pre-bedtime rituals such as warm milk and soft music, maybe a night light.

"Think about when you were a child," he said. "When the light drained out of your room and the darkness poured in—it can be very disconcerting, very disorienting."

Psalm 107 is a psalm of lament, a song sung by a disoriented soul watching the light drain out of the world and the shadows of death and pain pour in. It is the psalm sung by someone caring for an aging parent, someone who has been newly diagnosed, someone who is lonely or scared or suffering. Yet hear how the psalmist

begins: “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

At first glance, it seems harsh and unfeeling to command the daughter whose mother is evaporating to give thanks to God. But the deep wisdom in Psalm 107 is this: God is with her. God lives and breathes and moves in the valley of the shadow of death and dementia, making mugs of warm milk, playing dominoes and whispering into the darkness, “Let there be light! Let there be hope and healing! The sun will not go down on my people!”

As people of faith, this is what we are called to believe, who we are called to be and what we are called to proclaim. The psalmist makes this very clear (here in *The Message*): “Oh, thank God—God is so good! God’s love never runs out. All of you set free by God, tell the world!”

In Mary Oliver’s tender and powerful new [collection of poems](#), she takes the psalmist’s charge to heart. Even in the valley of the shadow of grief, even in the very presence of death, her eyes and ears are open to the grace of God through creation. Meadowlarks, crows, hummingbirds, sparrows, ducks, red birds and her dog Percy all sing of a God who is at work in the world. In the poem, “Sometimes,” she sums it all up with her instruction for living a life: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

Additional lectionary columns by Myer Boulton appear in the July 27 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.