

November 15, 33A (Psalm 123)

## **In times like these, we need heaven.**

by [Libby Howe](#) in the [November 4, 2020](#) issue

I never had any use for heaven. The Christians in my life who focused on the pearly gates and the sweet by-and-by refused to take any real responsibility for this messy world. They were looking up when they should be looking down. They were looking for God to provide and be generous to them instead of looking at what they could provide to others in the more equitable sharing of wealth. They were comfortably waiting for death, enduring life's inconveniences, clucking their tongues at the immoral and improper, and halfheartedly uttering, "Well isn't that a shame," before getting back to their easy, insulated existences.

But then my mom died. I was 29 years old. She and I had been estranged in my earlier twenties but, thankfully, recovered a relationship before she was diagnosed with an aggressive and terminal cancer. The time between diagnosis and death was two months. Because of my young age, the speed at which it happened, and the abhorrent indignities I watched her suffer, I felt abandoned, betrayed, and traumatized in ways I never had before. It was the first time I suffered a grief I knew could not heal in the short span of my lifetime. Nothing could ever make it right. My broken heart cried out so many times, "There has to be more than this. This cannot be all there is for her, for me, for us." I needed to get to heaven. And I needed a song to sing on my way there.

I found the songs for my journey in the 15 psalms commonly known as the psalms of ascent (120-134). These ancient songs were first sung by God's people as they traveled long roads to the temple in Jerusalem during communal feasts and personal pilgrimages. They express the sojourner's unwavering hope in God's presence, provision, and power amid all of life's sufferings. In every psalm of ascent you will find the certainty of an eternal heavenly destination rooted in the difficulty of temporal earthly experiences.

Cassiodorus, one of the lesser known church fathers, casually referred to the whole book of Psalms as the “honey of souls.” He wrote,

Once I had sampled that honey of souls, the divine psalter, I did what longing spirits often do, and plunged eagerly in to examine and to drink in sweet draughts of the words of salvation after the deep bitterness of my active life.

When I read that phrase, I recalled a favorite musical group named Sweet Honey in the Rock. For over 40 years, this formidable all-female group has fused the music of many cultures and people but especially Black spirituals, blues, and gospel to open minds and hearts to the deepest sufferings and injustices of our time. Their most recent album, *#LoveInEvolution*, addresses the particulars of systemic racism. It is impossible to listen and not taste both the bitterness of unspeakable suffering and the sweet honey of resilient faith. They never offer hope without truth. They never offer peace without justice. And they never sing of a heaven without an earth.

Here is my abridged version of Psalm 123: “Our feet walk on the earth, but our eyes look up to heaven—trusting that you, God, provide all we need. And what we need is mercy—relief—because we’re fed up with people abusing us.” If these words were first sung by exiles, they weren’t unlike the spirituals Howard Thurman described as “inspired expressions of religious interpretation found on the lips of a people who were far removed from a familiar environment and from that emotional security common to those who live out their days in the midst of their fathers.” The only people who don’t need heaven are people who have not known grief, suffering, and injustice that is larger than a lifetime.

I do not know anyone like that, aside from perhaps very young children. In 2020, we need heaven and its songs even more. A pandemic, the evils of White supremacy, political corruption, economic inequality, the erosion of trust and truth, diminishing help for those who need it most, and so on. The list goes on too long, and our broken hearts cry out, “This cannot be all there is!” Many privileged people, including me, are just now learning how to listen to and wrestle with the cries we’ve never had to sing and we still have the luxury of choosing not to hear.

But that would be unwise. All of us need the psalms of ascent. They are freedom songs for the ages, the spirituals of the psalter, the honey of souls. When there is no end in sight, they give us a destination, a city called heaven where we can shout all

over. When all the helpers are tired and worn out, they remind us there is a balm in Gilead. When the injustices of oppression and exile kill the precious bodies and souls of God's children, these songs promise that all God's children have traveling shoes. And when it's all too much and we can't go on, these songs give us a land that is fairer than day where we will meet on the beautiful shore.