

July 2, Ordinary 13A (Psalm 13)

## **I hear the psalmist's words on the lips of the unhoused. How long, O Lord?**

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I picture the words of the psalmist on the lips of many people living without a home—many in plain sight in big-city encampments, thousands more hidden from view across America. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

Each January local officials, social workers, public safety officers, and hearty volunteers mount an exercise in not forgetting the nation's unhoused—a cumbersome and challenging effort to count every person living outside or in a temporary shelter in every community. It's called the point-in-time count, and a February 3 *New York Times* article describes it this way:

They go into the streets in search of data. Peeking behind dumpsters, shining flashlights under bridges, rustling a frosted tent to see if anyone was inside. This is what it takes to count the people in America who don't have a place to live. To get a number, however flawed, that describes the scope of a deeply entrenched problem and the country's progress toward fixing it.

In recent years the number of people experiencing homelessness nationally was counted at more than 550,000. It is indeed a flawed count; it certainly underestimates the number of people actually living without a home. But it is the best attempt we have.

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where I live, the annual count has documented around 450 people experiencing homelessness in recent years. Lancaster is routinely rated one of the most desirable places to live in the country, causing housing prices to soar in recent years. In this context last winter every shelter was

so full they had stopped even tracking new inquiries from people seeking a place to stay the night.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*

I picture the words of the psalmist on the lips of residents we serve through the affordable housing program I manage. I think of one mother kicked out of her parents' home as a young adult when she became pregnant. She had nowhere else to go.

I think of one man in his 60s who moved to our community from New York a few years ago. He was married at the time, but when both he and his wife suffered escalating mental health challenges, their marriage ended in divorce. He too had nowhere else to go, so he slept in a park for a summer before securing one of our apartments.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*

Did prayers like this cross their lips when they were alone with no place to call home? Did the nights feel like an eternity in those seasons before they found permanent housing? What enemies—real and imagined, literal and metaphorical—preyed on their fears and vulnerabilities? How could they have room in their hearts for anything but sorrow?

In her book *Shelter Theology*, about the religious beliefs and practices of people experiencing homelessness, Susan J. Dunlap observes preaching that is focused on good news, encouraging testimony, frequent expressions of gratitude, and a belief that God has and will provide in seemingly impossible circumstances. In summing up the theological perspective Dunlap witnesses among those she serves in a local shelter, she says:

We might be prone to imagining God's redemptive activity among people without homes to be limited to a departure from homelessness into a life with steady housing, employment, family, relationships, and church affiliation. . . . [However,] many times, God is present in ways that *do not* fix any external circumstances but that *enable people to survive* in the midst of difficult circumstances.

I have often wondered in my reading of the Psalms how it is that so often the writer can turn from suffering and despair to hope and praise. What relief, what sign, what deeper feeling of conviction emboldened the psalmist to pivot from “Will you forget me forever?” to “My heart shall rejoice in your salvation”?

Did something in the writer’s situation change to give evidence of God’s activity? Or was the act of giving voice to suffering enough to remember and see afresh how God was present?

Dunlap’s deep dive into the spiritual worlds of people living unhoused points to the latter. For all the value of advocating for a more equitable economy and social programs aimed at alleviating poverty and homelessness, it may be the power of familiar ancient scripture putting words to one’s pain that makes it possible to carry through to another day.

The words of the psalmist remind me that for all my good intentions, it will not be the career nonprofit worker who saves another person from the trauma of living unsheltered. It will be a divine steadfast love and compassion older than time that creates strength to keep singing.