

Practicing gratitude in hard times (Psalm 107)

Sometimes celebratory texts like Psalm 107 are as difficult as the binding of Isaac.

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I first learned about the concept of a gratitude practice through a friend and classmate of mine during my first year of grad school. At the bottom corner of her laptop screen, she has a place to name three gratitudes each day. Morning after morning, whatever is happening in her life, she writes out her three gratitudes. I've seen notes on her fridge that say things like, "Name your gratitudes!" That's the kind of contagious, positive energy she has around gratitude, one that makes you want to practice gratitude, too.

Less than a year after I met her, I grew seriously ill with a poorly understood neurological illness. Until that point, I had resisted adopting a gratitude practice of my own. But as I grew sicker, eventually I wrote out my own note: "Name your gratitudes!" It sat within sight for the worst of my illness, right besides a verse from Job.

Texts like Psalm 107—with its triumphant celebration and insistence that God delivers the faithful out of their distress—can be just as difficult as classically thorny texts like the binding of Isaac. In good times, it's easy to agree with the psalmist: God rescues those who wander "in desert wastes" and brings them to "an inhabited town." Yet in hard times, we are forced to admit that the psalmist's words, which we

desperately want to be true, are not always so—at least not in the way they seem. Yes, there are times we feel we have been delivered from the desert. But there are also times where we seem to wander forever without coming home: the sudden loss of a loved one, the illness that doesn't get better, the pointless cruelty unfurling in gruesome detail on the news.

How can we proclaim with the psalmist that God “satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things?” How can we go to church and read a psalm that begins, “O give thanks”? Gratitude can be scandalous.

But this simple reading of Psalm 107 is not the only way to read it, and gratitude does not need to be simple either. In the first place, the psalm gives voice to hard times, when it seems like the soul has “fainted within.” In sorrowful stretches of life, it is good for our sorrow to be witnessed. Recited in community, the psalm says to those most hurting: *you are seen*.

But just as important, the psalm directs us to God's saving work, God's “steadfast love” and “wonderful works.” Beneath the surface is an insistence that God is always with us in the desert, one way or another; that there is always some goodness and love that follow us even as the conditions of life seem to deteriorate and pain deepens. Giving thanks in hard times is not about pretending away life's difficulties. It's about finding the love of God that has burrowed its way into them—a love that is greater than tragedy and outlasts it, even when it can't take it away.

In the end I fell out of my gratitude practice. I have never been good at regimented schedules, tasks I'm supposed to do every day. Still, something from this practice of thanksgiving stuck with me. My illness improved, but it left me with a disability and a host of other health problems—halfway in the wilderness and halfway in the town. I think that's often how it goes. Whatever the place, good or bad, love follows us, in the smallest and biggest of ways. And just as we bear witness to sorrow, we should bear witness to love, too: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”