

June 14, Ordinary 11A (Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19)

The psalmist's declaration of love is also a declaration of voice.

by [Kerry Hasler-Brooks](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

Published on June 8, 2026

Psalm 116 is a psalm of thanksgiving. Psalms 113–118 comprise the Hallel, a set of praise psalms that have been used together since ancient times to celebrate the Passover. As a result of this Passover connection, Psalm 116 is also one of the essential lectionary texts used in many Christian traditions on Maundy Thursday.

Despite this standardization within Jewish and Christian traditions, many scholars have noted that Psalm 116 is peculiar and disruptive within the context of the book of Psalms.

Joshua T. James argues that the psalm is marked by oddities of genre and structure that make it difficult to interpret. These oddities begin in the first line of the song, specifically “the worshipper’s powerful, but uncharacteristic” proclamation that begins the psalm: “I love the Lord.” Whereas thanksgiving psalms begin most often, according to Jerome Creach, by vowing to trust in God, to seek God, or to wait on God, Psalm 116 opens with a declaration of love that is unique across the psalms. As I consider this declaration of love and the psalm that follows from it, I am struck by several things.

As the psalmist declares their love for God, they suggest a story that begins before that love, and it is a story rooted in voice: “I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my supplications.” The psalmist loves a listening God who has held onto their voice and heard their pleading. This declaration of love, thus, is also a declaration of voice. The psalms are, of course, songs that invite us to hear the human voices that raised them aloft in the ancient world and raise them still today. They are poems written down in the biblical record but meant always to be spoken out loud, sung, and brought to God and to the world in the voices of the people. In Psalm 116 the psalmist bears witness not only to a listening God but to their own voice and finds great purpose—even pleasure—in the use of that voice throughout the song.

The psalmist uses their voice boldly and dynamically. They speak most obviously directly to their community, giving careful instruction on God’s gracious deliverance and modeling public gratitude and praise. However, as Joel LeMon notes, the psalmist also speaks directly to God, calling out, “O Lord” twice in the psalm to demonstrate the very different ways we can and must speak to God.

In the first example, the psalmist makes a desperate plea to God: “O Lord,” I pray, save my life!” Though embedded in a past-tense quotation—and not actually included in this lectionary assignment—the psalmist calls out to God in anguish and pleads for salvation. In the world of this psalm, to speak suffering out loud to God, be it in a whisper or a scream, is to trust that God will hear, attend to, and restore all that has gone wrong. As LeMon writes, “if YHWH hears one calling YHWH by name, then there will be a resolution,” an ordering to the disordered, a righting of the injustice that God cannot allow to endure.

In the second example, near the end of the psalm, the psalmist again cries out, “O Lord,” but this time the speech act is not a quote from the past; it is a live moment of direct speech from the psalmist to God:

O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
And call on the name of the Lord.

In this extended speech made directly to God, the psalmist has shifted from suffering to thanks, because God has saved and delivered but also because God has heard. Through the psalm, the psalmist has found deliverance at God's hand, but the psalmist has also found their voice. In awe of all that God has done, the psalmist asks, "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?" The answer is immediate and clear: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."

This psalm must be read, at least in part, as a call to testify. Rebecca Poe Hays urges us to find hope in the testimony of this psalm: "The God of the past heard, cared, and delivered, so we can be sure that God will continue to do so." And like the psalmist we can raise our voices to our communities, ourselves, and our God. We can make known all that we suffer and all that we hope. We can speak out loud the anguish that is here and that will inevitably return to us again and again, and we can speak out loud the promise of justice and peace that we have already seen and will see again.