

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

SERIES: SONGS OF THE SOUL



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Psalm 147
Second Message
Scott Grant
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Psalm 147

I've taken an annual personal retreat for twenty-four years now. Although I always go to the same place north of the Bay, each retreat has been different. No retreat, however, was as different as the one I took earlier this year, February 26-28.

It was different in no small measure because it was wet, really wet, especially north of the Bay. Just before I was scheduled to leave on my retreat, the Russian River jumped its banks and flooded much of the town of Guerneville. However, the rain was not as heavy farther west, where I was heading.

Before leaving, I asked the Lord if I should continue with my plans in spite of the heavy rains that were predicted for that day. I didn't hear him say no. Therefore, I got into my Mazda 3 and headed north.

As I drove north on Interstate 280, it was raining off and on, which gave me hope that maybe the weather wouldn't threaten my trip. I stopped in San Francisco at my usual place for breakfast in the Sunset. After breakfast, I resumed my journey, crossed the Golden Gate, and headed for the coast. The rain became more consistent, more intense.

I stopped, as I always do, at the Muir Beach Overlook, which affords a spectacular view of the coast. It's a popular place, which gets lots of visitors, even tour buses of visitors. This time was different. I was the only one there. I assumed that the rain and the wind scared off the usual tourists. Not me. I had to stop.

I didn't stay for long, but I stayed for long enough to feel the power of the wind. It made me meditate on the power of God.

Waters rising

I continued north, along Highway 1. The rain became more intense. At certain points, small rivulets of rainwater formed and crossed the roadway. I drove cautiously, especially when coming to these rivulets, and crossed them successfully.

As I passed the town of Olema, I looked to the left. I noticed, for some reason, the "vacancy" sign at the Olema House, an inn. I continued along Highway 1. Normally, just north of Olema, I take a left turn on Bear Valley Road, but the road was closed—because Olema Creek had flooded the road, I assumed. So I continued straight, planning to take the long way.

But the creek had also spilled over onto Highway 1. Should I risk it or not? My destination was only a few miles away. A pickup truck in front of me seemed to make it through all right. I had made it through a dozen or so rivulets to this point.

I went for it.

I drove on the extreme right side of the road and even on the shoulder, thinking that the water would be shallower there. I pressed on until I couldn't.

My car stalled. The electrical system shut down.

There I was, on the side of the road, and the floodwaters were rising. I tried to call for a tow truck, but I couldn't find the phone number of an operator anywhere close to where I was. I kept searching and fumbling and trying nevertheless.

I never felt threatened. I felt certain that at any time I could get out of my car and, uh, wade to safety. I felt that my retreat was threatened, however. And I live for these personal retreats. I live off them for a whole year.

Two pickups

As I continued to fumble with my phone, I noticed that a pickup truck had stopped to the left of me. I rolled down my window, and the driver asked me if I needed any help. Praise God! Needless to say, I answered yes.

I opened my car door, and water trickled into my car. I waded to the pickup truck, in water up to my knees.

Just then, the driver of another pickup truck stopped. This driver said he would go on ahead, into Point Reyes

Station, and bring back a tow truck. He came back only a few minutes later, however, and said he couldn't get into town because of the flood.

However, he said he had a tow strap in his truck and offered to attempt to tow my car to high ground. He attached the strap to the back of my car and towed me backwards, to higher ground. Praise God again! The first pickup truck driver circled back to check on me. Discerning that the second driver had everything under control, he continued on.

Now, would my car start? I turned the key. Yes! Praise God again!

I drove back to Olema in the pouring rain and pulled into the parking lot of the Olema House. One thing was clear at this point: I wasn't going to make it to Inverness this day.

The inn

Now what? Should I turn around and go home? Should I attempt to drive farther inland, to San Anselmo, and see if I could find a place to stay there? Or should I inquire about staying in the Olema House? From the outside, the inn looked pricey, like a resort.

I asked the Lord, "Should I stay here?" I didn't hear him say no. And, after all, I had noticed the "vacancy" sign for some reason.

I entered the inn, approached the front desk, and explained my predicament to the innkeeper, informing him that I was stranded.

He looked down, smiled, and said, "I think we can accommodate you. Normally, our rooms are \$250 a night, but we'll give you the stranded rate: \$125."

The innkeeper gave me the key to Room 11. It was gorgeous, featuring a king bed topped by about twenty-eight well-positioned pillows. Praise God again!

I returned to the lobby and asked the innkeeper if I could place my shoes, the only pair I brought with me, downstairs by the fire so that they could dry out. He said sure but just asked me to be quiet because there was a meeting taking place in that room.

It turns out I walked into the middle of some kind of leadership retreat. Everyone was friendly, however, and the facilitator even offered me some coffee and cookies.

I left my shoes by the fireplace but took the coffee and cookies with me.

The retreat

I returned to my room and began my retreat, not in Inverness, as I had expected, but in Olema. I prayed. I journaled. I read.

About two hours later, I went to retrieve my shoes, and the facilitator of the retreat invited me to stay for the meeting.

Because it seemed to me that the Lord had led me to this place and even to these people, I decided to stay. The facilitator, a woman named Kelly, asked me to introduce myself. I told the group that I was a pastor and that I was on my way to a personal retreat in Inverness before the flood stopped me.

For some reason, I felt I belonged. I felt somehow connected to these people. I listened to two of the attendees tell their stories. Both of them were struggling to make sense of their vocational lives, but near as I could tell, they were doing so without God.

After listening to the second story, I decided it was time to return to my own retreat. Before I left, however, I told them that I was available for pastoral counseling if anyone was interested.

I returned to my room, where I prayed, journaled, and read for a while longer before bedding down for the night. No one sought me out for pastoral counseling, either that evening or the next morning.

Should I stay, or should I go?

I woke up. I prayed, journaled, and read.

What would this day hold? Should I stay at the Olema House another night? Should I press on to Inverness? What about the roads? Should I go home? I wondered.

I went to breakfast, which was provided by the inn. I saw Kelly, the facilitator of the retreat, and though she was extraordinarily welcoming the previous night, she was indifferent to me this morning. I took no offense; I just assumed she had other things on her mind, like leading her retreat. I wondered if her response was perhaps some sort of sign that I should move on.

I walked outside, and the rain had stopped. The floodwaters had receded. I walked down Highway 1 a few paces and could tell that the barrier and the “road closed” sign had been removed from Bear Valley Road.

I asked the Lord, “Should I try to go to Inverness?” I didn’t hear him say no.

I packed my suitcase, left Room 11, thanked the innkeeper for his hospitality, got in my car, and turned the key. The car started.

Saint Columba

I headed down Highway 1, turned left on Bear Valley Road. The road was wet but not flooded. Even so, based on what I had experienced on the roads the previous day, I was nervous as I made my way north.

Finally, about twenty-four hours later than expected, I arrived at one of my favorite places in the world: The Saint Columba Episcopalian Church and Retreat House. Praise God again! I ascended multiple sets of stairs and made my way to my room on the fourth floor.

I tried to settle in. I prayed. I journaled. I read. But I couldn’t settle in. I think I was a little traumatized by what I had experienced the previous day, and it took me longer than usual to feel that I was meeting with God. Eventually, though, I relaxed.

When I go on these personal retreats, I spend long hours alone, holed up in my room. It’s a good place to be holed up, though: the room is perched atop the church and affords a view of the Tomales Bay off to the left. Nevertheless, I’m not a monk. For dinner, I always leave the retreat house and drive to a restaurant in Point Reyes Station, a few miles away.

After being by myself for most of the day, I especially enjoy going out. I especially appreciate whatever human interaction I can generate. I usually try to talk up the waitperson a little. I bring a book, order a glass of wine, and nurse it for an hour and a half. Even if I hardly talk to anyone, I enjoy the environment. There are people here!

Beef jerky and raw carrots

I wasn’t going anywhere this night, however. Although Bear Valley Road was open, the road to Point Reyes Station was closed. And I didn’t all feel confident driving my car at this point. I stayed at the retreat house.

I had some food with me—some beef jerky and some raw carrots—so I would be all right for dinner if you want to call it that. So I went downstairs to gnaw on my beef jerky and raw carrots.

Just before I did, however, I decided to pray. It felt like a frivolous prayer, but because the Lord had provided for me in such an unusual way up to this point, I felt confident that I could at least ask.

I said, “Lord, I’d like to have a glass of wine with dinner.” I didn’t know how that could possibly happen, but I asked nevertheless.

Biblically, drinking wine in moderation is permissible, though of course for some, drinking any kind of alcohol is not a good idea, because one glass isn’t enough. (Andy Burnham, our recovery pastor, says if it takes me an hour and a half to drink a glass of wine, he’s not worried about me.)

People come and go at the retreat house. Some arrive for a retreat, and some leave from a retreat. Church members come and go. When I went downstairs to the kitchen, a couple had just left. A woman in the kitchen said she had made some quinoa soup and offered me a bowl.

“Uh, I’d love a bowl of soup!”

“Do you like avocado?”

“I love avocado.”

She heated up a bowl of soup, sliced an avocado, and placed it on top.

And, by the way, she told me that the couple who had just departed left a bottle of wine in the refrigerator.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Uh, I’d love a glass of wine!”

I opened the refrigerator, reached for the bottle of wine, and poured what was left of it into a glass. There was exactly one glass of wine left.

Instead of beef jerky, raw carrots, and water, I sat down to a delicious bowl of quinoa-avocado soup, paired with a glass of Napa Valley Chardonnay. Praise God again!

Has the best already been?

It was not lost on me that there was biblical resonance with what I was experiencing. I was rescued from the flood. I was stranded on the side of the road, and a Good Samaritan—two Good Samaritans, in fact—had compassion on me. There was room in the inn. The water that I was expecting to drink with dinner somehow became wine. And of course, there was that time that Jesus turned beef jerky and raw carrots into quinoa soup with avocado on top. Well, not every experience matched up biblically!

It seemed to me, as I prayed, journaled, and read, that in two days, the Lord was showing me the story of my life. The Lord saved me when I was sixteen years old, and he has blessed me in multiple ways and through multiple people ever since. Whatever crises I've faced, the Lord has seen me through, often in unexpected ways. It's been a thrilling adventure. Through it all, the Lord has shown me himself, and he has taken my breath away.

But has the best of it already been? Sometimes I have wondered. The adventure has been so awesome, what could be better than what has already been? Sometimes I have wondered.

Several years ago, when I could no longer deny that I had reached middle age, I was conversing with a friend and asked him, "What is it about middle age?" You've probably heard of the expression "What it is is what it is." My friend said regarding middle age, "What it is is what it's going to be." In other words, in middle age, you have to fight the tendency simply to expect the expected, to settle for the routine.

Yet here I was, in the middle of a thrill-ride of a retreat in which almost nothing turned out as expected, and almost everything turned out better than expected. I sensed that the Lord was telling me something like this: "Do you think that maybe the best has already been and that the adventure is winding down? Try this."

Psalm 147

Then there was Psalm 147.

When I was in my room in the Olema House, I was reading a book that quoted Psalm 147:3: "He heals the brokenhearted / and binds up their wounds." After seeing that, I decided to read the entire psalm:

Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.
The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
The LORD lifts up the humble;
he casts the wicked to the ground.

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!
He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.
He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.
His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,
but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!

Praise your God, O Zion!
For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.
He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.
He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules.
Praise the LORD!

Immediately, I noticed the connection between the psalm and the storm I had weathered:

—"Great is our Lord, and abundant in power."

—"He covers the heavens with clouds; / he prepares rain for the earth; / he makes grass grow on the hills."

— “[W]ho can stand before his cold?”

— “[H]e makes his wind blow and the waters flow.”

Verse 11

For the last few years during my personal retreats, I have usually settled on one or two or three biblical texts. I simply read them multiple times and watch if something in those texts eventually grabs me. Then, I meditate on what grabs me.

I decided that Psalm 147 would be my text for the retreat. I read it multiple times. At some point, verse 11 grabbed me: “but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, / in those who hope in his steadfast love.”

The Lord was telling me to hope in his covenant love, his loyal love, his never-dying love. If I do so, I will be assured that the best hasn’t already been. In fact, I will be assured that the best, especially in light of what we have just studied in Revelation 21-22, is yet to be.

Moreover, he was telling me that whatever comes my way, I can and should apply my mind and heart to hope in his steadfast love. Is something not going the way I want? Hope in his steadfast love. There’s no guarantee that things will turn out the way I want, but that doesn’t matter. If I hope in his steadfast love, I will believe that he will bring something good out of whatever comes my way.

First, the Lord was telling me to hope in his steadfast love. Second, he was telling me to believe that he was taking pleasure in me as I was hoping in his steadfast love. When I hope in the Lord, the Lord is pleased with me. Based on verse 11, if I want to please God, what should I do? I should hope! I should hope in his steadfast love.

The adventure continues

What happened to me on my retreat? People I had never met before blessed me in unique and beautiful ways: the two motorists, the innkeeper, the retreatants at the Olema House, and finally the retreatant at St. Columba.

The adventure continues. As I hope in the steadfast love of the Lord, I also hope that I can bless others the way that others have blessed me.

On many mornings, you will find me sitting on our front porch. I take my Bible and a cup of coffee with me to meet with the Lord. At 7:30 a.m., two women from the neighborhood usually pass by on their morning walk. We usually wave to each other and say hi.

One morning a few weeks ago, I made some extra coffee. I brought my French press outside with me, along with two travel mugs. Sure enough, at 7:30, the two women were passing by. This time, I waved them over and told them, “I made some coffee for you.”

They came up to me, whereupon I asked them if they wanted milk or sugar. They said black was fine. I told them to leave the travel mugs on the porch if I’m not here when they return, and I sent them on their way.

What it is is what it’s going to be? Nah!