

What's the point of engaging any ancient writing, including the writings we call sacred? We all have our reasons, but mine was clarified when I saw *Arrivals*, with Amy Adams as a linguistics professor called on by the military when a spacecraft from Somewhere Else hovered over a field in Montana. Surrounded by massive military presence, the professor has been called in to decode any communication that might be forthcoming from the craft. Eventually Beings from Beyond emerge from the craft projecting a transparent force field, behind which they trace out circles in various configurations. The Generals assume hostile intent. But for the Amy Adams character this is the opportunity of a lifetime. What kind of intelligence do they have? What do they know that we don't? What do we know that they don't? Do we share anything in common because we inhabit the same universe, despite coming from different worlds?

Ancient writings are like communications from another world. Their perceptions born of different cultural-linguistic lenses that like all cultural lenses including ours, obscure some things and reveal others. We can approach them like the Generals in *Arrivals*—suspicious, ready to read hostility of intent--or like the Amy Adams character, curious to understand their take on things, especially those things that our cultural & historical lenses might filter out. What is their version of humanity like, their way of expressing emotions, their way of engaging transcendent realities, their perception of the natural world, what interests them, what concerns them?

Think of all the communications from 2500 years ago, lost to us, but these have been preserved. What do they contain that might be helpful, might expand our perceptions? Here's one, Psalm 27.

“The Lord is my light and my rescue. Whom should I fear? The Lord is my life's stronghold. Of whom should I be afraid?”

This is a person surrounded by threats. Any threat may be real or imagined, but the fear is always real. I can relate. I'm more aware of threat than any time in my life and that includes growing up with drills in school for nuclear war (we didn't need or have active shooter drills). It feels like our social fabric, our institutions are fraying. How close are we to civil war? Email from IHA. How bad is Omicron? What's the next variant gonna be like? Not to mention the many ways that many of you experience threat, that I never will. Especially since this person from long ago and far away, has experienced G-d as a rescue, a stronghold, a safe refuge when surrounded by threats, I'm curious. What's that like? How does one practice that? Well first they express the powerful emotions around threat.

“When evildoers draw near to me to eat my flesh—my foes and my enemies are they—they trip and they fall.”

This Psalms give considerable attention to one particular threat experience—not so much disease or natural disasters, but the hostility of other people. And they express something that isn't very easy to express openly in white collar culture—**injury anger**, and the profound vulnerability it represents. In many settings it's not cool to express injury anger, the rage that comes with betrayal, especially. But these writings from long ago and far have no problem with it: Job freely expresses injury anger, Jesus too in John's gospel especially. Let's stay with this.

We've all been in settings that inhibit expression of emotion or impose pressure to only express it if it can be perfectly proportional—not exaggerated, yet honest. Depending on our personality/upbringing we might spend so much energy getting it pitch perfect, that there's no energy left to express it the way it actually feels before we mute the feeling with all our frickin' balance. Nuance doesn't cut it when you're dealing with injury-anger, because injury-anger is stark, ***"When evildoers draw near to eat my flesh—my foes and my enemies are they"***

Not so long ago I accessed some injury anger, I had to suppress years earlier, when the injury occurred because there were other priorities. The injury anger went deep underground, but after some years it wanted to see the light of day, but I was ignoring it ... so it came in dreams where I was getting attacked by bears, wild dogs, in one I'm walking down the street I grew up on, see a gator in the middle of the road, it notices me and like flash it's after me ... and I wake up in a fright kicking my bedcovers. This line in Psalm 27 depicting evildoers drawing near to eat my flesh ... caught my attention because of those dreams and gave me words to express my injury anger consciously. Since then, disturbing dreams have abated.

Last night we saw the news about a gunman holding a rabbi and 4 members hostage in a Dallas synagogue. Just then, Julia got a call from a friend saying Temple Beth Emeth had just sent an email announcing a service to pray, so we logged on ... 140 devices tuning in at such short notice ... with rising hate crimes, including anti-Semitism, our Jewish friends, many with parents or grandparents who survived holocaust, some who knew someone killed in the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburg, were feeling their vulnerability to evildoers threatening them (not just a deranged gunman but the wicked people prodding them from high places) ... expressed here as well: ***"When evildoers draw near to eat my flesh—my foes and enemies are they—they trip and they fall"***

Picturing hostile actors who threaten you or your loved ones ... picturing them tripping and falling, can be cathartic ... and the Psalmist was free to express this in their hymn to God. Paul quotes a great line from Proverbs about not seeking revenge: ***"If your foe is hungry, feed him bread, and if he thirsts, give him water ... in so doing you heap live coals on his head"*** Mercy and anger *easily* co-exist The ancient writers grant more latitude of expression than so many half-inch deep/pious Christians do.

The psalm reflects the intensity, the many layers of injury anger—a thread running through the whole length of it: this experience of being subjected to close-range personal hostility (often in the Psalms, it involves the betrayal of family or friends). Like this next line: ***"Though a camp is marshalled against me, my heart will not fear, Though battle is roused against me, nonetheless, do I trust"***

Robert Alter has a footnote on these images: ***though a camp is marshalled.../ though battle is roused*** *It's not entirely clear whether the speaker is literally under assault by armed enemies seeking to kill them, or whether the martial imagery is a metaphor for other kinds of hostility. Later, in vs. 12, at any rate, the voracious foes attempt to destroy him by underhanded judicial proceedings rather than military means [think of court rulings or jury verdicts that don't render justice, or what it's like to be sued by someone with deep pockets who just wants to hurt us]*

Rousing others against us ... This is such a prominent part of our politics now, isn't it? Angry, hostile, powerful voices amplified by profit generating FB algorithms—rousing others against us. Sowing suspicion and alarm in our own family members toward us, toward perspectives we hold, sometimes toward who *are*, dumping toxic waste into some of our closest connections.

Nonetheless do I trust ...

In the Psalms trust is never a naïve or a “bury your head in the sand trust.” It’s always trust in the face of fear, hostility, threatening circumstance. The writer is part of a community, a tradition going back hundreds of years, of nurturing a sense of G-d as a being one might trust ... So different than the surrounding gods who were capricious, could care less about their worshippers. Maybe a short-hand way of saying it: this is the God of the black church, of black Jesus, not the God of what my old pastor used to call, “the stumbling monster of Christendom” This is the kind of trust practiced by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, not the impostors of market-savvy, brand conscious, culturally relevant churchianity.

So this ancient writing from a very different world—is modeling how to make this inward move toward a divine being who can be trusted, in spite of so much that cannot be trusted. If we so desire, if it scratches an itch that we have, we can learn to practice it.

Nonetheless do I trust. One thing do I ask of the Lord, it is this that I seek—that I dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the Lord’s sweetness, and to gaze on His palace. For He hides me in His shelter on the day of evil. He conceals me in the recesses of His tent, on a rock He raises me up. And now my head rises over my enemies around me. Let me offer in his tent sacrifices with joyous shouts. Let me sing and hymn to the Lord. (27: 3b-6)

The Psalmist is part of a community, part of a tradition that has imagined, envisioned, you could say cobbled together from surrounding forms and structures of the Ancient Near East—something that fosters experience in fits and starts of a divine presence that feels like home, a sanctuary, the calm eye of hurricane, where all the chaos is hushed ... And the temple is the physical sign, the representation of this sense of deep belonging and safety, of sanctuary

The writer couldn’t live in the sanctuary 24/7, but they wanted to ... and the desire for a thing is a taste of the thing desired. In fact, the Psalm probably comes from a place of exile in Babylon, the temple in Jerusalem having been destroyed ... But the desire for sanctuary, for belonging, for home, is a taste of sanctuary, belonging, home.

And always in this psalm, the surrounding sense of vulnerability, of insecurity ***Hear O Lord, my voice when I call, and grant me grace and answer me. Of You, my heart said: “Seek my face.” Your face, Lord, do I seek, Do not hide your face from me, do not turn Your servant away in wrath. You are my help. Abandon me not, nor forsake me, O God of my rescue. Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord would gather me in. Teach me O Lord, your way, and lead me on a level path because of my adversaries. (27: 7-10).***

Isn’t that tender, ***“though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord would gather me”***

When certain loved ones die, we may well feel forsaken by them. The part of the brain that bonds to a parent or primary caregiver is the same part of the brain that bonds to a romantic partner ... so their leaving even by death feels like being forsaken. Such vulnerabilities we carry

With the next verse, we return to anguish caused close-at-hand hostility: ***Do not put me in the maw of my foes, for false witnesses rose up against me, outrageous deponents***

Another layer of this special interest in the Psalms ... danger from foes. Then again, the pivot:

If I but trust to see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living—Hope for the Lord! Let your heart be firm and bold and hope for the Lord.

I read this as human from the distant past, speaking to themselves as we all do, not addressing a congregation or any other audience ... I see them composing these words to express a longing in their heart to trust a Higher Power who cares When I regard it that way ... it feels as though I'm decoding an intelligence from Elsewhere, a Being from Beyond my hyper-contemporary world, working things out that trouble them at 2:30 in the morning, as they lay awake in the dark, and it opens up a path that I too might want to explore. Here endeth my offering for today

MEDITATION

Over the next 2-3 minutes, I'll slow read the psalm, a few verses at a time with a 10 second pause between portions, and I want to suggest, not trying to make the Psalm your own, but listening to the words, as though a fellow human being were sharing them, vulnerably. Like you might listen to a fellow sufferer at an AA meeting, sharing ... and you want to support them by listening, by hearing them, receiving their offering so to speak

Let's begin by centering down, taking a few relaxing deep breaths, in through the nose out through the mouth, noticing the points of contact between the body and the chair, the feet on the floor...