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## Holy Writ and Human Writ

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# Holy Writ and Human Writ

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by James Calvin Schaap

*The varied and resplendent riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words; so much so, that I well know that whatever I say will be far from approaching the excellence of the subject.*

If John Calvin stepped back from his own words on the Psalms, as he does here in the opening lines of the Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, then how much farther should I distance myself from promising anything fresh or especially thoughtful about the world's most precious collection of po-

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ems. There are those—and they are legion—who have made whole careers of Psalm study; millions more have spent professional lifetimes preaching on texts from this wonderful book; and billions of readers, literally, have found themselves somewhere in the prayers. Who am I to say anything, much less anything new?

My own Psalm study, something I began about a half dozen years ago, was really undertaken for myself, as Calvin claims was his. My writing rhythm, for the last twenty years or so, was to take on a novel—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—and, when finished, do meditations. Novels bring a writer directly into life, into human character with a ferocity that may well be only slightly understood by readers. As Larry Woiwode once told me, “Who knows sin better than a believer?” Diving into the souls, into the very character of the live human beings I’ve always tried to render on the page, means uncovering both of the seemingly mutually exclusive characteristics all we humans carry—a character both directed by sin, by our own will and wishes—human depravity—and yet endowed like no other creature with the very image of our Maker. The paradox of our humanity is that we are both simultaneously. Writing fiction requires trips into the human holy of holies, where, not surprisingly, what one discovers and uncovers isn’t—nor will it ever be—totally angelic.

When I finish the novel writing, I like to meditate—perhaps I should say “I need to meditate”; and so it was I decided to use the psalms, especially those that offered a landscape not unlike the eastern edge of the Great Plains, where I live. I looked not

only for psalms with agricultural metaphors, like 23, but also for those that celebrated yawning vistas so characteristic of prairie and the plains. I chose psalms that I thought could have been written in the backyards of the place where I've lived for the last 35 years.

And then, I told myself, I'll do it for a year—write 365 of them. Was I thinking about publication?—every time I touch the keyboard I think about publication; but I didn't set out to create some kind of collection. I set out to cleanse my soul—that's bad theology, I know, but my guess is you will both understand and forgive my heresy.

I've been instructed from the time I was old enough to listen that reading the Bible—that “bible study”—is not only helpful but essential to the Christian life. The American Puritans considered themselves “people of the book” because to them—and to my people—the heart of the human experience and trajectory of human destiny is found within the covers of Calvin's own Geneva Bible.

An open Bible was just one of the blessings of the Reformation, a new age when Holy Scripture was turned around before the altar because, with the Reformation, holy writ belonged no longer simply to the priests but to the people. It was a uniquely Protestant task to immerse oneself in the Bible, which is why the American Puritans emphasized education the way they did—people of the book needed to be able to read it.

But I have sympathy for the protective attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, pre-Reformation, because the Scriptures are really mysterious. To think just anyone can read and understand holy writ is a stretch. That's why even Calvin's Geneva Bible is awash with footnotes and gloss. And yet, the truth of the book is a child's Sunday School lesson—“we keep messing up, but God keeps taking us back.” That's what it all comes down to finally. Everything else between the covers has probably the armaments of a thousand religious wars. The Bible *is* mysterious and even dangerous, but it's also God's Word, the gospel of divine love.

Once upon a time at a religious retreat led by a couple of Reformed Jews, one of our assignments was to take a psalm apart with each other—pair off and read, say, Psalm 23, verse by verse, putting the

ideas offered therein into our own words. I found that a wonderful exercise. Why? First, it taught me how tight those great poems really are—I mean, as literature; try it sometime—you'll find it impossible to state the ideas more economically or artfully than they are rendered. Second, the exercise slowed me to a snail's pace and made me realize that a poem like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is, line after individual beautiful line, deeply meditational. “The Lord is my shepherd”—think about it, just that line. What struck me that morning was that reciting the whole psalm—something almost everyone in this room can do—may well keep the forest parked regretfully in front of each individual tree.

“Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies”—think about it. Really? Does he? Who are *my* enemies? What's on the table? What in my life *is* the table?

Once upon a time, I took my grandfather's old English-language translation of Abraham Kuyper's *To Be Near Unto God* from what I inherited of his library. I'd been a confessing Kuyperian for most of my life; but, honestly, I knew very little about the man and had read almost nothing he'd ever written. I started reading that book, a book lots and lots of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch immigrants to this country—immigrants to northwest Iowa particularly—lugged along when they came to this country. I discovered, oddly enough, that Kuyper was as thoughtful and memorable as people claimed he was.

Soon enough, I thought that maybe I should try to redo those meditations—after all, the language of that early 20<sup>th</sup>-century volume was a wooden *pre-ektone* that disappeared from church pulpits somewhere around WWII. I assumed no one would ever read that translation unless they had to because the prose was almost impossible to digest. Maybe if I tried to make it more supple with a more contemporary style, maybe—just maybe—I could bring 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers back to a voice that I found profound and a blessing.

What Kuyper taught me about meditational writing was that I didn't really have to know the original language of the Bible or be an expert in Hebrew poetry. In fact, I didn't even have to be a practiced, professional theologian or a parish preacher to find myself in the words of Scripture.

What Kuyper does in *To Be Near Unto God*, day after day, is take a verse, maybe just a fraction of a verse, from anywhere in Scripture—sometimes just a phrase—and then riff like a jazz guitarist. Just sort of read-it-and-write, take that one thought and create concentric rings around it and around it again, drawing in every inch of this life as he knew it and saw it.

Maybe it was Kuyper who taught me one of the central truths of the Reformation—that we all do indeed have access to the words of Scripture, that the Word of God doesn't simply reflect its time and place but also lives in the age of Microsoft and Tim Tebow.

I've already mentioned the inherent grubbiness of writing fiction, a condition one gains after looking deeply into the mixed motives inherent in the human character. It's also a lonely job. Often, I run around for more than a year with an entire story in my mind, a story I really can't tell anyone. Writing doesn't create fellowship, except maybe with other writers.

Writing meditations isn't any different really, because the scalpel one uses to find the heart of things is always aimed at one's own heart. Screenwriters work in teams, but most writers have to spend long hours over a keyboard with nobody over their shoulders. It's work that has to come from inside somewhere, even when we're thinking deeply about how on earth it's possible to say that the Lord God almighty, in the digital age, is really little more than a divinely good shepherd.

And here's what I found in all that singular introspection—*I'm not alone*. It may well be the most important lesson of all Scripture really—*we're not alone*. The angels who appeared on Judean Hills on Christmas Eve carried with them a huge news story—there was a baby, and the baby was the Savior of all mankind. But the other message they delivered was important too, and it goes like this: "Be not afraid." You're not in this alone, those angels might have said. This is for you and for all people everywhere. Keeping sheep like this, those angels must have known, was a lonely job; just remember, boys, you're never alone. Be not afraid.

Just one wish on my bucket list now that I am retired is to read Emily Dickinson more closely to know her better. But I'd also like to talk about her

now too, a woman who, some say, is the best of all American poets, a poet who seemed to know only that she was one, even if no one beside herself or even her loving sister-in-law ever recognized her ability, her art. Emily Dickinson was born of a stalwart Amherst, Massachusetts, family—her father a college administrator, her brother a lawyer. She was part of a family whose ancestral Calvinism may well have, long ago, lost its currency. Her father was, we might say, a cradle Calvinist, of such a temperament that it was said of him that he was known to have smiled, once. The public righteousness of the family wasn't matched by what went on behind closed doors, but inside that house, the spinster daughter and sister lived what amounted to a reclusive life.

No matter. What does matter in her life and work is that her poetry's often elusive content seems to cover just about all of the ground our own shared human consciousness and perceptions can. In that way, one might say, Dickinson—as I said, often regarded as America's greatest poet—is really everyone's poet. Somehow, we're all in Dickinson. And that's what I'd like to try to illustrate for a few minutes here, before continuing our pilgrimage into the Psalms.

Be warned—Dickinson is neither pious nor saccharine. If she has an enemy, it is the forces of cultural Christianity she found all around her—a cultural Christianity, I might mention, in decay. The God those folks worship is fiercely not hers, to be sure; she measures God by a different yardstick than her contemporaries do. Occasionally—maybe even more than occasionally—she can be downright blasphemous.

As she is here, in one of her most famous poems, a poem that celebrates her own rebellion against the cultural character of religious practice around her:

I taste a liquor never brewed,  
From tankards scooped in pearl;  
Not all the vats upon the Rhine  
Yield such an alcohol!

She says she's a drunkard, imbibing liquor unlike any from a vat or barrel, not even the very best, what we might get from "vats upon the Rhine." Little Miss Dickinson, the very height of propriety, so loves that idea of herself as a sop that she really

can't quit:

Inebriate of air am I,  
And debauchee of dew,  
Reeling, through endless summer days,  
From inns of molten blue.

She's drunk on air, on nature, on molten blue skies, stumbling along through a resplendent creation. She even associates with the creatures in her flower garden who are, like good drinking buddies, similarly inebriated with the sheer beauty of the day:

When landlords turn the drunken bee  
Out of the foxglove's door,  
When butterflies renounce their drams,  
I shall but drink the more!

When flowers will admit no more voracious bees—when butterflies stop their boozing—she says, I will simply keep drinking in the glory of a perfect day,

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,  
And saints to windows run,  
To see the little tippler  
Leaning against the sun!

Why quit now?—she asks herself. Till eternity itself, she says, she will keep drinking the loveliness of the world outside her window—the air, the sun, the sky—so that someday even angels—saints and seraphs in heaven—will waive their hats at this “little tippler,” pie-eyed, against the sun. All the way to heaven she'll be drunk on the glory of a summer's day.

Now she's pushing it, as good poets do—we call it “poetic license.” Love poetry is all overstatement—“I'll love you till the cows come home, till Ivory soap stops floating, till Niagara runs dry, forever and ever.” Such is the boast of all poetry, and we might remember that Jesus himself wasn't a foreigner to hyperbole. What Ms. Dickinson is trumpeting is her drunken joy in the beauty of the created world. Her exuberance is inebriated. She's high with joy.

Maybe you've never felt that exuberance, but many have—the sheer splendor of a dawn, the exhilaration of a mountain top, the huge awe of a prairie vista that runs forever. She's in love with the glories of this world.

Here's my argument: that one of the reasons people claim Ms. Dickinson is such a fine poet—one of the reasons; there are others—is that she was capable of opening her arms for so many of us. These little tiny lines somehow open to what we know and feel.

And they open to us in other ways, not simply by way of ecstasy.

Here's a completely different mood, beginning with an outlandish comparison. She says, almost comically, that on what little she had as a child, a gnat would starve. You'll notice that she defines what it is she lacked as food (upper case), even though it's almost impossible to believe she means that literally. The speaker in the poem was starved as a child, barely getting by:

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It would have starved a Gnat—  
To live so small as I—  
And yet I was a living Child—  
With Food's necessity

Upon me—like a Claw—  
I could no more remove  
Than I could coax a Leech away—  
Or make a Dragon—move—

The food she didn't have is a claw burying itself into her, a force she's incapable of escaping. Strangely enough, she chooses to describe her persecutors by two gigantically contrasting and despicable creatures—a slimy leech (often used back then medicinally, but attached, of course, inside her being) and a fire-breathing dragon. Against both she would have been as powerless, she says, as she was to her grinding poverty.

And then, as if for emphasis and maybe a mocking kind of black humor, she returns to that gnat with which she began, a gnat that would have been more blessed than she was since she lacked the ability simply to fly away, to escape this immense hunger and “seek a Dinner” for himself, when she could not. And thus the lament grows almost absurdly: “How mightier He—than I—”

Not like the Gnat—had I—  
The privilege to fly

And seek a Dinner for myself—  
How mightier He—than I—

And then, somehow, this almost goofy little poem gets both deadly serious and yet, oddly enough, even more playful. For the third time she returns enviously to a barely visible gnat, who has the ability—stay with me now—to unintentionally kill himself by flying recklessly, time after time, into a window, his blind instinct telling him freedom lies just outside.

But Ms. Emily adds one word, one little possessive adjective that turns herself into this foil. For she could not even kill herself against the window as he could, even if she, by will, wanted to.

Is she really talking about suicide here? I don't know. But what's important is to see the immense burden she claims somehow to carry because she says she could not, finally, end it all as the gnat can and does. Instead, she says, she's somehow sentenced, as a human being, to begin again and again and again:

Nor like Himself—the Art  
Upon the Window Pane  
To gad my little Being out—  
And not begin—again—

End of poem.

What are we to make of this almost silly comparison drawn horrifically into a testimony of despair? When we reach the last line, we realize that nothing at all in this poem was ever a joke—it was, in fact, quite deadly serious and only seeming overstatement. She never tells us what “food” really was missing from her life, just that the deprivation created an unforgettable hunger. Dickinson was reared in one of Amherst's most prominent family; she cannot be talking about lack of food; the hunger she says she knows is something other than physical.

Go back to the first poem—sheer exuberance in nature; and now this—deep despair. In the era in which she lived, despair was one of just two unforgiveable sins because despair meant, of course, the absence of hope, which is to say faith. Today, we might toy with the word *despair*, but Dickinson wouldn't.

In this poem, strangely and powerfully, Ms.

Emily offers us a portrait of sheer hopelessness.

And now a confession—I've lived close enough to depression in my life to know that there are those among us, even believers, who understand something of that level of despair. She may not be writing for all of us here, but she is writing something accurate to the human story.

One more. When Dickinson was first published, her editor/sister decided to name this poem, fittingly, “Indian Summer”:

These are the days when Birds come back—  
A very few—a Bird or two—  
To take a backward look.

The next stanza can be puzzling—“the old sophistries of June” is more likely, than not, the promise that every sweet summer day offers us promises that are not worth much because all of us understand that heat will rise come July, and eventually leaves will fall and January will march in from the frozen northwest, as it inevitably does. June's promises, she says, are sophistry—the empty promises of, say, politicians. But remember, she's talking about Indian summer:

These are the days when skies resume  
The old—old sophistries of June—  
A blue and gold mistake.

Now she cries—listen to her voice change:

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee—  
Almost thy plausibility  
Induces my belief.

The empty promise of Indian summer—the unexpected warm air and azure sky come early November—is a lie, of course, a lie that can't cheat a Bee but can almost make Ms. Emily believe that maybe June has returned. Achingly, she almost believes, she says. Just about. Not quite. She's still too-filled with doubt, as well she should be. After all, no adult can truly believe the false promises of even a gorgeous Indian summer:

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear—  
And softly thro' the altered air  
Hurries a timid leaf.

There. She can't either. Think of milkweed seeds and, suddenly, falling leaves. Indian summer is, af-

ter all, a lie—a gorgeous one, even a blessed one—but a flaming falsehood. And now, once more, she sighs for what can't be, wishing the communion it offered was real:

Oh Sacrament of summer days,  
Oh Last Communion in the Haze—  
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake—  
Thy consecrated bread to take  
And thine immortal wine!

Emily Dickinson knew her Bible, knew the Christian faith, understood, in her wondrous mind, what such faith expected of her. She moves now to the *spiritual* joy of the false promise of Indian summer, calls it a sacrament, a “last communion in the haze,” and then she says, “Please, let a child join.” Let me partake of your elements—your “consecrated bread” and your “immortal wine.”

Two ways we can read this poem. In one, she's just *so* exuberant again about nature—this time about the perilous joy of Indian summer—that she resorts to religious faith because there can be no greater praise for the beauty of a late October summer's lease.

But there's another reading, much less accommodating to Christian readers. After all, she begs admission for “a child” and therefore suggests that faith, like the joy of Indian summer, is something only a child can embrace. Sadly, of course, she isn't one. She doesn't say “me” here; she says “Permit a child to join.”

Many readers who understand Ms. Dickinson's perilous fight with God will claim that the Ms. Emily here is the one who would tell us—if she dared in prose—that she simply couldn't believe in God, and that this poem is a confession of her wish, really, at times, that she could.

Those who know Dickinson and love her work believe that at least one mark of her genius as a writer, as a poet, is her ability to say so much about what it means to be human in so few words. In a stanza form she took directly from the hymns she sang in church, she churns up all the emotions human beings are capable of feeling. Miss Emily Dickinson is in her poems, but so are we, all of us—joy, faith, doubt, sadness. It's all there.

I say all of that because what I'd like to do is make a similar case for the Psalms. I have no interest in comparing them to the poems of Emily Dickinson; after all, the Psalms are Scripture—and that's not the point. What I do want to do is illustrate what I believe to be the most reassuring, the most hopeful lesson I have learned from writing hundreds of psalm meditations—that we're there, too, in the psalms. I don't mean this to be shocking, but it was something I had to learn by writing: the risk in thinking of the psalms *only* as God's Word is that we don't begin to see them as real human documents—and they are.

Case in point—Psalm 13. Charles Spurgeon, in his three-volume *Treasury of the Psalms*, says 13 has been called by others “the howling psalm,” because in it David literally howls at God.

### Psalm 13

<sup>1</sup>How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?

<sup>3</sup>Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;

<sup>4</sup>Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

<sup>5</sup>But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.

<sup>6</sup>I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me.

This “howling psalm” gets its name from the repetition of “how long?” Elsewhere, Spurgeon says that this psalm, like many others, carries the peculiar burden of the believer because only someone who knows God's presence in his or her life can understand the sheer horror of his seeming absence.

Let's play catechism here for a moment. Is God ever absent from our lives? Why most pastors would say surely not; if there's a breakdown in communication, it's because our wires are down and not His. And yet, most of us—maybe even all

of us—understand the terror of the Psalmist here because many of us, maybe all of us, have known times when it seemed absolutely clear that God almighty was somewhere out of sight and mind and spirit. God was gone.

And that's exactly what the psalmist feels, and that's why the repetition—all that horrible howling—is so piercing. If he said it once, it would be interesting. That he says it four times in two verses is a sign of frantic human misery. “Why hast thou forsaken me?” is what he's saying, the very words of Jesus.

Sometimes even God's people think he's left the building—that's what's here clearly in the opening lines of the poem we've named Psalm 13.

Sometimes I resent this psalm, even though it brings me in with its passionate pleading. Once the psalmist howls, he moves into the command form, something my prayers rarely do. And yet—I know this—when prayers do use the command form, they're not trivial. “Do it, God”: That's not so blasphemous a line as it is human. Somewhere Anne Lamott says she has only two prayers, really, and both are one word—“Help” and “Thanks.” *Help* is a command.

And then there's white space in Psalm 13. I have no idea what happened. I wish I did. In a way, this poem cheats because whatever change occurred in the emotion of the psalmist, we're not privy to it. All of a sudden, past tense; all of a sudden, a promise to God. All of a sudden, a song of praise.

I'll let each of you make what will of the plot of this poem; I have no idea what happened here to quell the terror of the opening lines. All we know for sure, from the life of David, is that God Himself somehow showed up once more. He did. And the howling ceased.

What I'm saying here is that if we don't find ourselves in the poem, if we see this only as something that's up and away from us on some altar—if we see it *only* as holy writ, which it is—we miss something spectacular—that it is human writ too.

Let's just stay with this English construction I've called “the command form” because it occurs constantly in the Psalms, constantly—many of the songs contain some form of command, the singer seemingly holding his finger up into the face of almighty authority.

Take Psalm 4, for instance:

<sup>1</sup>Answer me when I call to you,  
my righteous God.  
Give me relief from my distress;  
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

<sup>2</sup>How long will you people turn my glory into  
shame?  
How long will you love delusions and seek  
false gods<sup>[b]?</sup><sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful  
servant for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.

<sup>4</sup>Tremble and do not sin;  
when you are on your beds,  
search your hearts and be silent.

<sup>5</sup>Offer the sacrifices of the righteous  
and trust in the LORD.

<sup>6</sup>Many, LORD, are asking, “Who will bring us  
prosperity?”  
Let the light of your face shine on us.

<sup>7</sup>Fill my heart with joy  
when their grain and new wine abound.

<sup>8</sup>In peace I will lie down and sleep,  
for you alone, LORD,  
make me dwell in safety.

More howling. More consolation. Very much like 13, except it appears to have differing speakers. But let me just stay for a minute with the command form: David is sounding for all intents and purposes like an angry parent or a crabby teacher—“Answer me when I call!” It's almost impossible to say that line respectfully.

The impatience of the command form in the English language (we might even say its “nerve”) is on display grammatically. When we tell others what to do, we deliberately address them last, if at all; subject takes second place to verb, as in “brush your teeth.”

“Shut the door,” isn't sweet; it insists on action. Add a name and things soften a bit, but not much: “Shut the door, Billy.” In fact, if we attempt to take the edge off a command and add something endearing, we come up with phoniness: “Shut the



door, sweetheart.”

The command form happens so often in the Psalms that I think we simply become accustomed to hearing it and forget its lousy manners. My goodness, the Psalmist is talking to the Lord God Almighty, not some forgetful kid; yet, he’s ordering the Most High around as if he were a valet. “Hear my cry, O Lord,” says the King James. The NIV has “Answer me when I call to you,” which seems, if you ask me, to bring David’s petulance to another level all together.

Most parents scold their children for using the command form. “Give me the toys,” one kid screams, and we hold up a hand—“say *please*.”

“Insolent,” “impatient,” “petulant”—I’ve used some unpleasant words here, but it seems to me they all fit. The arrogance—we can call it that, I think—of the writer is here in holy writ. Simply stated, he’s telling the Lord what to do. He doesn’t sound a bit like a supplicant.

But then, good grammar be hanged when you’re calling 911. And that’s what appears to be going on here. The writer is at his wit’s end. He’s wasted the last of his best strategies, and there’s nowhere else to turn. Frantic, he forgets his manners and just bellows. How else do we explain God’s tolerating him? Poor David hasn’t a clue what to do!

You wonder sometimes whether God Almighty doesn’t actually appreciate being the last port in the storm. Most of us wouldn’t because our egos aren’t all that thrilled being the end of the line. But God seems to like it. Apparently, his feelings aren’t hurt one bit.

I think he likes us emptied. I think he likes us bereft of our own wiles, without a hope, with nowhere to go, on our knees and bellowing.

And I don’t know if that’s so much a characteristic of our Creator and Sustainer, as it is simply the story of our lives. Sometimes we need foxholes to realize there is nothing we can do. We need to hit bottom—too often, it seems. At some time or another, we all cower in a corner, nowhere to turn.

Here’s what I’m saying—the Psalms are songs of praise to the Lord, but they also emerge from what’s most human in all of us. They praise His holy name—of that I’m very sure. But I’m also really thankful that they also serve to help us understand the mysteries—and even the darkness—of our

own lives. We are not alone, thank goodness. We aren’t the only ones who’ve felt joy or sorrow or the thievery of grief. David bellowed, for pity’s sake.

On the other hand, however, if you want sheer exuberance, sheer joy, sheer exultation, that’s here too, in spades. Just take “Old Hundredth,” which we can sing, the way it’s supposed to be:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise him ye creatures he below,  
Praise him above ye heavenly hosts,  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Psalm 100 requires no poetic interpretation. It’s just unadulterated praise, something all of us, somewhere in life, know well. It’s us when held lovingly in His hand.

But let me say this, and let me finish with a long psalm, Psalm 104—which doesn’t just command us to praise, but shows us why. “Show, don’t tell” is one of the very first rules of sharp and memorable writing. Take it from an old writing teacher: don’t just tell us what to see or do, show us—that’s how we learn; that’s how we’re convinced:

Here’s Psalm 104 from *The Message*, mostly. Let me walk through it, and when we’re inside, be sure look around, to see:

O my soul, bless God! God, my God,  
how great you are!  
beautifully, gloriously robed,  
Dressed up in sunshine,  
and all heaven stretched out for your tent.  
You built your palace on the ocean deeps,  
made a chariot out of clouds and  
took off on wings of wind.  
You commandeered winds as messengers,  
appointed fire and flame as ambassadors.  
You set earth on a firm foundation  
so that nothing can shake it, ever.  
You blanketed earth with ocean,  
covered the mountains with deep waters;  
Then you roared and the water ran away—  
your thunder put it to flight.  
Mountains pushed up, valleys spread out  
in the places you assigned them.  
You set boundaries between earth and sea;  
never again will earth be flooded.  
You started the springs and rivers,

sent them flowing among the hills.  
All the wild animals now drink their fill,  
wild donkeys quench their thirst.  
Along the riverbanks the birds build nests,  
ravens make their voices heard.  
You water the mountains from heavenly cisterns;  
your earth is supplied with water.  
You make grass for the livestock,  
hay for the animals that plow the ground.

14-23

Oh yes, God brings grain from the land,  
wine to make people happy,  
Their faces glowing with health,  
a people well-fed and hearty.  
GOD's trees are well-watered—  
the Lebanon cedars he planted.  
Birds build their nests in those trees;  
look—the stork at home in the treetop.  
Mountain goats climb about the cliffs;  
badgers burrow among the rocks.  
The moon keeps track of the seasons,  
the sun is in charge of each day.  
When it's dark and night takes over,  
all the forest creatures come out.  
Lions roar for their prey,  
clamoring to God for their supper.  
When the sun comes up, they vanish,  
and stretch out in their dens.  
Meanwhile, men and women go out to work,  
busy at their jobs until evening.

24-30

What a wildly wonderful world, GOD!  
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side;  
The earth you created overflows with your  
wonderful creations.  
Oh, look—the deep, wide sea,  
brims with fish past counting,  
sardines and sharks and salmon.  
Ships plow those waters,  
whales romp therein.  
All the creatures look to you  
to get them their meals on time.  
You come, and they gather;  
you open your hand and they eat.  
If you turned your back,

they'd die in a minute—  
Take back your Spirit and they die,  
revert back to mud;  
Send out your Spirit and they spring to life—  
the wide prairies in bloom and blossom.

31-32

The glory of GOD—may it last forever!  
Let GOD enjoy his creation!  
He takes one look at earth and  
triggers an earthquake,  
points a finger at the mountains,  
and volcanoes erupt.

33-35

I will sing to GOD all my life long,  
sing hymns as long as I live!  
Let my song please him; I'm so  
pleased to be singing to GOD.  
But clear the ground of sinners—  
no more godless men and women!

O my soul, bless THE LORD!

I don't need to tell anyone that the Psalms are purely divine poems. I don't need to remind anyone here that all of this is holy writ. But the Psalms are not only holy writ; they are human writ too—and that truth, I'm arguing, is itself an immense blessing. The Psalms open their arms to what we know, not only about God but also, thankfully, about ourselves. We are not alone. Fear not.

But if you don't believe me, listen to Calvin at the very beginning of his own preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;" for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us

as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particulars in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.

What I'm saying—as does Calvin—is that the Psalms open their arms to us as the Word of God *and* the whole human story. That truth, it seems, makes the gift of these poems only more beautiful.