

*Boundary Lines & Waters* (30June19) Psalm 16

It's often said with much of the New Testament that we are reading other people's mail. Paul writing letters to deal with issues and relationships that weren't meant for snoopy us to eavesdrop.

A notch worse, I realize I have the feeling with Psalms I'm inserting myself into somebody else's prayers, ancient or your own.

I've gotten to consider today's Psalm for a couple weeks, including the quiet time in the Boundary Waters, where it joined Psalms I'm reading for my devotions this year and Psalms the youth were selecting day by day to fit their experience. It was so steeped in my mind I started jotting sermon notes at early dawn beside Ashigan Lake.

It was occurring to me it will be a challenge this summer to preach on Psalms, since it's essentially trying to preach a poem. In a minute, I'll do what probably should never be done by dissecting the poetry, picking it apart for kernels of my choosing, even though that doesn't let the poem stand in its full voice. I have doubts that I *could* let it stand in its fullness and be able to hold all of that (even in these little 11 verses) and preach on the whole poem today, partly because it has such movement, vast theme and feel.

But the stand-out snippets make meaning for each of us, where a poem speaks to us, or in this case where we pray and speak with the Psalm to God.

I've been told by a famous poet that it doesn't really matter what the poet meant or was thinking when writing. When it comes down to it, it's the reader in conversation with the poem. It makes the author a third party to the conversation, not really having a say.

That leaves me as preacher more like a fourth party, really out of the channel of communication you are having with the Psalm. The most this sermon can be is a little boost, an echo cheering and encouraging you. I especially cannot tell you what it means. It's not speaking a new word, adding a competing voice, trying to debate the Psalm. It shouldn't be in opposition, making you

feel your interpretation—much less your prayer—was wrong. At best, it should offer an opening that validates your prayerfulness, amplifying not my voice but your dialogue with the Psalm. It's especially important because it's not just a literary topic but involves your relationship with God. That is to say, I'm deeply hoping—worried enough to have been awake in a tent ten nights ago—that something of my reflection will resonate for you, reinforcing your faith's voice.

To begin the dissecting, the Psalm's snippet that stood out to me was “the boundary lines for me have fallen in pleasant places.” Boundary lines and Boundary Waters. I kept spiraling back to that, instead of getting absorbed into other snippets, trying to explain away the violent wrongs of blood-sucking devotions, or to question the theology of chosenness, or to deal much with the first commandment and how often we do have other gods.

“The boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places” was a verse that grabbed me, becoming my prayer at least in part because I spent a couple days looking across Birch Lake with Canada on the other side. It was pleasant for the sun and sunsets and bird song and calm, quiet rippling waters and agenda-free hours. Instead of boundaries and borders as contentious and fearful, this boundary—an invisible international line floating someplace down the middle of the lake—felt very peaceful and pleasant.



I rightly realized I was lucky. My own fortunate place stood in contrast with many

others, like as I was reading about Palestinians confronted with shifting boundaries that are deeply un-pleasant, and remembering last year coming back from canoeing to the news of family separations at our southern border, and that displeasing news continuing to fall all year long as we keep learning more about the horrific conditions we are putting those children through or of no-man's-land demilitarized zones.

I may indeed feel very privileged, but the prayer of this Psalm doesn't use that for guilt. It doesn't mention my boundaries so I feel bad about others. It begins with gratitude. I can pray very honestly: "the boundaries for me have fallen in pleasant places.

"I have a goodly heritage." It is, after all, an honor to spend a wilderness week with our young people as they're overcoming challenges and exploring identity and discovering who they'll be, thinking of their future.

Or if heritage is supposed to look not forward but back, it's goodly heritage to be connected to Sigurd and Aldo and the 55-year-old Wilderness Act with foresight to preserve those Boundary Waters, and we inherit the rewards of their efforts. It's also a stunning heritage to be on the same lakes and portage paths, not only of most of 50 years of the MCC, but more which French fur trappers and generations of native Americans used. Not to mention moose, wolves, and turtles with wild roses.

The Psalm says "My body rests secure," itself a securing thought, instilling confidence while in a fragile tent and feeble body surrounded by wilderness winds and nighttime noises.

My boundaries extended back to Madison, of the goodness of life I came home to, back to my house, my routines, my rhythms, my fridge and running water, to stroll around the grounds and peruse my territory, to be in my own familiar and comfortable element. To be here now. The Psalm keeps helping me pray gratitude and contentment and hope.

To be clear, I might not have done that first; where up north I could've thought of bug bites and blood-sucking leeches and raindrops, and all

that I was missing, and then arrived back here to wish again I was away from stress and emails and the stupid stuff in life, the Psalm instead keeps pointing me to gratitude and security.

Still, Bible and Beer on Tuesday night raised a question of gloating, of having it easy on the west side of Madison. Ken Streit compared it to wearing an old "Life is good" t-shirt. It could make us wonder whether this Psalm is only prayable by fairly well-to-do people like us.

Yet that probably reads the Psalm backward. Circumstances don't prove or disprove God. It's not because I'm in a pleasant place that I can gain reliance on God. The Psalm doesn't read from a happy situation as the lead-in to faith.

Rather, just the reverse and often the opposite, trust in God leads through the valley of the shadow of death. The Psalm begins exactly with a migrant, somebody displaced and maybe worried about being on the wrong side of the boundary or border, one worried about oppression: it says "I take refuge in God." I, too, am a refugee. Even (or maybe especially) from American life, I seek refuge and a hiding place, and that place is in God. A refugee in whatever way danger and harm confront you, God is the safe place. This Psalm voices your confidence.

With this focus on Psalms, I had the chance this week to dust off my Hebrew a bit, and there's a good word here: *rmv* (*shamar*). Many times the Psalms assert God as *rmv*, as Keeper, it goes with the image of a shield. But it's also the word in the Garden of Eden, when the earthling is told to till and keep the soil, observing and tending and preserving. In a way, a translation of that Genesis phrase often gets placed on police badges; not just till and keep, the phrase can be "serve and protect." It also is translated with guarding, watching over, caring for, remembering. For one thick view of God's "keeping," I suggest reading Psalm 121, where the word is used five times in eight little verses.

This expands the boundaries of our view of God. Yes, we can give thanks for all the good. But when something bad happens, it is not that God has forgotten you or turned against you. It is not

that your prayer has failed. God is your Keeper, a refuge. Maybe not a shield that prevents any wrong from hitting you, but God will keep on keeping you. God will keep watching over you, without batting an eye, never slumbering. God will strive to lift you out of the mire and muck. God won't give up.

This Psalm gets picked up in the New Testament, where it exemplifies the extent of God's care. It is used in reference to the resurrection of Jesus, with the snippet verse "you will not abandon your holy one to the grave." Far from saying that "life is good," this is a confession that even though death may strike, God still will not give up. Even then God will rescue you, raise you, and bring you safely into the path of life with pleasures forevermore.

Again, I don't think that's needing to compare and say it's even better than your life now, or that it makes up for the shortcomings now. It's most directly that you may have confidence in God's goodness. In the end, it's not about how well you keep faith in God. It's that God will faithfully always be your Keeper. And you are never left out of bounds for God.