

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 16, 2018

## [Psalm 116:1-9](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on Psalm 116:1-9** (by Fred Gaiser for *workingpreacher.org* – September 13, 2009)

In the lectionary portion of Psalm 116, we do not get to the question of verse 12, "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?"

That question introduces the psalmist's pledge to offer sacrifice to God and pay the vows made in the midst of distress (verses 13-19); but in a certain sense we do not need that section (though there is no reason to omit it), for the psalmist has already fulfilled the vow.

The ritual thanks offered in the final section is paralleled by the verbal thanks offered in verses 1-9. If the missing latter part of the psalm is about offering, the first part is about witness. Stewardship and evangelism are up-front issues in the church these days. The psalm reminds us of their close connection: our giving, our service, our stewardship (verses 13-19) are empty (or at least silent) without our witness, our evangelism, our testimony to the grace and goodness of God (verses 1-9).

Our psalmist cannot remain silent. He or she echoes the words of Psalm 40:3: "[God] put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord." Both Psalms (40 and 116) are called songs of thanksgiving, liturgical poems in which the pray-ers bear witness to what God has done on their behalf and pledge their ongoing devotion to the Lord. The genre is praise, but what rises to God as praise serves as witness to those who hear. Listen to what God has done! God's deeds and my words bear witness to who God is and how God acts. "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me" (Psalm 66:16).

As usual in the psalms, we do not learn precisely what is plaguing the poet. He or she seems to have been near death (verse 3)--or is that a metaphorical death?--but then experiences God's deliverance and is "saved." The lack of particularity allows the song's use in public liturgy. Too particular, and it becomes unusable by those with different problems. Too general, and it is meaningless. But after living a while, virtually anyone can testify to a near-death experience (physical or metaphorical), and here they hear the psalmist announce that, in that kind of situation, her survival, his deliverance, their salvation was a gift of God.

Indeed, because of that experience, the pray-er can make public confession that "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful" (verse 5). The frequent cry of distress in the psalms is perhaps the Bible's most primal expression of the profound truth that all is not well, that I am not what I ought to be and neither is the world, that something has gone wrong. The human, says psychoanalyst Stanley Leavy, "is a discontented animal." In life, as in the psalms, out of that distress and discontent, we cry to God. Some call this an illusion, a prop, a crutch, but, as Leavy notes, for believers the experience of deliverance from distress "is the gift of God through Jesus Christ. The critics are quite right in supposing that a fully satisfied human, with no failures, no sense of wrongdoing, no griefs, no fears, no longing for the eternal, would have no occasion to look to God. But it is they who are indulging in fantasy when they imagine such a creature and suppose it to be human."<sup>1</sup>

So, as Leavy implies, if the cry of distress is the primal witness to discontent, pain, suffering, and sin, the psalms' outburst of praise is the primal witness to recovery, renewal, and grace. And the psalmist is pleased and eager to ascribe that renewal to God and to invite others to celebrate and join in that experience.

Some Christian traditions call such witness "testimony," a term often viewed with suspicion by mainline Christians, but one that clearly reflects the movement of this psalm. God acts, and people tell what God has done so that others might know and enter God's saving work. Christians of all stripes should find a place in worship for such "testimony," and a sermon on this psalm might be a place to start.<sup>2</sup>

Now, to be sure, testimony in the style of the psalms needs to be more than my continued recital of the moment of my conversion--and, finally, it should not focus on "me" at all; but an honest and spontaneous report of God's saving work is not only appropriate, it is quite impossible to avoid. Which of us, having experienced God's grace, will not say so? It would be as impossible as seeing a rainbow in the sky and not telling my fellow passengers in the car. The "wow" is part of the experience. The experience is incomplete without it. You can't *not* tell.

If the preacher plans in advance, this sermon, after an appropriate introduction, could call forth stories of God's grace experienced by parishioners--either told by the parishioners themselves (best alternative) or narrated through the pastor if people are uncomfortable speaking publicly. Or, the sermon could introduce the issue and invite folks to prepare for future opportunities to bring their own report (echoing Psalm 66, above) of what God has done for them.<sup>3</sup>

Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann called psalms of this genre "reporting praise," where the report of what God has done becomes the praise of God. The psalm or the present preacher may or may not say "Praise the Lord," but the announcement that God has acted is itself praise in that others hear in it witness to the grace and mercy of God.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on Psalm 116:1-9:

1. How have you/we experienced God's activity / mercy / deliverance? What does it look like for *us* to give witness to God's activity in our own lives – both individually and collectively?
2. The text is somewhat ambiguous about whether the salvation experienced by the author was internal or external – whether deliverance from a threat such as illness or disaster or one such as inner turmoil and “soul sickness.” Does it matter which? Do we look for deliverance in different places for such different types of distress?
3. From Pr. Phil Heinze (*Living the Lectionary*, 9/11/2018): *Do we love the Lord because we are heard or are we heard because we love the Lord?*
4. From Rev. Dr. John Fairless (*The Lectionary Lab*, 9/7/2015): *There is a temptation to “praise God” when we get an answer to prayer that we like. When we have cried to the Lord for help, and have received deliverance — it's all good! But, what about those for whom the answer was not so redemptive? Are we committed to trust in the goodness and mercy of God — in advance — no matter the outcome?*
5. Note that the lectionary this week does not include the entirety of Psalm 116. Why do you suppose this choice is made? What is gained by reading only this beginning portion of this Psalm? What might be lost by leaving out its concluding verses?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?**