

Text: Psalm 119: 33-40  
Title: Dancing with the Torah  
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The wedding was idyllic.

A grassy peninsula on Martha's Vineyard was all greens and blues and the white of the bride's gown. The wedding was small ~ immediate family and a few friends. The dashing groom, with his dog at his feet, watched as his stunning bride, on the arm of her father, walked toward him. Smiles, sunshine, and tears of joy were all caught up and carried away on a gentle ocean breeze. Even Pinterest couldn't contain all the beauty.

A lovely reception on the lawn preceded an easy stroll down the coast to a boat house/supper club. There was lobster and salmon and snapper and shrimp and breads and fruit and grilled veggies and tasty desserts and the drinks were flowing and the bride's brother gave, without exception, the funniest speech/toast I've ever heard. It was idyllic.

But, what I will never forget is the mother of the bride ~ a retired school teacher, unruly black curly hair lightly sprinkled with gray, warm and gentle of spirit with a deep laugh, bright and open but never showy....

At one point, she kicked off her heels, climbed up on the bar, and danced with joy. No one else was dancing on the bar, but in that celebration of family, and love, and promise, and God's grace she hopped up on that bar to shake and shimmy with joyful abandon.

What makes you want to dance?

What has filled you with such a joy that your feet moved and your body swayed?

What gives you such delight that you dance?

*Simchat Torah* is a Jewish festival where worshippers take turns dancing with Torah. At the end of a year-long-cycle of reading through the Law of God they take the scroll and dance around the sanctuary with it. Everyone ~ seven times around the synagogue. Their delight, their dance, is with the *Torah* ~ the Law of God. It's a dance of joy for the gift of God.

What makes you want to dance?

Psalm 119 is a literary dance with the *Torah*. For 176 verses (the longest chapter in the Bible) the Psalmist does an intricate dance delighting in the Law of God.

Let's break it down....

Psalm 119 is divided into 22 stanzas, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse begins with the letter of the alphabet that heads the stanza. So, for example, the first stanza is *aleph*, and every verse in that stanza begins with *aleph*. The second is *bet* and every verse begins with *bet*... And so on, for 22 stanzas.

And, each stanza is exactly eight verses long.

And, the psalm uses eight different words for the Law.

And, with the sole exception of verse 122, every single verse contains at least one of those eight synonyms for the Law. Whew!

All of which leads C.S. Lewis to write about Psalm 119:

*...this poem is not, and does not pretend to be, a sudden outpouring of the heart, like say, Psalm 18. It is a pattern, a thing done like embroidering, stitch by stitch, through long quiet hours, for love of the subject, and for delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship.*

Doesn't feel like a spontaneous dance anymore. While it may be 176 verses of swirling and circling about the Torah like a colorful kaleidoscope, it is also what Stan Mast calls, "a literary monstrosity, 176 verses of boring, repetitious monotony."

So, dear friends, what are we to make of it?  
Given all the different literary genres in the biblical library, why this?  
What are we to make of this acrostic on steroids?

Some scholars think it is a memory device ~ a tool to teach children the "A, B, C's" of obeying the Law. Some think it is meant to capture the Torah's reign from A to Z, from first to last, for every jot and tittle of life. All of the world's words are captured here because all the letters are captured here.

But, Walter Brueggemann gets at it this way:

*...the dramatic intent is to find a form commensurate with the message. The message that life is reliable and utterly symmetrical when the Torah is honored. And so, the Psalm provides a literary, pedagogical experience of reliability and utter symmetry. A Torah-ordered life is as safe, predictable, and complete as the movement of the psalm.*

In other words, the Psalm reflects the order and beauty of life when we follow the Torah. This is life as God designed. Now, mind you, none of the 613 commands of the Torah are in Psalm 119. This is a celebration of the idea of the Torah. As life is in sync with the Torah there is order, joy, and even a dance....

To quote the first verse of Psalm 119:

*Happy (blessed, content) are those whose ways are blameless,  
who walk according to the law of the Lord.*

And yet, truth be told, life is rarely ordered, symmetrical, and reliable. Life is often chaotic, unbalanced, and fragile. None of us are blameless, many of us are restless, and few of us walk or dance without stumbling and falling.

So, in some ways, this celebration of the Torah removes it from life and makes of it a thing of beauty but not an accessible part of life. Like a magnificent painting we marvel at the color and intricate detailed patterns, but it stays outside of us, separate from life as we know it....

Life would be better if lived more fully in the ways of God.  
There is good reason to delight in the Law of God.  
But when was the last time that we danced?  
When have we taken the Law of God into our hearts and lives in authentic,  
meaningful, even joyful ways?

I recently asked a room full of pastors what they thought most people in most pews were concerned about. What is their underlying struggle? What are they wrestling with, or worried about? What are their essential questions?

(I was asking this in part because I saw that a Reformed mega-church was doing a sermon series on “Who is Jesus?” And I wondered if people are really asking that question.)

So, I asked a room full of pastors: What do you think your congregants are actually concerned about? The response was the usual list: kids and their teams, work and 401Ks, preparing or recovering from vacation, taxes, tending after house, yard, and all manner of belongings, loving friends and family, etc. They are concerned with the demands and details of modern suburban life. But, one bright young pastor said his parishioners are “ensconced in immanence.” (There’s a fancy pants phrase.) He was referring to a line from *How (not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K. A. Smith. Smith writes:

*Our age is haunted. On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while, we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by imitations of transcendence. On the other hand, even as faith endures in a secular age, believing doesn’t come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We’re all Thomas now.*

Now. There is a lot there. Too much to unpack in a summer sermon. But...

But, Smith is getting at the goodness and brutality of this immediate world. What we know is the joy of the wedding, the beauty and baubles of existence, the transitory but titillating things of this world. We dance with the little gods and their ghosts.

And yet, underneath is the longing for the Transcendent, for whatever it is that slips through and haunts us. There is more than this immediate, more than these imitations, and more than this vale of tears and laughter. We fumble for and maybe even dance after some connection with the Divine, but we are a mix of faith and doubt and longing...

Psalm 119 offers, in an admittedly bizarre fashion, a window to the Transcendent, to a way of being that roots contentment in the Law of God. For the Jews, Psalm 119 was a window into life aligned with God’s design for creation. Again, to quote Brueggemann:

*Our modern bias that sees commands as restricting is countered. The commandments liberate and give people space to be human. This Psalm instructs people in the need,*

*possibility, and delight in giving settlement to the issues of vocation and identity. Torah living does not require keeping options open about who we shall be.*

In other words: You belong to God and God has given you the best way to live and be and find meaning in this world.

Therefore, in the stanza that we read, verses 33-40, the psalmist implores God to “teach,” “give,” “direct” and “turn....”

*Turn my eyes away from worthless things;  
preserve my life according to your word.*

A different translation has it as,

*Turn my eyes from looking at vanities...*

Think, “ensconced in immanence”  
And then, at the end of this stanza we read,

*How I long for your precepts!  
In your righteousness preserve my life.*

The Psalmist pleads, even longs, for God to turn him toward the Torah.

Dear friends, the good news is that Jesus of Nazareth is the embodiment of the Torah.

In our tradition Jesus fulfills the law that we couldn't fulfill. But, it is also true that while we might long for and dance with the haunting beauty of God's way in this world it is entirely fitting that we would join the Psalmist in asking God to teach, give, direct, and turn us toward God's Word.

The Word as Torah.

The Word as Christ.

The Word as God's way and will in this world.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.