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A sower went out to sow, and his seed fell upon a summer, Sunday morning assembly in the Carolina mountains, gathered from our different homes and histories, our distinctive loves, concerns and possibilities.

Allowing for a little artistic license, this is also how I hear this morning's Psalm, the eight verses from Psalm 119. Imagine a summer morning in the ancient Temple, hundreds of years before Christ. A small troop of eight early-risers files in, all bringing their histories, loves, concerns, and possibilities to God. Taking turns, they are going to approach the altar one by one.

Each verse of Psalm 119 will be a different person's prayer.

The prayers are all alike in two respects—one explicit, one implied. Explicitly, these eight men and women all believe in the moral quality of human life, that there are things we ought to do as human beings, and others we should not. Implicitly, they believe in human freedom. You come to a fork in the road. Will you veer left or right? Freedom is the power to choose.

Last Monday, July 4, I re-watched the last episode of the John Adams series on HBO. It ends with Adams's message to posterity:

*Posterity! You will never know how much it cost the present Generation to preserve your freedom! I hope you will make good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in Heaven, that I ever took the pains to preserve it.*

How about that? The American experiment is also grounded in belief in the moral quality of human life, and in freedom.

In the ancient Temple, the first member of the party, a woman, steps forward, kneels, and prays.

*Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.*

It isn't easy, freedom. When we come to the fork, how to know which way to go? In ancient Israel, the answer was written in stone, the law handed down by Moses at Mount Sinai. In the fullness of time, God would clarify, amplify, that law in the person of his Son—the answer written in flesh and blood, an even brighter light to follow. That is what we believe, as Christians.

*Your word is a lantern to my feet.*

This morning, that may be the silent, thankful prayer of one of you. God having given you this freedom, you thank God for showing you how to use it well. This is because you know that having choice bestows an awesome responsibility on us as human beings—both for ill, and good. In the closing line of *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden and Anne Stanton walk hand in hand “out of history into history, and the awful responsibility of Time.”

The woman departs into the awful responsibility of time, and a young man takes her place. He prays:

*I have sworn and am determined to keep your righteous judgments.*

He is an earnest young husband, previously untested, now facing his first garden-variety temptation. As to the specific nature of the temptation, if I were to give you three guesses you would all get it right on the first try. Kneeling at the altar where he had made his marriage promises, he fingers his wedding band and privately renews his vow. “I have sworn and am determined.”

If this is you, don't raise your hand.

You are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, etc.—and it has always been easy up to now. What you are now finding out about temptation is that is more *tempting* than you had supposed. The animal part of it, you knew was coming, no mystery there. It also plays with your heart, and you had been warned to expect that too, though you find it disconcerting. But what you were not at all prepared for is how it messes with your head. There is a sense of moral vertigo. It is like a new airplane pilot flying in the clouds—his instruments say the plane is straight and level, but it feels like he is upside down. “Trust your instruments,” says the flight instructor. “Keep your promises,” says a voice inside your head. You answer: “Yes, I have sworn and am determined.”

The young husband exits older, wiser. A woman, middle-aged, comes forward. She is sick with cancer, which is bad and getting worse.

They had cancer then, like we do, but without our medicine to offer help and hope. They also suffered droughts, depression, heartbreak, and dementia—the whole long list of natural evils that torment the earth. In their communities, I would imagine, they kept prayer lists. Here is a woman from the prayer list, petitioning God for help and hope. She says:

*I am deeply troubled, preserve my life according to your word.*

All of us have been, or will be, in her shoes. Some one of you must be in them now, this morning. God bless you. Jesus wore those shoes, praying “if it be thy will, take this cup away.” We know in Christ that God takes no pleasure in our affliction. God is for us. We

set our faith on Christ, who is our help and hope. When all other hope is gone, this hope is not in vain.

Next in line, a true beginner—someone no longer young in years, perhaps, but brand new in faith. The prayer is:

*Accept O Lord the willing tribute of my lips, and teach me your judgments.*

I am an open book. Teach me. *Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours.*

If this is you, glory alleluia. Praise God, you have seen the light. Today, in post-Christian America, the eyes of your heart have been enlightened by the realization that there is a moral quality to human life, which is the living image of the moral character of God, which quality and character both are manifest, confirmed, and vindicated in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Shout Amen and shake your tambourine!

The next one up is a person of distinction, a man of means. He kneels:

*My life is always in my hand, yet I do not forget your law.*

Translated: “I’ve made my own nut. I am capable, self-reliant, in control. I pay my own way and my own taxes, and some other people’s way and taxes too (like the odd fellow over there with the tambourine). I am big, you see, but I’m not bad, because I know, O Lord, that I am not as big as you. I do not forget your law.”

And here you are. You don’t need much, ask much from your church. You show up for Sunday morning worship, because for Christians Sunday worship isn’t always entertainment, but it is always duty. Some of your golfing friends are already out there finishing their round in the peace and quiet of a Sunday morning, getting ready for a Bloody Mary. Frankly, you are beginning to get a little thirsty too. But when they invited you to join them, you said “No, it’s Sunday, I’ve got church,” because you do not forget the law. You are honest in your business, loving to your children, and devoted to your wife. God bless you, and may your tribe increase.

The gentleman is honorably discharged to make his tee time. He is followed at the altar by his older brother.

*The wicked have set a trap for me, but I have not strayed from your commandments.*

Oh dear. You have been playing by the rules, but there are others in offices up and down the street who have no fear or love for God, and some of them have turned on you. Your life is no longer in your hand.

Could be:

Some one has your credit card; or a takeover group is buying up your stock; or you are an obstetrician opening a letter from a former patient's personal injury attorney. You remember that day. You did everything correctly, according to the book.

The trap is set, and you will have to fight. But the Word was, and is, a lantern to your feet. You did not, do not, stray from the commandments. Insofar as this is true, in your fight for your money and your reputation you represent what is right, honorable and good. Ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King, who will tell you that those who live according to the Word should not let the lawless have their way.

Two remain, an old woman and her granddaughter. The old one wants to kneel, but her knees refuse. She is a good woman, almost a saint. Her knees bend within her heart.

*Your decrees are my inheritance forever; truly, they are the joy of my heart.*

Save for one line, your obituary is already typed and in the drawer. You've seen, done the Great Depression, World War II, the Beatles. In some respects the world has gotten better on your watch, in others not. Personally, you have known good times and bad. You have sinned and been forgiven. In faith, now you approach the end which is your beginning—because in death our lives are not ended, they are changed. This change is for the better. That is gospel.

The granddaughter kneels, and in her the old woman sees herself forty, fifty years ago: a young woman still, but already spiritually mature. The Word of God is in her head, her heart, and on her hands. She prays:

*I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes, forever and to the end.*

And that is enough. The women leave the Temple, and close the door.

We are the continuation of a great moral, spiritual and intellectual tradition, a line of faithful Jews and Christians who for millennia have lived according to the laws and promises of God.

A sower went out to sow. His seed was his Word of the moral quality of human life, and the moral character of God. And he was the Word, by whom all things were made, including this day, these hills and waterfalls, and us. This is gospel.

For us, the faithful, this Word is an "awful responsibility," our burden—and our blessing. Our burden, because faithfulness is a sacred trust and duty in all seasons, including this present one of rising ignorance, indifference and unbelief; our blessing, because the burden is our hope, our joy.

