

“Psalms of the Becoming God”
July 13, 2025

Exodus 3:1-16
John 14:1-6a

Most years during the summer months, I like to linger over a particular book of the Bible as the source for my preaching—a Gospel, a letter of Paul, the words of a Prophet. Today, and in the weeks ahead as we move through the summer, I want to explore the Psalms.

Now, we generally read a Psalm during worship each week, but I usually don’t preach from those readings. They are chosen to, in some way, reflect on the other scripture lessons of the day.

There are 150 Psalms, so I won’t be preaching from all of them. Seeking the light that they might shed on our living in these days, I intend to look at seven Psalms.

And that number is in no way original.

Back in January of 2019, Paul Simon dreamed that he was working on a piece of music called “Seven Psalms.” Over the succeeding years, he wrote the words and music of what became, well, “Seven Psalms,” the album he released in 2023. It is 33 minutes long, a single, continuous track in seven parts.

The only other Paul Simon album I have is “Graceland,” which came out, gosh, nearly 40 years ago. But how could I resist buying something called “Seven Psalms?” It’s a strange, kind of mystical work, not exactly what you might expect from Rhymin’ Simon—certainly not what I expected. For several weeks, it was the only music I listened to—nothing else captured my attention as it did.

And for some time, I wanted to do see if these new Psalms might help me better understand those ancient, biblical songs. Perhaps they could provide a new way into listening to those words.

This summer, Simon is touring and performing the entire work live. It seemed like a good time to pick up my potential project. And I’ve turned it into a sermon series.

Now, if you don’t like Paul Simon all that much—and there are people like that—don’t worry. I plan to make this more Psalms than Simon.

Some of us listened to the first movement before worship this morning—and we’ll continue to listen to parts on each of the upcoming Sundays.

That first movement is called, simply, “The Lord.”

In the midst of reflections on nature and life and love, there’s this refrain:

The Lord is my engineer
The Lord is the earth I ride on
The Lord is the face in the atmosphere
The path I slip and slide on,

Simon concludes, stealing his own words from a long-ago song about regret.

This refrain surfaces again and again throughout the seven psalms, repeating itself and changing until he sings:

The Lord is a puff of smoke
That disappears when the winds blow
The Lord is my personal joke
My reflection in the window...
The Lord is the music I hear
Deep in the valley, elusive

All of this led one music critic to suggest that Simon finds “the sacred everywhere and nowhere”—much as many of us do.

What strikes me is how often in the Psalms of the Bible, we encounter the expression, “The Lord is...”

Perhaps the first thing that came to your mind were the familiar, comforting words the affirm: “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

But the Psalmists also announce that the Lord is a refuge and a rock, a fortress, strength and a shield, merciful and gracious, full of compassion, a helper, a defense, and, as this morning’s Psalm said, “The Lord is my light and my salvation...The Lord is the stronghold of my life.”

All of these expressions carry some degree of truth in them—and you may have experienced that in your own life.

All of these expressions invite us into deeper reflection on the Holy One and on God’s ways with us. Experiencing or conceiving of God in such ways may indeed influence how we live in the world:

The Lord is my shepherd—I shall not want.

The Lord is my refuge—I as saved from my enemies.

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom then shall I fear?

We remember these words because of their deep, life-giving affirmations.

And yet, do we not also sense that such descriptions are incomplete—as are all attempts at confining God to our words.

They raise the question: Who is this Lord? Who is this Lord that we call a helper and a defense, or for that matter, “my engineer” or the earth I ride on?”

The question is at least as old as Moses, whose story we heard this morning.

Moses has fled from Egypt and is, in a sense, hiding out, herding sheep in Midian. He encounters the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of

Jacob and Rachel and Leah—the One they knew as the God of promise. This is One who is vitally interested in the misery of the people, who tells Moses:

“I have seen the afflictions of my people. . .”

“I have heard their cry . . .”

“I know their sufferings . . .”

This is not One who stands off, unmoved by the human condition.

This is a God of deep compassion.

“I have come down,” God tells Moses. “I have come down to deliver [my people]. . . to bring them to . . . a good land.”

And this is God’s plan: Moses will be the one to deliver the people.

Of course, Moses will have nothing to do with this. He quickly comes up with a number of objections to this plan and boldly makes them known to the Holy One. We didn’t read all of Moses’ objections this morning—you can find the rest of them in chapter three of Exodus.

What is important for our purposes today is Moses’ question: “If I come to Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

You who are Rock, Refuge, Shepherd, Engineer: What is your name?

And God replies in a way that the rabbi and feminist biblical scholar, Drorah Setel, has called “simultaneously clear and ambiguous:” I AM. “Tell them I AM has sent you to them.”

The Hebrew, as you might know, is just four letters. The name was considered so sacred that it was not to be spoken aloud by the faithful. Over time, Jewish people substituted the word “Adonai”—or “Lord”—for the name of God when they came across it in scripture. When you see the word “Lord” in your Bible printed in all capital letters, you’re seeing the traditional manner in which English versions of the Bible render this name of God—I AM.

To make matters even more confusing—which is also, perhaps, even closer to reality—that name could be translated as I AM WHO I AM or I AM WHO I SHALL BE or I SHALL BECOME THAT WHICH I AM BECOMING.

This name is the music we hear, deep in the valley, elusive.

This is the God of infinite possibilities who calls us into life filled with options and opportunity.

I SHALL BECOME THAT WHICH I AM BECOMING. Such a name might not be as comforting as Shepherd, not as protective as King. It is more. Rock, Refuge, Shepherd, Engineer—we need such words to help us come before the One who is I AM WHO I SHALL BE. We need such words to help us understand what we cannot understand.

But the Psalms that provide such names in no way provide an exhaustive and exclusive list.

So, Paul Simon can sing as well:

The Covid virus is the Lord
 The Lord is the ocean rising
 The Lord is a terrible swift sword
 A simple truth surviving

Perhaps we hear in this a warning that we should not try to get too cozy with I AM WHO I AM. There is a sovereign, uncontrollable aspect of God that is not to be ignored.

But isn't this what the ancient Psalmist knew, singing:

Do not hide your face from me
 or reject your servant in anger.
 You who have been my help:
 do not cast me off or forsake me, O God of my salvation.

Even one who knew the Lord as the stronghold of life was also aware of enemies round about and of the possibility of God's absence, a possibility that is ever stronger in our own contemporary experience. The worry is both ancient and modern:

The Lord is a puff of smoke
 That disappears when the winds blow

John's Gospel presents us with God that is indeed much more than a puff of smoke—a Jesus who is God made flesh and dwelling among us. And even John struggles to express what such an incarnation might mean for us and for this world.

So, as we read through John's Gospel, we hear Jesus speak of himself many times saying: "I am..."

I am the bread of life.

I am the true vine.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the water of life.

Even, as we heard this morning, I am the way.

This Jesus is the very path we are on.

The Lord, the song tells us, the Lord is the path I slip and slide on. Earlier, Paul Simon sang: "Slip sliding away...the nearer your destination, the more you're slip sliding away."

We think we get close to understanding this God, only to find our understanding, our certainty slipping away.

This is the God we are dealing with—or perhaps I should say that this is the God who is dealing with us. The God who calls to us from the most improbable, unlikely, impossible places: from a

burning bush, a city street. The God who tells us the most improbable, unlikely, impossible things: “Go,” when it would be far easier to stay put; “Stand up for the weak,” when we feel anything but strong ourselves.

Most of the messages that we hear—and they come to us loud and clear—tell us:

That there will be no intrusions into our ordinary lives by the Holy.

That we can go on our way, doing as we please and God will not disrupt us.

That in times of despair or weakness or indecision *we are on our own*.

The God who claims I SHALL BECOME WHAT I AM BECOMING, the God in process, is the one who not only intrudes and disrupts but also is with us as each one of us becomes who we are called to be.

With the Psalmist, we sing of the becoming God. Now, even now in these days

There is strength where we are weak,

There is courage where we are fearful,

There is love where we would hate.

The very ground we stand on is holy.