

Poetic Responses to Psalms and Scripture

■ *By: Ms. **Karen Jessee**, OP - - a member of the Dominican Laity, St. Mary Magdelene Group in Raleigh, NC. She writes and teaches, living with her husband and children near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

Everyday vocation

To shine, to gladden
To weep when I am maddened
At people's malice towards each other—
These are the tasks of a prophet,
Of a preacher.

We must learn to shine together,
To wash our hands at our kitchen sinks
—remembering each other,
To sip our morning coffee slowly
—blessing each other.

We must speak well of each other
When we talk on the phone,
Reach out for equity
In each and every email.

Yes, the lamp above your bed
Is a halo for you—



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Abruised reed will not break
*and a dimly burning wick he will not
quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

Isaiah 42:3

How afraid we are of the dark –
the blue-green shade which blooms
on our thigh, from the hidden table corner

or the hand which strikes,
a word slashing the heart –
we experience it all.

Even an unseen bruise
evidences blood roused
by inevitable surprise.

Perhaps we come to expect it –
wounds received again and again
as if, like a sacrament –

until they define us.
Hurt circulates by blood
as breath does,

and Grace blooms by its own surprise:

gift of tears,
embrace of ourselves –

the magic kiss
a mother offers her child,
true comfort in darkness

Even if it can't

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make the pain go away.

Liturgy of the Hours

Waking

Recognition of my body swaddled in flannel.
Blinking in light, shifting hips—the familiar
pain centered joint. The receiving mattress.

Roll until my legs drip off the bedside.
Toes sense the rigid floor, consent to land.
A fluid moment: my feet spreading.

Robe, the lightweight one. Sip of water
from night time's cup. To the window. Delight
as six ducks dip and surface on the pond.

Lunches

Everyone eats but me. I have coffee
tempting, the cup all but neglected as I grab
bread bags, turkey slices, mayonnaise—
the standards—from our burdened refrigerator.
Mine insists it remains a happy burden, day after day
scraping the knife over toast, squeezing bright yellow
mustard in a lacing pattern, portioning out the carrots.
I fret over whether the children have fruit.
They have food, I pray.

Laundry

Here begins rhythm,
lifting the basket,
descending the stairs,
bending to thrust arms open-fisted
into the pile of crumpled clothes,
shoving the whole mess in the washer.

Forty-five minutes I circle
the kitchen counter, shifting dirty dishes,
stacking clean ones,
putting cottage cheese away.
I pause by the window with clean hands,
grateful to see ducks still swimming
on silver water. The buzzer sounds.
I have to pull hard on the tangle
of wet, heavy clothes. With a click
the drier door locks, machine drone
becoming the cycling song of morning.

Chair

From here, I see only sky out the window.
Sky and clouds, thin wispy threads
of heaven's mantle, shawl of prophets.
Scripture lays in my lap, a comfort of weight,
thousands of years' pleas and praises,
wars, fidelities, all of the animals and spheres,
the many promises of God, then the Law,
then Law Fulfilled. What glory in the simple
flowers he says what dignity in a meal
of fish and bread. A woman sweeps her house
to find the coin she has lost, her precious keeping.
I glance at the carpet strewn with skeins
of my daughter's crocheting, my son's trading cards.
Whatever peace I seek
hides under these irritating piles.

Afternoon

I check for the mallards and buffleheads.
They bathe, flapping up out of the water;
they play, flying a brief distance then skidding
into the pond's silken surface, making spray.
I decide the window is a lonely place.

I prepare for my pilgrimage to school,
tie the hair away from my face
so, my eyes can be seen.

I know I will greet other parents as we walk
to collect our children. I know
I will smile at people whose names I can't recall.

Dinner

Two unfolded towels and some socks
still litter the kitchen table,
but we sit down anyway, after I'm finished
pouring the milk. I ask if my son, who has prompted us
before, if he'd like to lead the prayer. His chin tucks
into his neck. "Josephine?" I ask my daughter.
"No." She speaks definitively.
"David?" I plead, and as he dips his head to one side
he bleats "thank you for this grub so lovingly prepared."
He looks despairingly at me. "You know I'm no good
at these things." I look around at them, all waiting,
hoping I will concede it is finally time to eat.
With a simple sign of the Cross the prayer is over,
and probably forgotten. But we won't forget dinner.
Not ever.

Bedtime

My room deepens in the dark, a latent space.
There is the bed which birthed me this morning,
there is my husband already asleep.
I pause to look.
Held up by the house,
this floor, this mattress, I lie down
where I came from, returning
the gift.

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.*

Psalms 19:8

I abide by the requirements of home:
rituals of bathing, eating,
preparing for sleep

milk lovingly poured,
an ear awakened,
the willingness to wait my turn.

What solace limits provide—

Six steps lead from the entrance of my house
to expectant ground.
Promise and need call me out.

Gravity compels my feet to fall
yet they lift again,
ever a miracle of service.

Without the simple demands
outlining each day,
I would waste bereft of reason

to rise,
no will to approach the door.
The threshold You set in place for me

allows me freedom to move.

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*O Lord, you know all my longing:
my groans are not hidden from you.*

Psalm 38:9

Transparency,
that's what I long for—
the freedom of dismantling

brick after brick
the wall named
“how I want to be seen.”

Think of the light!
Morning streaking through poplar leaves,
Noon unbridled beating the roof,

and in late evening
by the gardenias, moonlight,
soothing as I wait for you.

Still, I can't live naked.
My skin won't allow it.
Even with you I feel need
for shelter.

A veil or a window,
whatever I choose—
Please, my Lord, take care
to look through.

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*I will bless the Lord who gives me counsel,
who even at night directs my heart.
I keep the Lord ever in my sight:
since he be at my right hand, I shall stand firm.*

Psalms 16:7-8

If only I could sleep standing
my dreams might cease, the ruthless plague
of chase and capture.
Then morning I wake on my right side,
sensing the hopeless weight of my body.

If I could sleep standing I
would have your hand.

Believe me, I fight for a glimpse of you before
unwelcome naps in the afternoon.
Part rest, part grief, sleep as thick as felt –

I hear nothing when you call, yet
my eyes open on their own.
You guide my days.

But when, my Lord,
will my nightmares end?
Conquer my heart!

I always wake lying on my right side.
One day soon, let me see you there.

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O God, do not stay far off:
my God, make haste to help me!

— Psalm 71:12

You? Mine?
I don't think so.

I'll tell you what's mine —
the shattered sunroom window,
my daughter with a flooding gash
across her foot and you
as far away as the hospital.

Concerned friends assure me
you hover nearby,
palpable as steam.

My eight-year-old son knows
when you come to his room
you'll fly billowing
thick ribbons of black gauze.

I remind him, **white**.
But how do *I* know?

I'll tell you what's mine.

Whatever's broken,
and my foot.

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*Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord?
Who shall stand in his holy place?
The man with clean hands and pure heart,
who desires not worthless things.*

Ps. 24:3-4

My seven-year-old son climbs the roof,
a short step out his window
and thirty feet down,
to claim what birds reside in.

He certainly knows
when I discover him,
fear will reign, a *thunderstorm*.

But for him sky opens
like the door to a room of dragons
light on the wing,

not his own small room,
walls cluttered with stickers,
milk stains on the floor.

Once, his thrill
was the kitchen sink, to climb
the stepstool on his own,
reach the soap,
stroke his small silken hands.

Now he braces the walls of the house.

No matter how I plead,
his face beams, faithful to joy.

No matter

how willful I am,
he won't come down.

Then he. . . sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore. - Genesis 8:12

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Certainty

Escaping crisscrossing children, the packing of lunches,
I slip upstairs to the bathroom and shut the door.
Out the south facing window a figure falls from a high pine,
dropping into the wind as if into a hammock,
wings still as the ground but its whole being in flight.
The red-tailed hawk lifts across the pond, as effortlessly
as it began, then alights, grasping the pinnacle of a cedar tree.
Instantly another bird of prey swoops from within the woods
into a great circle over the water—looking, looking—
our pond grey as the overcast morning.
How do these birds pierce the underworld for signs,
then lance at evidence of snakes and fish?
Talons empty this time, great rusty wings beat
to the tree where the first hawk began. Closer to me,
a house finch flits suddenly past the glass.
It's a great day for birds, I sigh, standing,
my eyes tracking all these movements up and down
in this bowl of earth called, “my yard.”
Downstairs again I stand on the path, watch my children
and husband shuttle to the car with lunchboxes swinging,
their feet magnetically wed to the ground.
Then facing the house (where papers lay in disorderly stacks,
like fog, over the kitchen table), I spy the blue-grey bolt
of a heron. Its arrow body steers over us,
another bird determined to arrive
where it knows it is going.

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*Glorify the Lord with me.
Together let us praise his name.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
from all my terrors he set me free.*

Ps. 34:3-4

Come with me to the playhouse my father
built in the backyard.
Come, play this game of being
family—mommy, daddy—
with imaginary plates to carry
our food,
together, here
inside these plain plank walls.

I'll eat first, then you take a bite.
The grassy floor holds up more than
the two of us.
Mother's peach tree leans near the fence
to the neighbors' yard, and beyond
that live even more people.

Just wonder,
on any sunny day, are we not the only
children who look
into each other's faces wanting
company?

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*O happy the man to whom the Lord
imputes no guilt,
in whose spirit is no guile.*

I kept it secret, and my frame was wasted.

Ps. 32:2-3

Thoughts snake,
hatched after weeks of brooding.
They bite themselves
to keep company.

Is this a maze?
You
call me out.

I'm mucking blind
with such a headache.

To be free
it's understood:
I must tell *someone*.

You already know,
Friend.

Still,
I hate to mention it.

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*But the love of the Lord is everlasting
upon those who hold him in fear;
his justice reaches out to children's children
when they keep his covenant in truth,
when they keep his will in their minds.*

Ps. 103:17-18

Oh, but they are small!
My kids, racing past the kitchen cabinets –
will they grow, and pair,
give birth? As I have.
Will they listen to one word I say?
How can they keep a covenant
when they don't remember their promise
to throw fruit roll wrappers away?
Lego men, pens and a pillow fort on the floor testify:
they have more on their minds than You!

I try for them, to remember,
cajole and admonish.
I bark, a guard dog
protecting their future.
But my tone seems thin while my hands
work: prepare their clothes, clean her ear piercings,
put sunblock on his scar – her medicine, his
wheatless meals. What must I know
to fulfill my covenant with you?
I'm afraid I fail.
I *do* fear the Lord.

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*Give me discernment, that I may observe your law
and keep it with all my heart.*

Ps. 119:34

Make my ears new
or I might wake,
a pillow molded over my head,
oblivious to You.

Lean toward me
as I talk with my children.
Pull close.
I can almost tell it's You.

Those two parents on the playground
grumbling, the rude barista—
I know they're hoarding
secret notes You've sent.

My eyes scrutinize
grumpy faces.

Yell, if You have to,
but let me hear.
Every day
I need to know You've come.

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*I thank you, Lord, with all my heart,
you have heard the words of my mouth.*

*On the day I called you answered;
you increased the strength of my soul.*

Ps. 138:1a,3

I sent my daughter to school
without her raincoat,
again!

She'll canter home soaking wet.
I'll strain my wrist
yanking tangles from her hair.

If I bother my friends
it's no wonder,
ranting about these
and a hundred other worries.

But I can't phone them now.
My cell went dead last week
after I dropped it in a puddle.

My tongue flails
like a fire hose blasting water
with no one to hold it.

Still, today, I feel better.
The sun shines, proud of itself.
The sky beams.

Dry.

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*Let God arise, let his foes be scattered.
Let those who hate him flee before him.
As smoke is blown away so will they be blown away;
like wax that melts before the fire.*

Ps. 68:1-2

I never thought of myself as
running,
but I do—

jog to the house
from the car a fourth time
for my phone, more coffee, the shopping list.
Nothing I need.

My hands swing
from doorknob to cup to keys,
eyes drifting,

no help to anyone.
My children wait,
burning in their seats.

Do I forget them?

*Hurry up, please.
Melt me.*

I want to become
someone who holds on,
who *stays*.

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*Though I have spoken once,
I will not do so again;
though twice, I will do so no more.
Job 40:3-5*

My mouth wanders like a circus performer
town to town
hawking the sideshow,
sullen dancing girls.

I moan:
my children keep growing!
No babies left for me
to cuddle, spoon-feed, bathe.

I hate myself
for mentioning my husband's fat.

When adolescent, I spilled
each soft detail of love affairs—
her lips, his eyes—
and too much of my body,

things I would never
want you to know now.

My children rustle in their beds
plump as pillows,
and somewhere
South of here, a hungry mother
scoops cornmeal with a piece of chipped cup
into the mouth of her listless child.

Dear Friend, help me!
I pull my hand up to my face
and press my mouth shut.
There is so much

I mustn't say.

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*You are loving with those who love you:
you show yourself perfect with the perfect.
With the sincere you show yourself sincere
but the cunning you outdo in cunning.*

Ps. 18

Stop near a mirror
in the moonlit dark.

Whose eyes do you notice
glancing sideways
for a peek at you?

I know!
Sullen girl, worried boy—
what is bothering you now?

You look away
believing you know something
your reflection can't.

But Radiance
shimmers through whites of eyes,
even the ones you pretend you don't see
hidden in your own head!

Blink,
but face your Face.
Don't falter.
Stare.

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Praise is fitting for loyal hearts. Ps. 33

Some people raise
their hands and faces
pulsating with joy,
shouting, "Yes Lord!"

I curl my fingers
around a coffee cup,
looking long

into my friend's-tired face.
Who put her here?

Her husband's work leaves her
alone with grown sons,
their internet gambling,
never enough milk.

She complains.
I hum, "Yes, Lord"—
about her daughter's budding breasts,
"Lord have mercy!"

We all
get to say what we like.
I search for words
that kiss.

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*I will instruct you and teach you
the way you should go.*

*Exult, you just,
all you upright of heart!*

Ps. 32:8,11

Stand as if heaven
came nearer
to your head.

Breathe,
broadening the channel
of your throat.

What holds
you up?
Have you thought of that?

Not your shoulders.

Relax!
Your feet fidget,
ready to move.

Humankind was *made*
to walk upright.

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*the Spirit drove him into the desert, and he remained there. . . ,
and was put to the test by Satan.*

Mark 1:12-13

I'm thrust into deserts
everyday
by the broken cup,

the shrunken sweater,
the cherished table's water stain.

Perfection molts,
litters its ugly
outgrown skin
as evidence.

Am I really to blame?

The scar on my son's
silken cheek,
a playground wound,
still searing, red—

demands I look
at *what could have been.*

Flaws flower
in unrelenting sun.
Once I begin to complain,
I will never be done.

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*He stooped down to me;
he heard my cry.
Ps. 40:1*

*Infinite ear,
labyrinthian—
the path*

*my breath seizes,
the One
which surrounds*

*everything!
I reach to cry
near your face.*

*And who am I?
All mouth.
Need and echo of a world
groaning.*

*You listen.
How kind.*