

Even the hard pathways ...

MUC Fellowship@10, 26 October 2025

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Psalm 65

Back in the 1800's, a vast swamp and river basin in Toronto were covered over. The wetlands were buried eight metres deep in dirt and gravel so that the city could expand. In the 1920's, the river itself was re-routed into a concrete channel, so its path could be fixed and the area even more heavily industrialised. Factories poured their waste into the river; raw sewage was also directed there. The river became so polluted that it was declared dead. On several occasions, it caught on fire.

Once, the wetlands had operated as a sponge, absorbing great quantities of water in times of flood. Meanwhile, the river had never been a line on a map, but a constantly shifting system through a landscape. The smothering of the wetlands and the concretisation of the river meant that heavy rains had nowhere to go. The city began experiencing costly flooding events. In time it came to realise that, in a changing climate, these events were only going to become more frequent and more intense.

And so in response to decades of grassroots activism, and in consultation with Anishinaabe elders, Toronto began a long project of restoring the river and wetlands. The city built new pipelines and filtered runoff, diverting pollution from the river. The riverway itself was restored, as more natural meanders were reintroduced. A large new park is under construction, and what is happening there is extraordinary. As the eight metres of contaminated dirt began to be removed, sedges and cattails began to sprout. The long-buried seeds had been lying dormant under the rubble, waiting a century or two to grow.

Scientists took soil samples from the site. When they were moistened in the lab, water fleas began moving around. They'd been buried alive in the late 1800's but here they were, now swimming. Nematodes, worms, larvae, zooplankton: all came to life. 130-plus years after their last meal, brown wormlike creatures began munching on green algae under the microscope.

The scientists found seeds from the 1500's, and pollen; and, beneath the rubble, peat bogs. As conservation biologists used these findings to guide new plantings, beavers found their way back into the area. So, too, muskrats, fish, turtles, mink, snowy owls and eagles: the area is now being bioengineered by the returning exiles. The beavers are damming the restored river, further slowing the flow and helping the soil become an even more effective sponge. Plants are self-seeding in the beaver dams, growing new clumps, new copses, even new forest. And people are returning: for what was once the site of heavy industry is becoming a watershed playground for kayakers, joggers and children.

'Praise awaits you, O God!' sings the Psalmist. 'When we were overwhelmed by our transgressions, you forgave us ... You answer us with awesome deeds of

righteousness, O God our Saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth ...' (Psalm 65:1,3,5). When we feel overwhelmed by industrial devastation and human hubris, by colonisation and deforestation, by genocide and ecocide, and by the unchecked expansion of our cities, I suggest we might unearth this psalm and once again let it sing. Psalm 65 paints a picture of a hope-filled world where even our worst transgressions are forgiven and where we are answered by God's good and righteous acts: acts of formation, acts of peace-making, acts which lead to an abundance of life.

Having assured us of forgiveness, the Psalmist goes on to describe God's shaping of the mountains. Then, sings the Psalmist, God stills the roaring of the seas. The seas are an ancient symbol of chaos and destruction. Just as God's breath hovered over the chaos in Genesis 1 and brought forth order, here God stills the roaring of the seas and calms the uproar of the nations. Then God takes the waters and turns them to good use. Where unchecked floodwaters wreak havoc and destruction, God turns the waters into an agent of life. 'God cares for the land and waters it,' sings the Psalmist. 'You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops.' (vv 9-10). We are moved from images of fear and devastation, of chaos and war, to images of intimacy, as God tends the earth through good soaking rain which brings forth the earth's bounty.

What happens next? 'The grasslands of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with gladness. The meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout for joy and sing!' (Psalm 65:12-13). The NIV changes these to passive verbs: the hills are girded, the meadows are clothed; but the Hebrew has them clothe themselves. In other words, creation itself generates life and manifests God's praise.

Like the language of chaos, this generativity also echoes Genesis chapter one. As you will remember, God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind ... And it was so ... Later, God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly ...' and 'Let the land produce living creatures ...' Each time God spoke, the elements responded by generating life: and God saw what the land, the water and the sky produced, and declared it all good.

The language of Genesis suggests that God is not a divine manufacturer of life, but instead calls forth life from another, trusting the other to generate exactly what is required. God invites; the other responds, and the response is characterised by creativity, generosity, abundance. So the land puts forth vegetation, an intricate tapestry of lichens, mosses, fungi, grasses, sedges, shrubs and trees. The waters fill with life, from the smallest microbe to the giant squid and even the great blue whale. The skies teem with birds and bats and flying insects; the land produces wild animals, livestock, reptiles and creepy crawlies. Similarly, Psalm 65 describes how the grasslands and hills and meadows and valleys respond to God's goodness by

adorning themselves with abundant crops and flocks, and with songs and shouts of joy!

These images are all very lovely and poetic, but what are the implications? Well, if people are created in the image of this God, and our story says we are, then it suggests that we, too, are to make space for life and to trust what emerges from the soil. In the Toronto wetlands, ecologists, horticulturalists and above all Indigenous elders watched as the nematodes, the algae, the seeds, the pollens, the sedges, the cattails, and finally the eagles, the beavers and everything else made themselves known. The people watching trusted what the soil produced and let the emerging species guide them in their efforts to restore ecological health. 'I still think back to that moment when those plants were discovered,' says Anishinaabe elder Shelley Charles. 'It was joyful, I actually cried ...' So joyful, even the hills clothe themselves with gladness, even the valleys sing! Closer to home, I think of the grassroots activism and the good work being done to restore health to the billabongs around Heidelberg and the waters of Birrarung (Yarra River), and so many other riverways. Perhaps this Psalm is an invitation to support and participate in such work.

It suggests to me also that we would do well to observe the fecundity of the earth, and the earth's economies of gift-giving and abundance. The grasslands, the hills, the meadows and the valleys all respond to God's goodness and righteousness with generous abundance. They're not participating in an economics of scarcity; they're not fighting over who gets what. Instead, each element showers the world with gifts: murrnong (yam daisy) in early Waring (wombat season); kangaroo grass seeds in Biderap, or dry season. Each gift is the result of countless exchanges leading up to that point: the sun feeding plants through photosynthesis, plants feeding wallabies with their leaves, wallabies feeding the soil through their droppings, microbes and nematodes creating rich humus, mycorrhizal fungi networks between trees exchanging information and nutrients, flies and moths pollinating flowers, rains sent by God helping everything grow, and wise humans gently facilitating all this.

It points to a way of life that is gracious, grace-filled and steeped in joy. Robin Wall Kimmerer observes, 'Instead of changing the land to suit their convenience, [Indigenous folk] changed themselves.' Rather than demanding whatever they wanted wherever and whenever they wanted it, rather than trucking produce across the continent in shrink-wrapped plastic, Indigenous folk gratefully received what was given to them in its own packaging and its own time. Shellfish in November; eels in March. Limes right now in many of your gardens, but apples won't be ripe until April. 'We are filled with the good things of your house,' sings the Psalmist (v 4). A life honouring the God described in this psalm might mean hearts and bellies filled by the joy of seasonal eating and the relationships which are nurtured through gift.

We know how to do this, for we all regularly participate in relationally abundant exchanges far from the formal marketplace. The lemons from a neighbour, the book

given to a Little Free Library, the handing on of a coat or a skill, the pot of soup dropped to someone in trouble, the daily tender care of a loved one: these exchanges feed us in ways that shopping never can. Like the valleys and hills who send forth abundance with no money and great joy, this psalm encourages us to inhabit these small disruptive economic spaces as much and as often as we can.

But if this all feels too pragmatic, too hard or too strange, then I'd invite you finally to rest in a metaphorical reading. The wetlands in Toronto were buried under eight metres of contaminated soil. It seemed impossible that anything good could remain. Yet life lay dormant, just waiting to emerge. Even if we feel overwhelmed, smothered in sin or grief or chaos, Psalm 65 assures us of God's graciousness. God stills the sea, God quiets the turmoil and, where morning dawns and evening fades, God invokes generosity and joy. As the Psalmist sings, 'Even the hard pathways overflow with abundance.' (v 11).

In the chaos, God breathes life. In the maelstrom, God offers peace. In the liminal spaces, in the shadowy times, in the moments of transition between one season and the next, God calls forth joy. Let us trust in these promises. And may the hard dark contaminated places of our lives be cracked opened to the light, that God's gifts may grow in us in due season.

Let us pray: Loving God, so much is buried deep inside us. Take away all contamination; open us up to your light. Breathe your spirit into us, send gentle showers of rain, that we may bring forth fruits of generosity and joy. Amen: let it be so. Ω