

A Contemplative Encounter with the Psalms



Watercolor by Luz Bratcher

A collection of psalms, thoughts, and original artwork
compiled by



Introduction

What is contemplation?

"Contemplation is taking a long loving look at the real."

-Walter Burghardt

In Christian tradition the word "contemplation" has a special meaning. Popularly "contemplation" means something like "thinking really hard." But that is not what we mean by it here in the context of Christian prayer. Instead of laborious thinking, it is a free and easy response. Contemplation is a natural loving response to an encounter with the presence of God through scripture, prayer, the sacraments, etc.

Seen in this light, contemplation is not mystical or beyond normal human experience in any way. It's just what happens to us when our attention is captured by something awe-inspiring. Perhaps you have been stopped in your tracks by a beautiful sunset, or by a vista spreading below you from atop a mountain? Or again, maybe you have found yourself dumbstruck by a painting or poem? If so, then you have "contemplated" in the Christian sense. Contemplation is that moment of pause. That time when your entire attention is wholly claimed by something other than yourself. Words are not adequate or necessary.

But this experience can never happen if I am not open to it. I will never see the beauty in any sunset, or experience the poignant meaning of any work of art unless I am willing. I must be a willing abductee if my attention is ever going to be captured.

Willingness. Trust. The Christian word is "faith." This is the prerequisite to true prayer. I cannot make God's presence come to me. I cannot make him reveal himself to me. Just like I cannot make a sunset beautiful or a poem meaningful. But I

don't need to make God come to me or reveal himself to me. He already has come in Jesus, and he already is present through the Holy Spirit. All I need to do is assume a posture of openness. A posture of trust.

And then pause! Pause long enough to take it all in, to see the whole view or hear the whole song. Stop long enough to receive the gift of God's presence, love, and beauty. When I read a psalm (or any part of scripture), God is present. When I hear God speak through the psalm, God is speaking directly to me. This is a gift so wondrous that it is beyond human thought! So, instead of filling my mind with words, I open the eyes of my soul and "take a long loving look at the real."

How to use this book.

A suggested method for contemplating with the Psalms and art.

Begin

Sit down and take a deep breath. Thank God for this time and consent to the reality that God is here with you now. Whenever we read scripture we are directly encountering the living person of God.

Step 1

Read the entire psalm slowly. Immerse yourself in the words, images, and emotions of the psalm. Let this prayer be your prayer. Consent to the words as being your words.

Pause for a moment of silence to let your heart and soul sing this psalm to God. Resist the desire to analyze the psalm for information, instead let the words inspired by the Holy Spirit speak for you.

Step 2

Read the psalm again. Listen for a word, phrase, image, emotion, or longing to capture your attention or especially express something you want or need to say to God.

Pause for another moment of silence. Rest with that word, phrase, image, emotion, or longing. Say it or give it to God.

Step 3

Read the psalm one more time. Be open to the possibility that God will respond to you. That he may have an invitation for you to know, feel, or do something.

Take another minute or two of silence. Whether God responded to you or not, thank him for his presence. If you have been invited to know, feel, or do something, how will you respond? Say your intention to God.

Praying with the art

Praying with art begins with a simple gaze, not the gaze of evaluation or judgement but of receptivity.

Each work in this book is paired with the psalm that follows it. Do not overthink the pairing. Resist the temptation to analyze or judge the art. Simply let each work be a prompt to pause and engage God with more than just your mind.



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AUDI
SOUZA
2017

Morning in Maine
by Audi Souza
12" x 16" acrylic on canvas

Psalm 131

A song of ascents. Of David.

LORD, my heart is not proud;
my eyes are not haughty.
I do not get involved with things
too great or too wondrous for me.
Instead, I have calmed and quieted my soul
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like a weaned child.
Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
both now and forever.

A thought

Contemplation begins by renouncing our pride. The first movement is to surrender our self-will and self-dependence. But this abandonment of myself entirely into God's loving care is not a further act of willpower (for that would be to sneak pride in by the back door). It is instead a laying down of all my willpower. A relinquishing of control, like a weaned child resting his mother's arms.





Shelter.
by Jana Gering
3"x5" Shelter: Small sculpture. Encaustic, Clay, Paper, Wire Mesh and
Gold Alcohol Ink. Formed to the shape of the artists' hands, 2020.

Psalm 27

Of David

The LORD is my light and my salvation—
whom should I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—
whom should I dread?
When evildoers came against me to devour my
flesh,
my foes and my enemies stumbled and fell.
Though an army deploys against me,
my heart will not be afraid;
though a war breaks out against me,
I will still be confident.

I have asked one thing from the LORD;
it is what I desire:
to dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
gazing on the beauty of the LORD
and seeking him in his temple.
For he will conceal me in his shelter
in the day of adversity;
he will hide me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
Then my head will be high
above my enemies around me;
I will offer sacrifices in his tent with shouts of
joy.
I will sing and make music to the LORD.

LORD, hear my voice when I call;
be gracious to me and answer me.
My heart says this about you:
“Seek his face.”
LORD, I will seek your face.
Do not hide your face from me;
do not turn your servant away in anger.
You have been my helper;
do not leave me or abandon me,
God of my salvation.
Even if my father and mother abandon me,
the LORD cares for me.

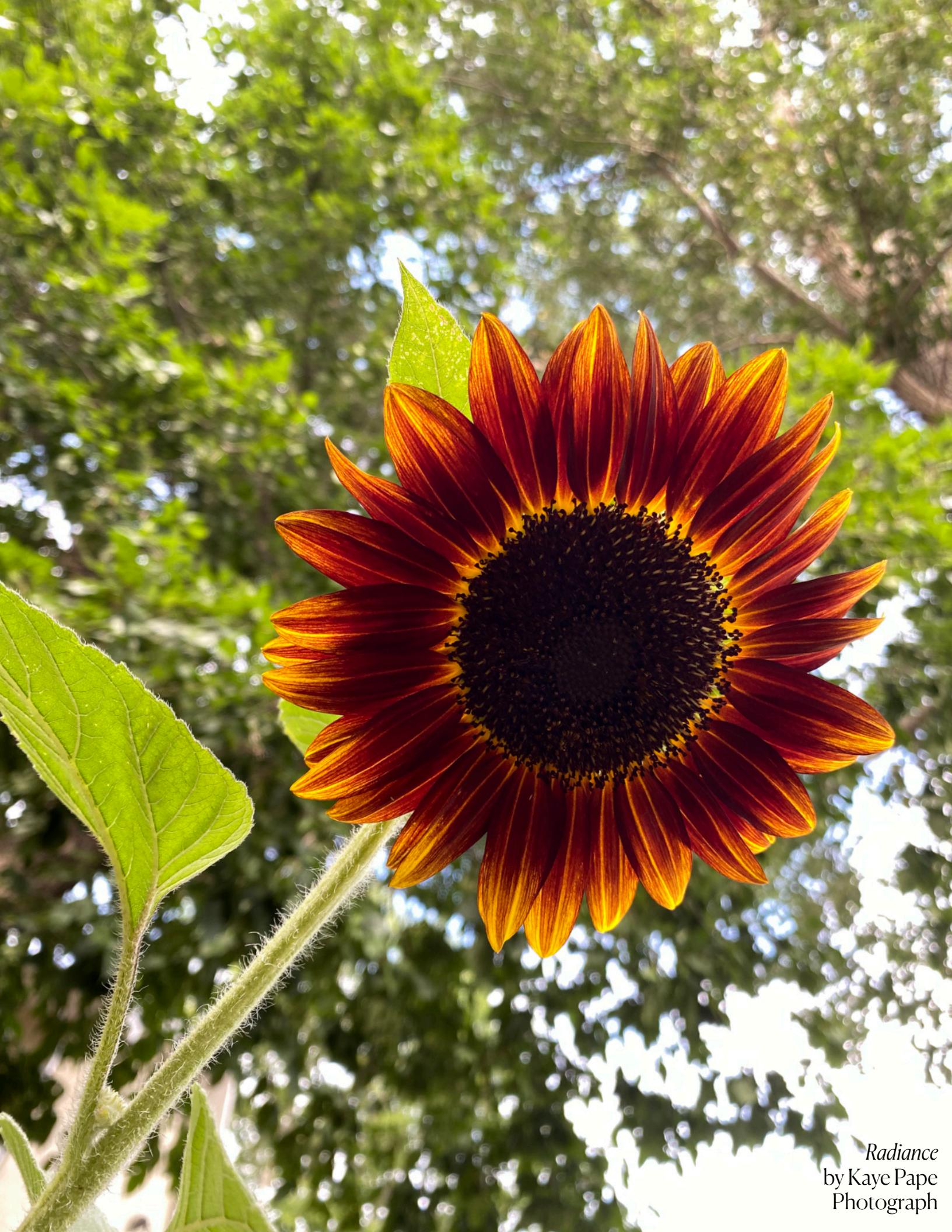
Because of my adversaries,
show me your way, LORD,
and lead me on a level path.
Do not give me over to the will of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
breathing violence.
I am certain that I will see the LORD’s goodness
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart be courageous.
Wait for the LORD.

A Thought

To “seek the face” of God is to adopt the inner posture of receptivity towards him and his will. It is the posture of Jesus himself and the posture he taught us to adopt by teaching us the Lord’s prayer. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” To receive all events in my life from God—but especially to receive Jesus—as God’s good will toward me is to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

For those of us who are obsessed with controlling the outcomes of our lives (which is all of us), this inner action of surrender requires practice. But the practice is the practice of ceasing to strive. Surrender is neither a virtue or a skill. It is the sustained loving gaze at the face of Jesus which is full of strength, wisdom, and intense care about me personally.





Radiance
by Kaye Pape
Photograph

Psalm 123

A song of ascents.

I lift my eyes to you,
the one enthroned in heaven.
Like a servant's eyes on his master's hand,
like a servant girl's eyes on her mistress's hand,
so our eyes are on the LORD our God
until he shows us favor.
Show us favor, LORD, show us favor,
for we've had more than enough contempt.
We've had more than enough
scorn from the arrogant
and contempt from the proud.

A thought

A contemplative gaze at God is humble and patient. We wait for the Lord to speak and act. We do not demand or complain. Not because we are fearful or self-loathing, but because we are totally confident in God's personal preference for us—his love for us like a doting mistress on her favored handmaiden. Indeed more than that! Because of Christ and in the Holy Spirit we have been made sons and daughters of the Almighty Father. Though we must struggle impatiently with contempt from the world, we know our Father. He will show us favor.





Circles to their other end.
by Jana Gering
5"x5" Encaustic on board, alcohol ink, bookbinding foil, 2020

Psalm 139

A psalm of David.

LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I stand up;
you understand my thoughts from far away.
You observe my travels and my rest;
you are aware of all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue,
you know all about it, LORD.
You have encircled me;
you have placed your hand on me.
This wondrous knowledge is beyond me.
It is lofty; I am unable to reach it.

Where can I go to escape your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I fly on the wings of the dawn
and settle down on the western horizon,
even there your hand will lead me;
your right hand will hold on to me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me,
and the light around me will be night"—
even the darkness is not dark to you.
The night shines like the day;
darkness and light are alike to you.

For it was you who created my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will praise you
because I have been remarkably and
wondrously made.
Your works are wondrous,
and I know this very well.
My bones were not hidden from you
when I was made in secret,
when I was formed in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw me when I was formless;
all my days were written in your book and
planned
before a single one of them began.

God, how precious your thoughts are to me;
how vast their sum is!
If I counted them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand;
when I wake up, I am still with you.

God, if only you would kill the wicked—
you bloodthirsty men, stay away from me—
who invoke you deceitfully.
Your enemies swear by you falsely.
LORD, don't I hate those who hate you,
and detest those who rebel against you?
I hate them with extreme hatred;
I consider them my enemies.

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my concerns.
See if there is any offensive way in me;
lead me in the everlasting way.

A thought

Through contemplation we discover that our journey towards God does not, in fact, require us to go anywhere. We do not really "seek" God as one seeks for a hidden treasure. The simple reason for this is that there is nowhere we can go to escape God's presence!

Contemplation is, nevertheless, a journey. It is the growing awareness of God's presence and attunement to his loving will. It is the ever greater opening of myself to God's sanctifying grace that he may search me, know my heart, and transform it.





Electric Sky
by Kate Shaffer
16" x 20" Mixed Media on canvas

Psalm 19

A psalm of David.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the expanse proclaims the work of his
hands.

Day after day they pour out speech;
night after night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech; there are no words;
their voice is not heard.
Their message has gone out to the whole earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming from his home;
it rejoices like an athlete running a course.
It rises from one end of the heavens
and circles to their other end;
nothing is hidden from its heat.

The instruction of the LORD is perfect,
renewing one's life;
the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy,
making the inexperienced wise.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
making the heart glad;
the command of the LORD is radiant,
making the eyes light up.
The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are reliable
and altogether righteous.
They are more desirable than gold—
than an abundance of pure gold;
and sweeter than honey
dripping from a honeycomb.
In addition, your servant is warned by them,
and in keeping them there is an abundant
reward.

Who perceives his unintentional sins?
Cleanse me from my hidden faults.
Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins;

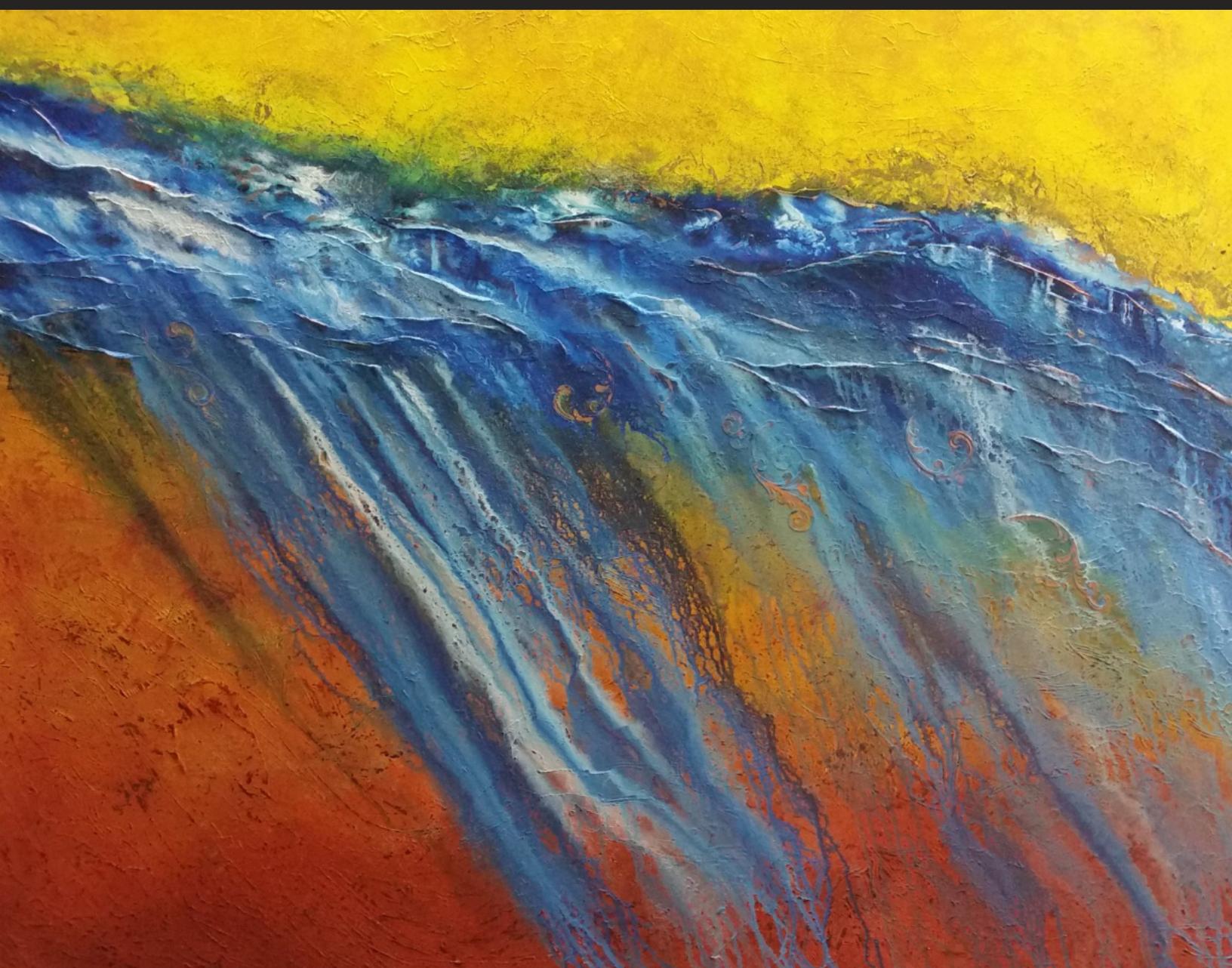
do not let them rule me.
Then I will be blameless
and cleansed from blatant rebellion.
May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

A thought

How does creation proclaim the glory of God without a voice? How does it communicate knowledge without words? By simply doing what God intended it to do. The sun rises, the trees photosynthesize, the flowers open, the bees pollinate. The sun sets and tomorrow they will do it all again.

In contemplation we take our rightful place in this beautiful dance. There in the silence of our hearts we drink deep from the living water of God's love. In that place of total dependence on God we do exactly what we were created to do: we enjoy him. Then, sustained by the water of life, will we blossom and produce the fruit of service to others. It will not be so much a conscious choice, as the inevitable flowering of our natures.





Joy Comes in the Morning
by Kate Shaffer
36" x 48" Mixed Media on canvas

Psalm 84

For the choir director: on the Gittith. A psalm of the sons of Korah.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD of Armies.
I long and yearn
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.

Even a sparrow finds a home,
and a swallow, a nest for herself
where she places her young—
near your altars, LORD of Armies,
my King and my God.
How happy are those who reside in your house,
who praise you continually. Selah

Happy are the people whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
they make it a source of spring water;
even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings.
They go from strength to strength;
each appears before God in Zion.

LORD God of Armies, hear my prayer;
listen, God of Jacob. Selah
Consider our shield, God;
look on the face of your anointed one.

Better a day in your courts
than a thousand anywhere else.
I would rather stand at the threshold of the
house of my God
than live in the tents of wicked people.
For the LORD God is a sun and shield.
The LORD grants favor and honor;
he does not withhold the good
from those who live with integrity.
Happy is the person who trusts in you,
LORD of Armies!

A thought

Life is a “pilgrimage” and we must often pass through dry and desolate places like the valley of Baca. Even in our prayer times we will have long periods of desolation when we receive no peace, rest, or refreshment from our contemplative practice. And yet we are happy because from these places spring new and fresh gifts of grace. God can give life to long dead and dried out bones. He will certainly give life to our dried out spirits in the proper time.





Chalet Bellevue
by Luz Bratcher
Watercolor

Psalm 16

A Miktam of David.

Protect me, God, for I take refuge in you.
I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have nothing good besides you."
As for the holy people who are in the land,
they are the noble ones.
All my delight is in them.
The sorrows of those who take another god
for themselves will multiply;
I will not pour out their drink offerings of blood,
and I will not speak their names with my lips.
LORD, you are my portion
and my cup of blessing;
you hold my future.
The boundary lines have fallen for me
in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

I will bless the LORD who counsels me—
even at night when my thoughts trouble me.
I always let the LORD guide me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad
and my whole being rejoices;
my body also rests securely.
For you will not abandon me to Sheol;
you will not allow your faithful one to see decay.
You reveal the path of life to me;
in your presence is abundant joy;
at your right hand are eternal pleasures.

A thought

When we take a long loving look at the real God we will experience what we know to be true, there is no other God but God, that his character is love, and that he is present with us. And God's presence is transformational. How? It gives us abundant joy! It is a psychological fact that we feel better when we find ourselves in the presence of another who knows and loves us deeply. We can't help ourselves. Indeed we have to actively resist noticing the other's loving attention if we want to hold on to our negative feelings.

But God does not only give psychological benefits. In his presence is the "abundance" of joy! It goes far beyond (deeper?) than emotions. And what great flowers of virtue blossom from a heart filled with joy! Just think of how many fearful and sinful habits would be eradicated from our lives if we had a pervasive sense of overall safety and well-being!

As we grow in awareness of God's constant loving presence and attention we will grow in our ability to do exactly what Paul encourages: "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."



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Spiritual direction is two people listening together to the Holy Spirit. It is a unique relationship where one person accompanies another person on their spiritual journey toward ever greater attunement, openness and responsiveness to God's presence and love.

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