

“On the Other Hand”
Psalm 62
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Perhaps you have seen that little sign that is sometimes displayed in retail establishments that want to discourage the use of credit. It reads something like this: “In God we trust. All others pay cash.” Or the one at the entrance to the swimming pool that reads, “Welcome to our ool. Please notice the “P” is missing. We’d like to keep it that way. Thanks for your cooperation.” Well, believe it or not, these two signs have a lot in common with Psalm 62. They weren’t written by people who knew Hebrew, but they incorporate an important Hebrew sensibility in them. So let me introduce you to one of my favorite Old Testament words, one which we often use, even if we never see it. It’s the word AK. Say it with me now, in a nice guttural Hebrew voice. AK. AK is a particle that usually joins two phrases and it signifies that the two phrases are in opposition, or that the one that comes second is a complete reversal of the one that comes first. It is often translated as “but,” but that only scratches the surface. And so, in the phrase, “In God we trust. All others pay cash,” you can imagine a big AK right there in the middle. “In God we trust. AK. All others pay cash,” meaning that there simply are no exceptions to the rule, credit will not be extended, don’t even bother to ask. It is not meant to be a theological statement, although it surely is when it notes that God is God and we are not. Likewise, an ool is a very different thing than a pool, as different as clear

is from yellow. “Welcome to our ool. Notice there’s no “P” in it. AK. We’d like to keep it that way.” You get the idea.

There are six AKs in Psalm 62, and curiously enough they do not appear in between two phrases, but at the beginning of six verses. Besides being unusual, this is also very specific, because it sets off immediately that what follows is a bold statement, an absolute statement, an exclusive statement. In the case of Psalm 62, it is the statement that begins the psalm, “For God *alone* my soul waits in silence.” AK, it begins in the Hebrew, “For God *alone* my soul waits in silence,” and never allows you to imagine what else, or who else, the Psalmist could possibly wait upon in that glorious silence. There is no other besides God. AK, it continues, “God *alone* is my rock and salvation.” There is no other source of strength and salvation. God is the final word. And as you probably observed, the first two verses are repeated for good measure in verses five and six, which just happen to come after the next, telling, AK in verse 4: “Their *only* plan is to bring down a person of prominence.” The psalmist’s enemies too have made a hard and fast choice and there is no alternative to their methods. They will pursue their evil, no matter the destructiveness of its course. And finally, to make clear the ultimate truth of the wisdom of the psalm, there is another AK at the beginning of verse nine, one that is less clear in the English as we read it, needing some additional words for emphasis: “Surely, without a doubt, those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion.” If you put together all the people of the world, rich and

poor, humble and arrogant, deserving and undeserving, they add up to nothing more than a great amount to nothingness.

The result of all these utterances of AK is to make clear the psalmist's utter confidence and dependence on God. In the face of such determined enemies, and the reality that life has its limits, God stands as the final and only source of hope and strength. "Once God has spoken, and twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work." AK is kind of like an Old Testament "Amen." Can I get an AK anyone?

Audibly, and appropriately, the word AK is ugly and abrupt, its purpose being to call us to attention to a hard and fast truth, whether spoken by a prophet or a psalmist. But we don't speak Hebrew very often, and so when an AK is required in our lives, in the world, we need something in our vocabulary that does the same thing, but that will make sense to those who hear it. As I pondered what that could be in English, the best I could come up with besides, "I'm your mother, that's why!", was the somewhat more subtle phrase, "On the other hand." When we use that phrase, it is often to present scenario B as an alternative to scenario A, as in, "We could go to the movies. On the other hand, dinner is an option too." Or to make our point in opposition to someone else's: "Yes, crime may be the most unpleasant aspect of living in San José. On the other hand, the pollution is pretty bad," and it tells the other person that although their opinion matters, so does ours.

But the phrase, “On the other hand,” can also express the same unshakeable faith of the psalmist when it is used to state an alternative that is not really an alternative at all, but a certainty. “The only things that are certain in life are death and taxes. On the other hand, there is God.” “The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. On the other hand, there is God.” “The world is full of enemies pushing against us, as if we are a leaning wall or a tottering fence. On the other hand, there is God.” “All around us is destruction and hatred and violence. On the other hand, there is God.” “On the other hand” is our trump card, the one we play to declare our final unshakeable position. It may not have the guttural, linguistic force of AK, but it has the ability to stop a debate in its tracks when the other hand is offered.

Psalm 62 is not a private message, despite the abundance of the personal pronouns I and my. It is a message for the world, for all those who need shelter against those who define themselves against God, either intentionally or by the actions they take that deny God’s justice and love to God’s people. Remember, they too have uttered their AK. But as much as Psalm 62 is a comfort to us, reminding us of our refuge, it must also be a call to action, an opportunity to help others to recognize God as their rock, their refuge, the one whose steadfast love endures forever. Taking action will be the AK which calls their attention to God’s salvation in their lives. It is not enough to simply know that we are protected by God’s strength. We must be that strength, and exhibit that strength, that all may find comfort in it.

One of the greatest stories of faith in the Bible is that of the prophet Jeremiah buying a field in the midst of the siege of Jerusalem. As the armies of the Babylonians are advancing, as the food is running out, as the panic is increasing, as the city is on the border of destruction that he himself has foretold, Jeremiah stops and invests in the future. Everyone must have thought he was nuts. But as certain as were the prophecies of the doom of Jerusalem were those of the bloom of Jerusalem, some time in the future. The city might be cut off, but the people we not, at least not in the long term. And so Jeremiah's unshakeable faith issues forth in the purchase of worthless land, a field he will never plant, a field his enemies might even fill with salt. It is his AK moment, the point of no return in his faith in God, his statement of "For God alone my souls waits in silence; from him comes my salvation." And first Jeremiah, and then his field, would wait in silence, indeed wait for decades, for the day when his descendents would once again plant that field, and harvest its produce, and build houses and live in them. On one hand, the city is in ruins. On the other hand, God has made a promise.

To live like you know about the other hand, and to make sure others experience it, sometimes means living contrary to conventional wisdom. It means being able to see farther than what is immediately in front of us, and having the courage to reach out for it, even if there are consequences. Environmentalist Dr. David Orr has said, "The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers,

storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.” That is an interesting statement in light of what the psalm says about the combined weight of both the humble and the arrogant, as **it** puts it, those of low estate and high estate. It is not on the basis of our success that God chooses to love us, but oh how long it often takes us to figure that out. When the psalmist says, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him,” what we are to pour out is not a list of our efforts and their successes or failures, but rather the story of God’s love and our response to that love, shown in living for one another in ways that make the world more habitable and humane. The world defines success in terms of profitability and market share and security. On the other hand, God defines success as waiting in silence for God.

There is always a danger of reading a certain passivity into those kinds of statements, as if God were the only actor in the story, and we are to cover ourselves up and wait for the divine rescue. But waiting of this sort takes a great deal of effort on our part. It takes resisting our urge to take the actions reserved for God alone like meting out divine justice and vengeance. It takes restraining ourselves from simply trying to play the same game better than those who oppress us. It takes maintaining a focus on being righteous even when those around us are not. It means defining ourselves by God’s standards, and not those of our family or

workplace or culture, even if those sometimes coincide. It takes proclaiming what's on the other hand, and then standing behind that proclamation, come what may. May we find our courage in the psalmist's AKs, and our strength from God's power and steadfast love as we proclaim what's on the other hand. Amen.