

It's 4:30 in the morning. The darkness of the night still hangs in the air, feeling as though a fog has crept into your room. You begin to toss around under the blankets, trying to pretend you're still asleep. Something strives to awaken you, whether a nagging unresolved issue from earlier in the day, a bladder wanting to be emptied, or a worry about something coming later that day. You force your eyelids shut, trying to resist the early morning waking. But the night lingers on. What often happens when you try to force yourself to stay asleep? ... Just the opposite—we often find ourselves wide awake!

So what does one do in the middle of the night when the darkness lingers longer than we want? ...

We have so many options. Watch TV, turn on the light and read a book, play “Words with Friends” on our smartphones or computers, turn on the lights and clean the house, or do other chores. Just imagine, however, if in the middle of the night you had no electricity, no light with which to see. Then what would you do?

That's something the writer of Psalm 30 may have been experiencing as he pondered the emotions reflected in this psalm. Although the headings for the psalms were added later, they offer a bit of insight into how later biblical scribes viewed the meaning of the words. One heading suggests this psalm was “at the dedication of the temple,” though the words seem unrelated to any such event. Some scholars suggest that the heading may refer to the rededication of the temple after it had been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanies, who may have been the enemy referred to in the psalm. Judas Maccabeus recaptured the temple 164 years before Jesus, cleansed it, and relit the sacred lamp, now commemorated in the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

Another heading in this psalm suggests these words were offered as thanks for the recovery of an illness, which we see reflected in the words “I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.” I can imagine the writer waking in the middle of the night, having tossed and turned all evening with

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illness, feeling his fever break, and lighting an oil lamp in order to write these words of thanks.

The writer could have also been expressing thanks for the healing of an emotional stress, which we still experience today. Problems at work may cause us to toss and turn. Financial worries can prompt restless nights. An argument with a friend or family member may replay itself in our minds throughout the night. Those worries can feel like nagging little demons teasing us throughout the night.

Regardless of the exact setting of the psalm, whether a dedication of the temple or recovery from a physical or emotional healing, the words convey a sense of relief, a move from despair to hope, which is something we still long for today. I think for most of us, however, we have a hard time imagining what it would have been like in the ancient days to linger in the darkness of the night. Today we can easily create light with the flip of a switch, but that is a relatively new phenomenon that appeared not long ago when

In 1882, on Pearl Street, in Lower Manhattan, the Edison Illuminating Company established the Pearl Street Station, the first central electrical power plant in the United States. Its coal-fired steam engines turned the dynamos that generated electrical current. Initially, Pearl Street Station powered 400 lamps in 85 households.

It soon became apparent that gas lamps were the technology of the past. Once a power plant had been built and insulated copper wires run throughout the neighborhood, a virtually unlimited supply of electricity could be provided cheaply and cleanly. The new electric lights burned more brightly than the sputtering, flickering gas lamps of generations past.<sup>1</sup>

We are so used to the electric lights coming on automatically in our communities that we forget what it was like before they existed. In Lebanon where I live, every year around Christmas, they reenact what it was like when gas lights provided the main source of light in towns. All the stores in

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town turn off their lights, and a group of carolers walk through the town following someone who pretends to light the oil lamps along the street. One by one the merchants turn on their lights to chase away the darkness of the night. This event reminds me of the story about

Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of classic books like *Treasure Island*, [who] spent his childhood in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the 19th century. As a boy, Robert was intrigued by the work of the old lamplighters who went about with a ladder and a torch, setting the street lights ablaze for the night.

One evening, as young Robert stood watching with fascination, his parents asked him, “Robert, what in the world are you looking at out there?” With great excitement he exclaimed, “Look at that man! He’s punching holes in the darkness!”<sup>2</sup>

I think the writer of Psalm 30 experienced God punching holes in the darkness, seeing hope in the midst of despair, light in the darkness of the night.

The psalmist expressed this hope by writing, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” The Hebrew word לִוּן (*luwn*), what we translate as the English word *linger*, can also mean to “lodge,” “remain,” or “abide,” as though the weeping moves in and stays overnight. The sorrow is like an unwelcome guest who moves in and stays an indefinite length of time, causing bleakness and sadness to permeate the house. The Hebrew word can also be translated as “murmur,” which captures the sense of the darkness murmuring unhealthy thoughts throughout the night, those voices that keep us awake tossing and turning.

The psalms often catch such real human emotions, the struggles and joys of life, the despair and celebrations, and they remind us that God remained present in the midst of all those emotions and ups and downs.

These ancient words written thousands of years ago recognized how God moved in the world, how

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God lingered with them in the darkest of nights, but they also remind us that God continues to punch holes in the darkness, for the psalmist concluded, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” Once we experience what God is doing in the world, we cannot remain silent, for we become partners with God in punching holes in the darkness.

Each time you listen to a friend who is struggling with the loss of a loved one or with financial fears, you punch a hole in the darkness.

When you offer forgiveness to someone who has hurt you, you punch a hole in the darkness.

When you welcome someone into our community of faith even though she may not believe or act the same way you do, you punch a hole in the darkness.

Each time you hear the news of a tragic event in the world and offer a prayer for those you don’t even know, you punch a hole in the darkness.

Each time you offer kind words to someone who has spoken harshly to you, you punch a hole in the darkness.

Darkness may continue to linger in the night, but may you continue to punch holes in the darkness by reflecting God’s light and pointing to the joy that comes in the morning.

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<sup>1</sup> *Homiletics*, April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ilifejourney.wordpress.com/2012/06/13/7176/>