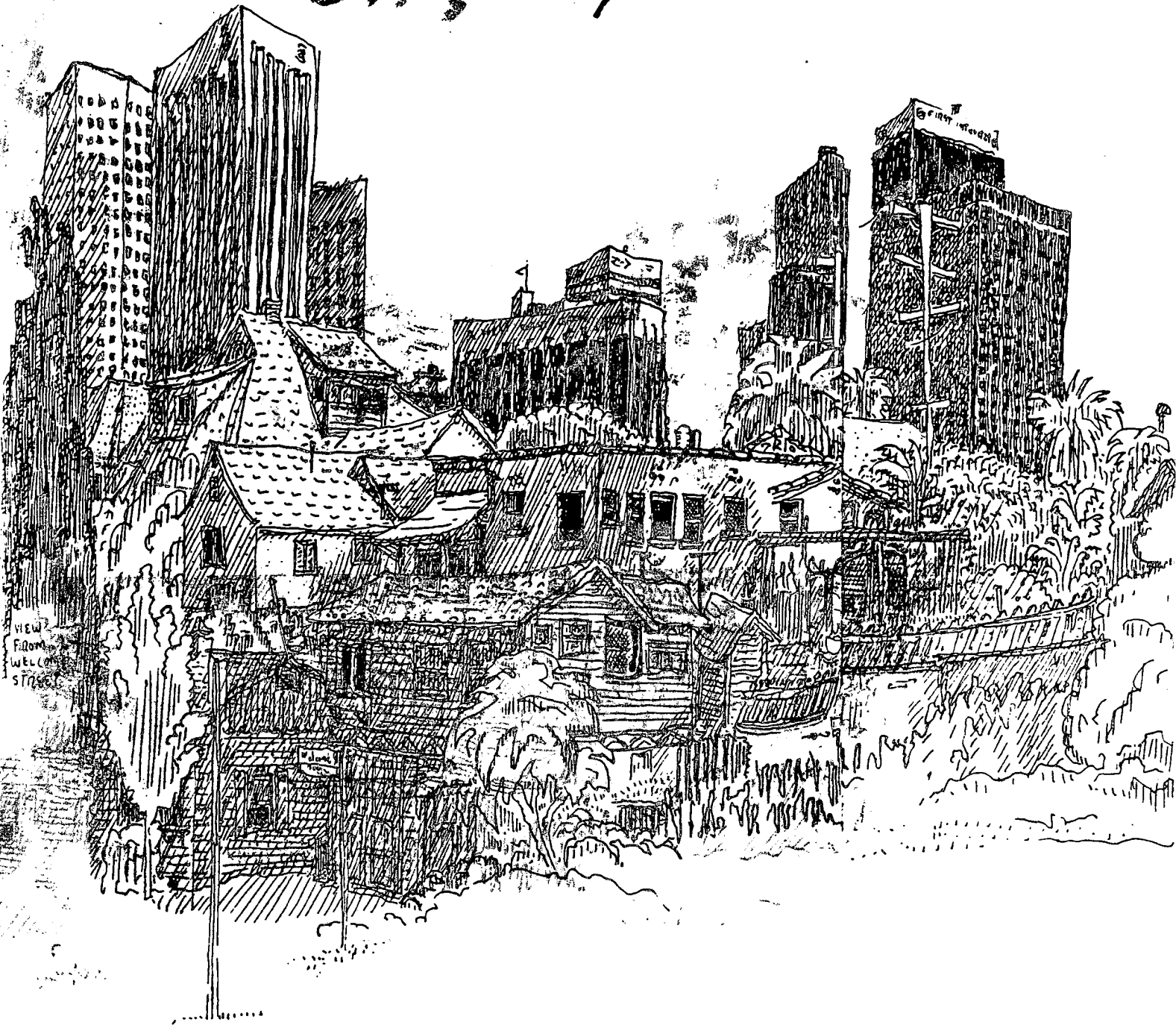


PSALMS

FOR THE
CITY



PSALMS FOR THE CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Psalms are not for the city, so the conventional wisdom goes. Los Angeles is my city, and at first glance, the Psalms do seem to be too ancient, too tribal, and too pastoral for a place like L.A. That impression was confirmed some time ago in an Urban Evangelism class when the instructor opened the session with, "Whatever you do, don't begin an urban ministry with the Twenty-third Psalm!" Of course, I understand his point and it is certainly valid, but his challenge set me thinking: What is there in the Twenty-third Psalm that speaks to the city?

It has taken me awhile and another class (this time in Urban Anthropology) to get around to answering. And my answer, as it turns out, has devotional rather than theological origins. But life with God — especially in the demanding, changing atmosphere of the city — cannot be divided into such neat portions. The theological informs the devotional, and the devotional brings vitality to theology. In the devotions that follow, I hope some things will emerge that can contribute toward theological insights that are useful in the city.

Recently, I began using an Anglican Breviary in my private devotions which includes daily readings from the Psalter and leads one through the entire Psalter in a two week period of time. The texts of the Psalms used in this paper are all from either the Jerusalem Bible or the new translation made by the Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church for the Draft Proposed Prayer Book (1976).

This consistent, concentrated exposure to the Psalter revealed to me that the themes of the Psalms are profoundly relevant to life in Los Angeles, even if the imagery sometimes is not. One thing that impressed me greatly is the strong theme of justice that appears throughout the Psalter, and the frequency with which God is called upon as the advocate of the poor, the helpless, and the oppressed. The form of the Psalms

is relevant, too. These are songs, and the city is full of music . . . ethnic, folk, classical, contemporary, commercial, rock, rap, satirical . . . the city is always singing about something. When the Psalmist's songs are combined with the city's music, it becomes clear that the Psalms are not simply pastoral. They are also songs of war and power, cries of pain and pleas for justice, lonely laments and glorious celebrations. The style of the Psalms is appropriate for the city, as well. Their lyricism — especially their directness and intensity — suits the rushing, roaring vigor of Los Angeles.

The urban setting in turn makes for vigorous meditation. The constant motion and noise of the city teaches one to meditate in the thick of things. It is instructive to read from the Psalter (as I sometimes do) in a crowded park near downtown , surrounded by vendors, transients, and lovers, with the high-rise bank buildings looming over us and the Hollywood Freeway whooshing past us. The setting and the Psalter have a mutually illuminating effect on each other, as themes and phrases in the Psalms begin to weave their sound around people and experiences in the city. All of the people and events mentioned in this paper were experienced while living and serving in Los Angeles during the period of time I was enrolled in this course. The Psalms had their affect on my experiences, and the experiences affected my reading of the Psalms. When the Psalmist's lyrics are set to the city's music, some of the urban issues that are addressed include pluralism, mobility, changing family structures, and social justice.

With all that in mind, what **does** Psalm Twenty-three have to say to the city? I tried to let it dialogue with some of the people who "lie down in the green pastures" of the city's parks. I took the words of "street people," which were either spoken directly to me or overheard, and interspersed them with a re-singing of the Psalm for the city where the Lord, if no longer our "shepherd," is still our protector and our friend. Perhaps that is the most important thing that any re-singing of the Psalms can say to the city — that God is there.

PSALM 9:17-20

May the wicked turn away to Sheol,
all the nations forgetful of God.
For the needy is not forgotten for ever,
not for ever does the hope of the poor come to nothing.

Arise, Yahweh; human strength shall not prevail.
The nations shall stand trial before you.

Strike them with terror, Yahweh:
the nations shall know that they are no more than human!

PSALM 82

God takes his stand in the council of heaven; *
he gives judgment in the midst of the gods:
'How long will you judge unjustly, *
and show favor to the wicked?
Save the weak and the orphan; *

Psalm 82

defend the humble and needy;
rescue the weak and the poor; *
deliver them from the power of the wicked.
They do not know, neither do they understand;
they go about in darkness; *
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
Now I say to you, "You are gods, *
and all of you children of the Most High;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, *
and fall like any prince."'
Arise, O God, and rule the earth, *
for you shall take all nations for your own.

THE FINAL WORD

(Psalm 82)

"Romantic!" He said the word with a sneer. "Korean society is not so romantic like American society," Myung-Hoon was telling me. "Korean society is man-centered." He made this last statement with a sense of satisfaction. At least there was one place in the earth where things were as they were supposed to be. For Myung-Hoon Kang this was a comforting thought since things in his life had not been what they were supposed to be for at least eight months and probably a lot longer.

Eight months ago, Myung-Hoon came to the United States on business, bringing his wife and four year old daughter along. It wasn't the first time he'd come, but this time in America — "this ugly place," as he called it — Myung-Hoon's life finally fell apart. He wasn't meeting his work responsibilities and his career was on the line. Then his wife found a job as a nurse and was issued her own work visa. Shortly afterward, she did the unimaginable — she rented a separate apartment and moved out, taking their daughter with her.

It was clear that for his wife, Shin-Hi, America was not such an ugly place. And it was clear that here the center of Myung-Hoon's "man-centered" world was not holding. It was as if, in the Psalmist's words, "all the foundations of the earth were shaken" and Myung-Hoon was groping about in the darkness among the shattered pieces.

"Americans always talk about **love**," he said with another sneer. "In Korea you just have a family. That's it. You don't talk about love."

"Don't Korean husbands love their wives?" I asked. My question was more of an attempt to understand Myung-Hoon's point of view than to obtain cultural information. He wavered. He wasn't willing to say that Korean husbands didn't love their wives, but

he wanted to say somehow that it was unimportant whether they did or not. He finally said that Korean husbands didn't need to be romantic.

Fair enough. "Then what is it that Korean husbands do to show love for their wives?" I asked.

Myung-Hoon said they worked so they could earn a living for their families and they gave their wives children. I know nothing at all about Korean culture and am in no position to evaluate the accuracy of what Myung-Hoon tells me. But I knew that even by the standard he himself just set, he wasn't showing love to Shin-Hi and hadn't for quite some time.

He went for long periods without working and spent money recklessly when he did work. He spent all of his free time with church activities and a constantly changing circle of friends. He probably hadn't been home long enough since his daughter was born to give his wife any other children. When he was home, the fights were so loud and long that the neighbors got fed up and called the police. That was especially appalling for Myung-Hoon. Neighbors in Korea would never intervene like that in a family matter, he assured me. "Mexican people, American people, Black people . . . they all tell me and my wife not to fight. They tell us what to do." It seemed to him as if the whole world had a say in his life, and he was the only one left out of the conversation. And now his wife had actually listened to one of the American neighbors and taken her advice to move out. She had discovered that here she didn't have to keep living in a man-centered world.

But to the people at Myung-Hoon's church, if Shin-Hi was moving out of a man-centered world, it was only so she could move into a self-centered one. "I know it looks different to you Americans," Rev. Kim explained. "To you, what she did seems reasonable. But, I am sad to say, in Korea even now many women are called upon to endure many things from their husbands. Even Christian husbands. Even many husbands who are pastors. The great virtue for a Korean wife is endurance. I have seen this many times in Korea,

that a wife will suffer many things , but she will pray for her husband. Many times she may get hurt, but she will go to Prayer Mountain and she will ask God to help her. Sometimes there is a great deliverance. Sometimes the husband will stop hurting his wife. We don't understand Shin-Hi because we have seen many cases much worse than hers. Even women who went to the hospital. Some nearly died. But they went to Prayer Mountain, and they endured everything from their husbands. Shin-Hi's husband is very weak right now. She is the stronger one so she holds the key. She should help him. But she does not endure. She runs away. This seems a very selfish thing for a Korean wife to do. The great thing for a Korean wife is to endure."

I listened carefully to Rev. Kim because I have great respect for him. I know he is a man of God and of deep prayer. I have seen how gently he treats his own wife and daughters. I know how well he understands the U.S., its strengths and weaknesses, and both the pressures and benefits it brings to his people who live here. I know how wisely and faithfully he ministers among them. And I could see how genuinely sad he was over Myung-Hoon and Shin-Hi; how truly ashamed he was that so many Korean women were called upon to endure so much — even now, even in the church.

But one thing Rev. Kim said particularly disturbed me. It was the word "sometimes." **Sometimes** there is a great deliverance. **Sometimes** her husband stops hurting her. But how much is "sometimes," and what happens the other times? Do the neighbors just keep not intervening? Does her husband just keep preaching and praying in public, and punching in private? Does his wife just keep shifting back and forth between the hospital and Prayer Mountain?

That little word "sometimes" leaves a yearning for so much more. Perhaps Rev. Kim used it because he sensed that what he was saying was not the final word, that the final word cannot be left with nations — Korean or American. After all, nations are no more than human. They are places where human strength prevails . . . prevails in all its relativity and limitation, sometimes brutal limitation. The final word cannot be left with

nations who may be man-centered or self-centered, but are almost never God-centered. In fact, being God-centered is exactly the "something more" Rev. Kim's "sometimes" leaves us yearning for. Our cry joins with the Psalmist's: "Arise, O God, and rule the earth. Rule Korea! Rule America! For you shall take all nations for your own."

Take our nations for your own, Lord — we yearn for your rule. For when we forget you we turn away to Sheol; we move toward death. Our nations cannot be man-centered without being death-centered; they cannot be self-centered and still survive. But how can we become God-centered? How can our nations — relative and limited — do things God's way, a way that is "more than human"? Our nations will be God-centered only if they grant God the final word. They must seek His rule — the rule of God where it is not the prerogative of the strong to prevail over the weak; it is the responsibility of the strong to preserve the weak. As the Psalmist expresses it:

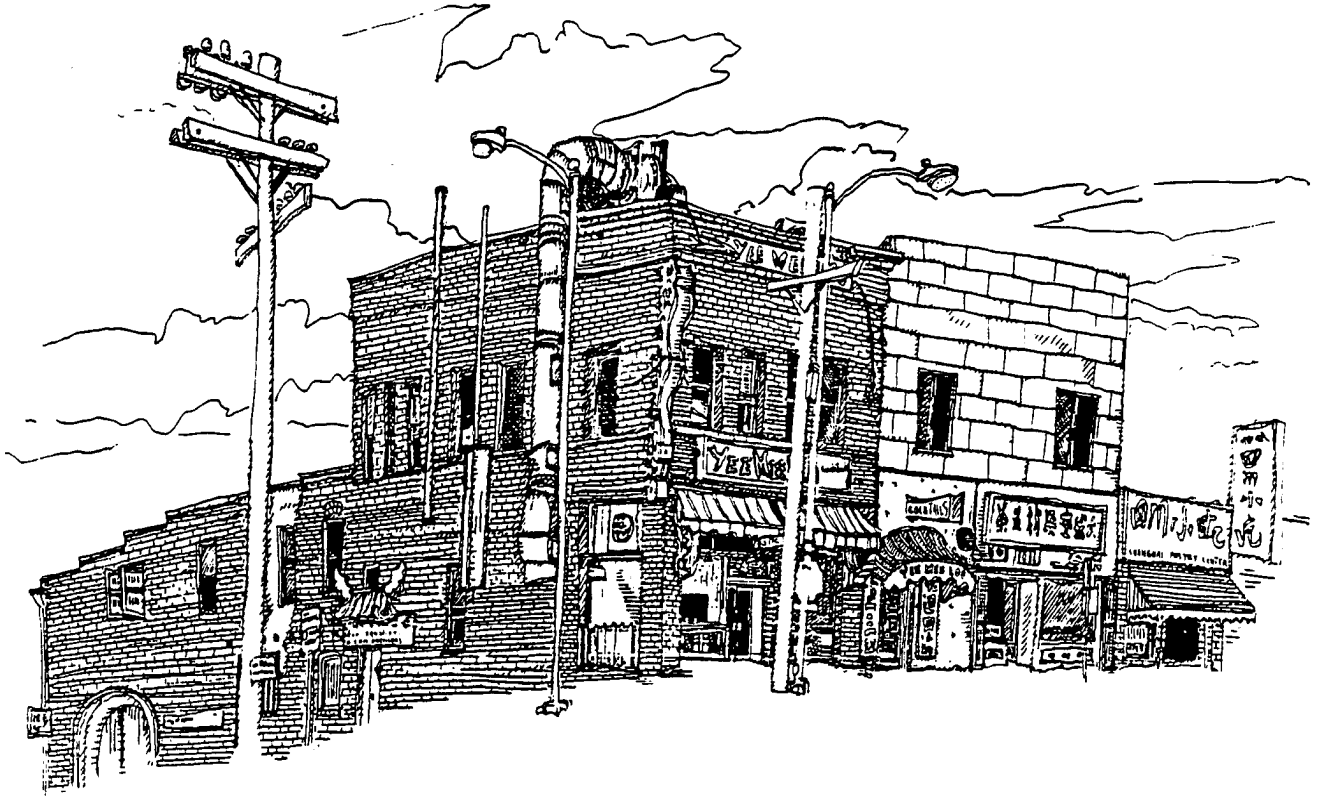
"save the weak . . . ,
defend the humble . . . ,
rescue the poor . . . ,
deliver them from the power of the wicked."

In a self-centered nation, the rule of God means "rescuing the poor" — not focusing exclusively on ourselves, but widening our vision to include others, especially those in need. In a man-centered nation, the rule of God means not forcing women to assume responsibility for deliverance from their own victimization. It means recognizing that both the victim and the victimizer need deliverance from the deathly effects of violence. It means that the church must defend the oppressed from dehumanization while challenging the oppressor to behave in a manner that is truly human.

O God, Myung-Hoon is angry and confused. Shin-Hi is hurt and without hope. Neither the nation they came from nor the one they've come to can tell them how to end their pain because, in important ways, both nations have forgotten You and live in ways that lead to death, not life. Lord, please speak the final word. Arise, O God, and rule our earth. We yearn for you to take our nations — all nations — for Your own that

we may save the weak, defend the humble, rescue the poor; that Your strength may prevail, and not our flawed human strength. Take our nations for Your own that we may **all** be delivered from the power of the wicked, the wicked that is within us as much as the wicked that is outside of us.

Amen.



PSALM 10:12-18

Rise, Yahweh! God, raise your hand,
do not forget the afflicted!
Why should the wicked spurn God,
assuring himself you will never follow it up?

You have seen for yourself the trouble and vexation,
you watch so as to take it in hand.
The oppressed relies on you;
you are the only recourse of the orphan./

Break the arm of the wicked and evil,
seek out wickedness till there is none left to be found.
Yahweh is king for ever and ever,
the heathen has vanished from his country.

Yahweh, you listen to the laments of the poor,
you give them courage, you grant them a hearing,
to give judgement for the orphaned and exploited,
so that earthborn humans may strike terror no more.

ELEGY FOR OUCH NOUEN
(Psalm 34:1-8)

*I will bless the Lord at all times,
his praise shall ever be in my mouth.
I will glory in the Lord;
let the humble hear and rejoice.*

Ouch Nouen died today. But we bless the Lord, even in this time, his praise ever in our mouths. If we're going to glory at all, it has to be in the Lord; there is certainly nothing we've done that we can glory in. All we did for Ouch Nouen was pray with her . . . just twice. It was the Lord that did whatever glory there was.

The first time we prayed for Ouch Nouen she was in the hospital in Chinatown. She was frightened and alone. We went to see her because her granddaughter came to our Children's Church and because whenever we went to visit her home, Ouch Nouen gave us such a warm welcome. In the hospital, she talked to us as if we were fluent in Khmer, telling us of her fears. It was her face and her tone that reached us since her words could not. We asked if she wanted us to pray with her. We placed our palms together in front of our faces so she would understand. She nodded eagerly, so we gathered around her bed and prayed — first, for God's presence, then for her healing and her peace — all in words Ouch Nouen couldn't understand. But in her humbleness she heard, and was glad.

We found out how glad when one of us went to visit her after she got home from the hospital. Her granddaughter explained. She said Ouch Nouen wanted us to come and pray with her again. She said after we left the night we prayed with her in the hospital room, Jesus appeared to her. Whatever God did that night,

Ouch Nouen was glad. She wanted more. Her family was a little embarrassed. They thought she was crazy. And maybe she was crazy, who can say? But she wasn't scared anymore and she wanted more prayers in the name of "Jesu." Maybe her "craziness" was really the kind of humbleness God could speak to.

So we began to make arrangements to talk to Ouch Nouen with a Khmer Christian translator. Not being overly crazy ourselves, we thought we should first find out what Ouch Nouen knew, what was **really** going on. Then we could teach her and lead her to salvation step by step. But time was too short for our orderly, rational plans. Before we arrived with the translator, Ouch Nouen was back in the hospital.

*Proclaim with me the greatness of the Lord;
Let us exalt his name together.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me out of all my terror.
Look upon him and be radiant,
and let not your faces be ashamed.
I called in my affliction and the Lord heard me,
and saved me from all my troubles.*

Ouch Nouen had a lot of troubles she needed saving from. In addition to her present illness, she had suffered through all that comes with war — personal indignity, the deaths of most of her family, the destruction of her country. She was forced to run away from her history and her home, ending up in a strange new land. And after all the strain and struggle to survive, now she was dying in a strange room, hooked up to strange western medical technology, fed on strange food, seeing her son — who should have been her strength — depressed and useless in the demands of this new society.

Her son, Vuth, told me about some of their troubles as he drove me to the hospital that second and last time. "In my country," he began — and he wove that phrase through all the litany of troubles. "In my country I don't need car. I have motorcycle. New. Very good. Go everywhere. Here I have car, but car no good.

Break many times. Car too old. In my country I have good house, many rooms, very cheap. But here my apartment no good. Very small. So expensive." He shakes his head. It is as if everything that was so good in his country is suddenly no good here. And now we are going to see his mother who, like the car and the house, was suddenly "no good" here. "I don't know what happened," he says. "In my country, my mother very strong. Stronger than me. When we run out of Cambodia, she carry many things. She carry more than me. Walk many days, no sleep. Very strong."

But Ouch Nouen managed to greet us only weakly when we entered the room. Vuth was visibly pained at the sight of the plastic inverted bottles above her and the long plastic tubes connected to her. He didn't look at her much, and seldom replied to whatever it was she was saying to him. But he cleared away the stiff macaroni and shiny jello from the untouched hospital dinner tray and gave his mother the bowl of rice and spiced meat his wife had made and sent wrapped in a brown paper bag to keep it warm. Ouch Nouen sat up and ate a little. She showed me the bruises on her arms from the needles and, speaking in a bewildered tone, pointed to everything that hurt. And everything did hurt, it seemed.

Then she settled quietly back on the pillow. In our unconventional way, it was time for us to exalt the Lord's name together. And the Lord's name was all I could understand of Ouch Nouen's quiet magnificat. "Jesu," she repeated softly, again and again. And each time she said it, I nodded. Vuth could have translated, but he seemed to think that this, too, was "no good." He shifted uneasily, then tilted his head a little and tried to read what was written on the inverted bottle with the bright yellow liquid. His finger pointed to a letter at a time — CHEMOTHERAPY. But Ouch Nouen went right on talking about "Jesu." It was as if she had fixed her gaze on God and grown radiant. Vuth's dismissal did not shame her. Then she made

the prayer gesture, so I prayed — hurriedly, nervously because of Vuth . I prayed for the Lord to save her — from all her troubles.

*The angel of God encamps around those who fear him,
and rescues them.
Taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are they who trust in him!*

Oh Ouch Nouen, what you taught me without words about the mercy of the Lord! Did his angels encamp around your bed that last night? God knows you'd spent nights enough in camps where you needed his angel to even wake the next morning. And where **did** you wake this morning? Forgive my halting, feeble prayers, you who so boldly, wordlessly asked for them and showed me by your request what it was to trust. We who are not yet "crazy" and are still "good" because our health gives us the illusion of permanence, we have to wonder how "Jesu" rescued you without the Four Spiritual Laws or the Inquirer's Class or the rite of baptism — without **us**. With only two prayers in a language you never understood and His own appearing. What **did** He say to you? Or did you just gaze on Him and die in your radiance? You who in the hospital waited for the familiar food from home, but hungered to taste the new Lord Jesu, tell us who never quite understood your words, how good He is, how happy you are who trusted in Him.

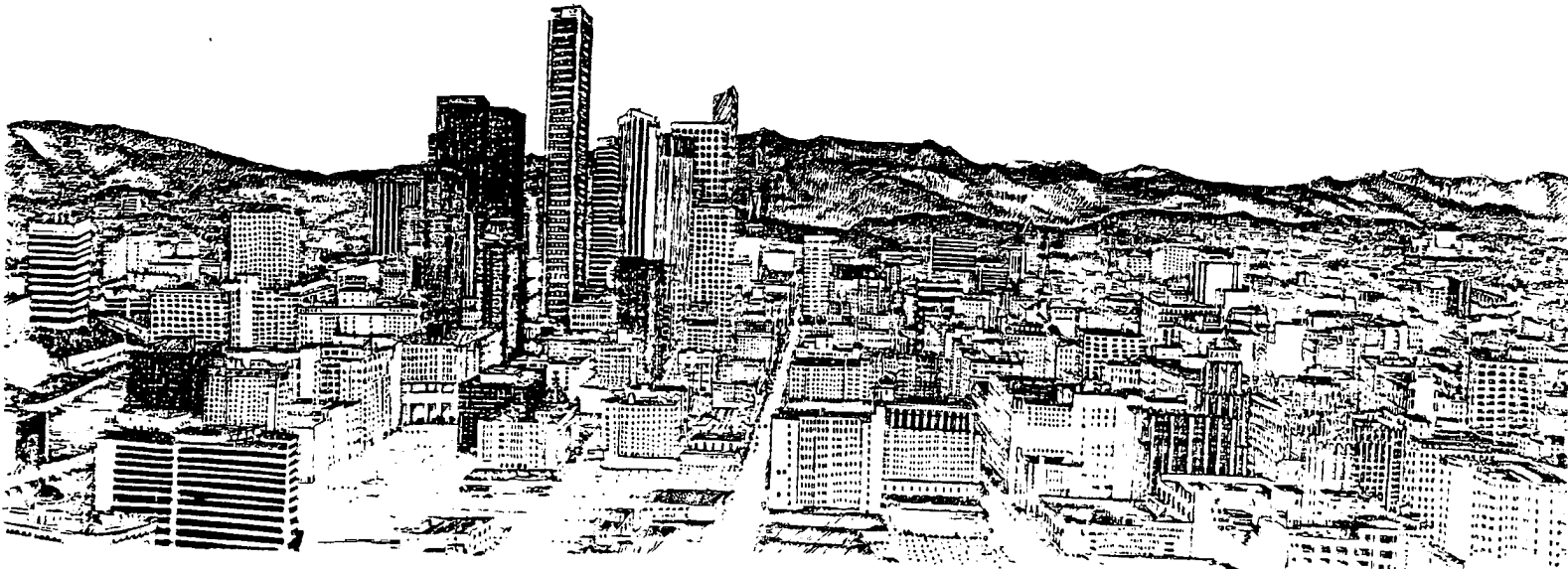
PRAYER FOR THE CITY

(Psalm 122)

The Psalms are songs with a strong element of prayer. Many of them are prayers or calls to prayer. Los Angeles is not known for its calls to prayer, but if there is anyplace that needs prayer, it is the city —

prayer for discernment ,
because there are so many complex systems and competing interests;
prayer for guidance,
because its future affects the well-being of millions;
prayers of intercession,
because of the great need and hurt that come from its inequities;
prayer for protection,
because just as the Psalmist prayed for protection from the hostile
forces of nature and enemy armies, the city needs protection from
the hostile forces of human nature and inhuman structures.

In Psalm 122, the Psalmist celebrates Jerusalem — the holy city, the City of Peace. In my prayer for the city, I celebrate Los Angeles — not yet a holy city, though we call her the City of the Angels. She is a city that needs angels— messengers from God to speak to her, minister to her, and offer her protection . . . if only from her own appetites and powers. Her powers are impressive, and I celebrate them in her vitality, her variety, her color and smell and life — and most of all, in her people.



*I rejoiced that they said to me,
 'Let us go to the house of Yahweh.'
 At last our feet are standing
 at your gates, Jerusalem!"*

*Jerusalem, built as a city
 in one united whole,
 there the tribes go up,
 the tribes of Yahweh,
 a sign for Israel to give thanks
 to the name of Yahweh.
 For there are set the thrones of judgement,
 the thrones of the House of David.*

Jerusalem! A city the tribes are glad to go to. A holy city. A city at unity with itself. A place where pilgrims stand at its gates and salute it with peace.

Los Angeles, our world's tribes are glad to go to you, too. We stream to you from every direction, but we come to you for paychecks not pilgrimages. We do not stand at your gates because you are not so well-defined; your sprawl is too vast to contain within walls. You are more at war than at unity with yourself; sometimes you seem about to fragment in your diversity and complexity. And yet, it is your diversity and complexity that draws us to worship in you. Not in your temples perhaps, but in the household of God that is being gathered in you from every tribe and nation and tongue. It is your people, most of all, Los Angeles — your people and their need of God — that call me to your heart if not your gates, like a pilgrim to a holy city.

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
 "Prosperity for your homes!
 Peace within your walls,
 and quietness within your towers!"*

*For love of my brothers and my friends
 I will say, 'Peace upon you!'
 For love of the household of Yahweh our God
 I will pray for your well-being."*

As the Psalmist prayed for Jerusalem,
 Pray for the peace of Los Angeles,
 A psalm of Shalom for the City of the Angels:

"Prosperity for your homes —
 and for your homeless —
 for in you, Los Angeles, home too often
 is neither made nor found.
 Shalom for the children growing up
 in cars and cardboard "condos";
 Shalom for old ladies asleep in laundromats,
 with nowhere left to go and nothing left to go on;
 Shalom for families crowded twenty to a room
 because it takes that many welfare checks
 to cover the slumlord's rent;
 Shalom for housing projects
 that have become apartheid for the poor;
 Shalom for young parents living on a freeway,
 driving hours every day
 because the homes they can pay
 for are miles away from where they earn the money;
 Shalom for the prosperous of L.A.
 who in their prosperity pull down million dollar houses
 to put up five million dollar ones,
 surrounding their frantic wealth
 with sophisticated security systems,
 still feeling somehow unsafe.
 Shalom for the city
 who needs your shalom more than she knows.
 Prosperity in her homes,
 And quietness in her towers —
 Her towering bank buildings and hotels,
 her offices and court houses
 need quietness where all is drive,
 need wisdom where all is scheme.

It is for love of my brothers and my friends
 that I say, 'Peace upon Los Angeles.'
 Love is the reason for prayer, after all,
 And people the reason for love.
 People who could be neither brothers nor friends
 but for your love, Lord,
 Your love that takes all people for your own.
 Lord, make of us brothers and friends —
 unlikely brothers, perhaps,
 or unexpected friends —
 But make brothers for Carlos,
 make fathers and mothers, too;
 And unexpected friends
 of Myung-Hoon and Shin-Hi
 so there can be help where now all is hurt;
 Unexpected friends
 like Ouch Nouen and me
 who without speech were friends
 with hands and faces . . . and with prayers.

Lord, you've gathered so many of us here in this city;
 Teach us to be brothers and friends,
 To share your Shalom
 not because the House of God is here
 like a temple in a holy city,
 but because You are here,
 And because, Los Angeles, all your houses —
 both makeshift and magnificent —
 need God in them.

For love of the household
 that God wants to build in you, dear city,
 I will pray for your well-being.

Amen.

