

From the Pulpit: August 11, 2024

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Matthew 6:10

Poetry Church—The Path to Kindness, I: Insh’allah

Our scripture for today is simple. Often heard. Often recited. Itself poetry. A kind of ancient hymnody. It comes from Matthew 6:10

*your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

Phyllis Cole Dai says “Poetry is an ideal tool in times of uncertainty and change because it grounds us to the now”¹

Sometimes we need to be grounded in the now. Sometimes it is urgent. Kaveh Akbar gives that idea texture, “when I was getting sober,” he says “I found no easy prayers, no poems to sing me well. What I did find was that during the early days of my recovery, when sobriety was minute to minute—white knuckles and endless pacing and cheap coffee by the pot—poetry was a place I could put myself.”²

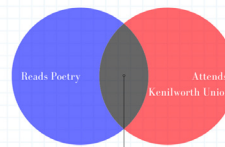
Pulitzer Prize winning Galway Kinnell says “poetry is somebody standing up so to speak, and saying with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment.”³

“if God
wills it.”

Christine Hides and I have been sharing a little document called Poetry Church for a little while now, dreaming of the time when poetry might speak more intensely in our midst. Poetry in scripture. Poetry in hymnody. Poetry in contemporary life. All springing forth together.

I was admittedly a little discouraged when I read that the National Endowment for the Arts hosts a survey asking Americans if they’ve read poetry in the last year. In 2022 only 9.2 percent of Americans said they read poetry in the last year. Which means 90.8 percent of Americans went nowhere near poetry.⁴

*Poetry reading
people of faith*



But I am hopeful nonetheless, that [this Venn diagram](#) might at least stand for the month of August, wherein there is some overlap between our expression of faith and our reading of poetry.

And so as a balm for the uncertainty and change we experience today, as a steady place where we might put ourselves, and in order to speak aloud what it is for us to be on earth at this moment, let us hear a poem.

¹Cole-Dai, Phyllis. *Poetry of Presence II*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Grayson Books, 2023.

²Akbar, Kaveh, ed. *The Penguin Book of Spiritual Verse: 110 Poets on the Divine*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2023.

³Lewis, Daniel. 2014. “Galway Kinnell, Plain-Spoken Poet, Is Dead at 87.” *New York Times*, October 29, 2014.

⁴Iyengar, Sunil. 2023. “New Survey Reports Size of Poetry’s Audience—Streaming Included.” National Endowment for the Arts, April 6, 2023.

Insha'Allah

By [Danusha Laméris](#)

I don't know when it slipped into my speech
that soft word meaning, "if God wills it."
Insha'Allah I will see you next summer.
The baby will come in spring, insha'Allah.
Insha'Allah this year we will have enough rain.

So many plans I've laid have unraveled
easily as braids beneath my mother's quick fingers.

Every language must have a word for this. A word
our grandmothers uttered under their breath
as they pinned the whites, soaked in lemon,
hung them to dry in the sun, or peeled potatoes,
dropping the discarded skins into a bowl.

*Our sons will return next month, insha'Allah.
Insha'Allah this war will end, soon. Insha'Allah
the rice will be enough to last through winter.*

How lightly we learn to hold hope,
as if it were an animal that could turn around
and bite your hand. And still we carry it
the way a mother would, carefully,
from one day to the next.⁵

I was immediately drawn to this poem. I know how potent the word Insha'allah is, and her framing of it sits right in the most tender parts of life. I can picture the mother-to-be, waiting for the baby to arrive. I can imagine the dry earth, waiting for rain. I can see the seasons of life when the plans keep unraveling, just as a young child's braids unravel, her mother's fingers never quick enough to catch every strand. I can imagine the grandmother and her laundry. The potato peels. I can picture the table with its absence, the sons having not yet returned from wherever they are, war or study or some unknown place beyond imagining. I can picture the war, the rice, the hope. Hope held lightly. I can picture the last time when hope bit her hand and how she carries it more carefully this time.

⁵"The Poetry Magazine Podcast." 2021. "Naomi Shihab Nye and Danusha Laméris in Conversation." Apple Podcasts. Podcast audio, March 4, 2021. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-poetry-magazine-podcast/id270054093?i=1000512206185>.

Denusha Laméris must ponder, "I don't know when it slipped into my speech/that soft word meaning "if God wills it." For her it could only have slipped in. Her mother is from Barbados. Her father descended from watch makers in Holland. She lives in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, out her door, redwood trees. The phrase slipped in. One day at a time. Not a native Arabic speaker, the word tumbles in with the sincerity of a convert. No trace of sarcasm here. Not quite rote "a soft word" she says. Earnestly spoken. And now the word is there. Insha'Allah. If God wills it. Used by Arabic-speaking Christians as well as Muslims, it acknowledges that God's presence, God's will, is tangled up in what happens next.

A native Arabic speaker might tune the phrase in other directions: one person explains that in some instances it might drip with sarcasm: "if you are a parent" maybe it unfolds this way. "Father will we go to Toys 'R' Us later today?" "Yes son, inshallah." Translation: there is no way we're going to Toys 'R' Us."⁶

It can become an overused phrase: I'll get to the gym, inshallah. Yes I'll clean up around the house, inshallah.

And in 2016 a UC Berkeley student was removed from a Southwest Airlines flight when during boarding, another passenger overheard him say "inshallah" in a phone call, so tense were American sensibilities toward Arabic speakers; this gift of a word felt more like a threat and even the airline employees could not untangle their prejudices long enough to think straight. The student didn't sue but did ask for an apology.⁷

Insha'allah. God's will be done. For some it is a phrase that has been there all along. Used as innately as saying hello, or I love you, or mama. A first word.

⁶Ali, Wajahat. 2016. "Inshallah Is Good for Everyone." *New York Times*, April 22, 2016.

⁷Stack, Liam. 2016. "College Student Is Removed From Flight After Speaking Arabic on Plane." *New York Times*, April 17, 2016.

For others it is a word that sneaks into the vocabulary, at first belonging to someone else, and then finding its way in, soon enough a word that too belongs to you, a chance for you to admit that day after day God's will is tangled up in what happens next. That God is here in our midst. That God's vision, God's dream for us, God's hope held strong is possible and here: a hope for thriving, a hope for joy, a hope for justice, a hope for community, a hope for neighbors, a verdant hope, a hope alive in this world.

And like Laméris suggests every grandmother does have a word for this: in our sanctuary it is "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We repeat it every week, twice a week, as many times as we pray the Lord's Prayer, the *Abba Prayer* as it was called in the early centuries of Christian faith. It is a prayer that encompasses the wellbeing of all creation: of rain clouds and rice, potato peels and lemons for laundry, distant wars we pray cease, babies we pray arrive safely and flourish, loved ones returning home, please Lord re-

turn home. All that Laméris evokes and more is part of our prayer for the wellbeing of creation. And it is held in four small words that take up so little space in our liturgy we can overlook them, speed by them, "thy will be done." "Thy will be done."

John Calvin says that all creation is the "theater of God's glory." When we pray "thy will be done," we cease to look heavenward, and turn ourselves to the world. We pray "on earth." For this place, here, now, the "theater of God's glory" is among us. There is no other place for us to experience God's will. "When we pray for God's will to be done on earth, we are signaling to see this hope through in so far as it is possible for us." It is Jesus who teaches us this prayer, Jesus the divine one who takes on flesh to dwell among us, our incarnate, down-to-earth God.⁸

⁸Anna Case-Winters connects Calvin's idea of creation as "the theater of God's glory" to our understanding of the will of God encompassing all of creation in her book *Matthew: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

We cannot live anywhere else except in our own down-to-earth bodies, our own embodied selves, and that is where we meet this incarnate, down-to-earth God.

Denusha Laméris' story is tinged with heartache, where the story of life and love has taken turns she did not expect. Her brother died at his own hand, and she writes about accompanying his widow through the task of bringing home his watch from the coroner, choosing an outfit for the day of the funeral. Her son died of a neurological disorder at a young age, she speaks about how she had to give up the search for a miracle cure, and instead sit in the miracle of little moments of grace. The nurses at the hospital who would bring laughter even in what otherwise felt like the darkest hour, or the other mother in the waiting room who suddenly felt like a long lost cousin, an ease of companionship found in an otherwise lonely place.⁹

"in our
sanctuary it
[Insha'allah]
is 'thy will be
done, on earth
as it is in
heaven.'"

Robert Frost said "A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness."¹⁰ There is a sense that every poem Denusha Laméris writes begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness, a love-sickness. And in some ways that is where faith begins. That is why we pray "Thy will be done."

Because of the lump in the throat, the home-sickness, the love-sickness that we carry around with us all the days of our lives. Because we see the disconnect between the world God dreams of and the world that is.

⁹Zimmer, Eric, host. "How to Find Solace in Discomfort with Danusha Laméris." *The One You Feed*. Podcast audio, April 14, 2023. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-one-you-feed/id792555885?i=1000609000811>

¹⁰Frost, Robert. *The Letters of Robert Frost, Volume 3: 1929-1936*. Donald Sheehy, Robert Bernard Hass, Mark Richardson, Henry Atmore, ed. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 101.

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Because there is a gap between what this life and what we know of God's dream for all creation, the unfolding of justice, peace, thriving. Someone here is also searching for companionship in the otherwise lonely place. Someone is searching. Someone is finding. This the theater of God's glory, the place where little moments of grace pile up, unexpected. Let this poem live again between us and evoke the possibility of God's presence.

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as if it were an animal that could turn around
and bite your hand. And still we carry it
the way a mother would, carefully,
from one day to the next.

Eternal God of this glorious summer, this season of overflowing gardens, when a leafy canopy towers over every step, and around each corner a butterfly or living miracle awaits, it is you alone who deserves our praise.

We witness your beautiful and abundant gifts and yet we notice a dissonance between the abundance we see and the clamoring outrage we hear. Every hour seems to become a new opportunity to argue. Your son Jesus told his followers to be encouraged in the world's distress. For though the noise may rise to overwhelming levels, Christ is our peace.

Merciful God, let your peace be something we can hold and shape into a tangible vessel passed tenderly to another. Mold our hearts to compassion for growing conflicts around the world. Draw near to the warring places specially Lebanon where Americans were told to evacuate, and to the entire region where too many innocent lives have been lost. Let your peace grip the hearts of those who cause division and who use terror as a weapon.

Let your peace be something we can breathe, savoring each precious molecule that flows into our lungs. As we watch the Olympics we marvel at what breath, and muscle, and bone can do as we celebrate along with medal winners, especially Peter Chatain and his team who rowed this weekend.

Let every one of our exhaled breaths be a prayer for those whose bodies are more mystery than strength. We remember those who mark time in the hospital, let every hour be an exponential possibility for thriving. Let each breath become a prayer for those who countdown the remaining treatments and number each fragile step forward in rehab.

Let peace be a place we can walk to, a sacred space here on earth, encircled by heaven. In every place let us greet others with goodness and be greeted by their kindness. For those who have lost the path, guide the way toward connection and hope. That we may come together, united, with you as our center, to shine with your love. Our Father.... Amen.

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