

October 15, 28A (Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23)

## **Where is the psalmist's own voice in this communal confession and appeal?**

by [Kerry Hasler-Brooks](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue

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Reading is an opportunity to join a rich conversation. Writers often reach out to the words and ideas of others, shaping their craft by echoing, extending, or critiquing what they have encountered as readers. Explicit or implicit, intended or not, intertextual moments in a text connect us to the wider community of people, words, and ideas.

This is true of my favorite fiction. When I read Geraldine Brooks's *March*, I rediscover the little women of Louisa May Alcott's beloved novel through the father, the battlefields of the Civil War, and the plantations of Virginia. When I read Toni Morrison's *Sula* or *Tar Baby*, I find a remade Janie, the storytelling heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I meet Brooks and Morrison not only as great writers but as brave and creative readers who respond to Alcott's and Hurston's classic tales in order to make new meaning of the pains and hopes humans experience.

As a reader of scripture, I am similarly drawn to passages that reach out to other passages. Here the Bible is alive not only as a source of divine truth but as a bridge to the ancient authors who, like me, have engaged in the serious work of knowing and sometimes wrestling with the stories, poetry, and teaching of our sacred text.

I reread Psalm 106 today listening for the psalmist, the person behind this grand and formal appeal for God's favor. Likely written after the Babylonian exile, this psalm catalogs hundreds of years of Israelite unfaithfulness. Structured as a chiasmic poem, it connects the captivity in Egypt to the captivity in Babylon to tell the truth about this long history of disobedience and—most importantly—about God's unrelenting covenant.

The psalm is a communal confession of sin and a communal appeal to God yet again for undeserved mercy. Using a communal voice that speaks to and for a whole people, the psalmist is largely hidden within the plural “we” and “they.”

But I do hear, however briefly, the person of the psalmist at the beginning of verse 4. Following the opening invocation for the people to “praise the lord and give thanks,” the psalmist slips into the first person singular and directly addresses God for the first of only two times in the psalm: “Remember me, Lord.” This is an intimate moment in an otherwise public psalm, a quiet and private reaching out from a particular person to a mighty God. In this moment, I sense the person inside this psalm, and I am reminded that the collective of God’s people is made up of particular, singular, small, and sacred individuals who, like me, are reaching out to God for themselves and for others.

In verses 19–23, the psalmist summarizes the golden calf story of Exodus 32, one plot point in the catalog of the Israelites’ disobedience. The psalmist lays out the facts of the story. At Horeb the people forgot God, God’s miracles, and God’s faithfulness. They made a calf from metal, and they worshiped the calf as God. God vowed to destroy the people, but Moses interceded and God showed mercy to an undeserving people. The covenant continued.

This summary of the golden calf story is almost matter-of-fact in tone, but in the final verse of the summary, I sense again the person inside this psalm. The psalmist who in verse 4 calls out intimately, “Remember me, Lord,” does some intimate remembering—or rereading—of their own in verse 23. The psalmist gives us their own language for the particular miraculous moment in the particular miraculous life of Moses, the moment when Moses “stood in the breach” for the people, pleading for God’s mercy just like the psalmist is doing so many years later. As the psalmist finds the person of Moses in the breach, echoing and remaking the Exodus 32 story, I find the person of the psalmist, a careful reader and writer who is in the breach themselves.

The image of the breach in English is rich with meaning and implication. A breach can be a gap, an injury done by one to another, a dissolving relationship, an interruption, a broken contract, a broken fortification, land broken by the plow, or the sea broken by rocks. To stand in the breach, therefore, is to bridge the gap, to bind together two parties, to heal and repair injury, to uphold contractual obligation, to restore and rejuvenate land, to resist surrender, or to risk death.

The psalmist's language of "the breach" is echoed throughout literature, from Shakespeare's "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" in *Henry V* to Tracy K. Smith's recent poem "You Certainly Have the Right to Your Thoughts in This Minefield." It is a powerful image that calls each reader to stand in the breach themselves, to intervene on behalf of others as ally, advocate, neighbor, and friend. It is a reminder that we are bound to God by way of others, by the community that prays for us when we cannot, by the people who reach out to God and to justice for us when we cannot, and by the God who reaches out to us again and again when we cannot.