

“Hey, there. What’s your *Sitz im Leben*?”

Pick-up lines you’d only hear at a divinity school. One of the requirements of a theological education is that students learn the most complicated term possible to describe any concept. For instance, it wasn’t until I was half-way through my Introduction to the New Testament course that I figured out that when the professor referred to something that was “Johannine”, he simply meant it came from the Gospel of John. For instance, “in the Johannine rendering of the resurrection . . .” instead of, “in John’s story of Easter.” Needless to say, an East Coast seminary was a challenging place to be for a Midwestern gal with a penchant for the practical.

But, in time, I learned to speak the lingo. One of the most meaningful bits of theological lingo I picked up was the term *Sitz im Leben*. It’s a German term that, in its simplest form, translates into English as, “setting in life.” Determining the *Sitz im Leben* or the “setting in life” from whence a scripture originates is an important aspect of Biblical interpretation. There are nuances and details that we miss if we don’t understand the cultural, social, economic, literary, political and geographical contexts in which the passage was originally written.

Perhaps it would be helpful to think of an example of *Sitz im Leben* from our modern context—the term “bless your heart” for instance. When my Midwestern, Methodist grandmother said it “Well, bless your heart!” she meant it as a kind of prayer that you would feel loved, valued, and appreciated. When my Southern, Presbyterian sister-in-law says it, “Well, bless your heart” it’s a statement of pity laced with a heapin’ helpin’ of judgment. Obviously it is important to know the *Sitz im Leben*, the “setting in life,” of the person blessing your heart in order to understand the intention behind the statement.

You can imagine that if the *Sitz im Leben* can be so important for understanding the intent of a modern phrase in a modern context, how much more important it might be to try to understand the “setting in life” in which our ancient scriptures were written. For instance, the beginning of the Psalm Gail read for us this morning . . . “as the deer pants for streams of water . . .” Yeah, so, a deer is thirsty. Big deal. The deer can just go to the edge of the lake or the bay for a drink, especially this year when there is so much more edge to the lake and the bay than there has been in previous years due to the high water levels. A thirsty deer is hardly an urgent situation in Northern Michigan. Our *Sitz im Leben*, this current situation in life in which we find ourselves, might create some stumbling blocks for us to truly appreciate this passage about a deer panting for water.

And so we do our best to consider the conditions of the ancient context in which this Psalm was written. For help with that, we turn to Biblical scholars who work to determine as much as they reasonably can about the *Sitz im Leben* of this Psalm. Perhaps, for our purposes today, the most important thing to understand in order to more properly interpret this Psalm is the geographical region in which the Psalm was written.

Unlike with the sodden fields or overflowing bodies of water of the Midwest, this text comes from an arid region in the Middle East. It was a dry and dusty place, a place where water is scarce and precious. It’s a place where, when the winds blow, they are more likely to bring with them a choking storm of dust than the nourishing rain of storm clouds. It is the place where, when the rain falls on the just and the unjust, the rain is not, as we might sometimes interpret it, a kind of punishment but rather a glorious gift of God that brings new life and opportunities to all God’s creation.

In that setting in life, a deer’s thirst for water is mighty. The deer’s desperation is such that it is panting in its thirst. In that setting in life, the availability of water is not a given. And so, when the Psalmist pants for the Lord as the deer pants for water, it is a desperate thirst. Getting to water isn’t a sure a thing. Perhaps that water for which the deer yearns is the drink that will make the difference between life and death. That is how badly the Psalmist needs God, like a deer in the desert during the dry season needs a bit of water to survive, so too does the Psalmist need God to survive. *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”*

It is thought that this Psalm was written by King David when he is on the run from his son Absalom who wants to kill him in retaliation for a punishment David inflicted upon him. The punishment was deserved, but Absalom is angry and wants revenge. The whole town knows of the conflict and they taunt David, “Where is your God?” This is hard for David, a

bastion of the faith, once well-respected and revered for his piety. And so he wonders, *I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"*

David's fortunes have reversed, the tides have turned, once the one on the seat of power, he is now on the lamb, running from his son, seeking for, yearning for, indeed PANTING for God's presence, God's help, God's protection.

And so it is that, in one fell swoop, one's *Sitz im Leben*, one's setting in life, can change. In my vocation, I bear witness to it nearly every day, a meaningful change in someone's *Sitz im Leben*.

- The discovery of a partner's indiscretion suddenly leaves someone adrift in a sea of betrayal and unknowing. What he had thought to be true—the setting in life in which he thought he lived—a marriage that was a partnership of mutual respect, love, and trust—is suddenly called into question.
- An otherwise healthy person gets a call back after a routine screening only to discover that there is nothing routine about what is happening in her body. Suddenly, the future for which she had planned so carefully seems but a dream, and her life has become a nightmare of fear and anxiety.
- Or, a phone call from an unfamiliar number. Upon answering the sober voice on the other end informs him that he regrets that he has some bad news to share. The sudden and unexpected death of someone he loved and held dear sends him into a tailspin because he simply can't imagine his *Sitz im Leben*, his place in life, without the one with whom he had basically designed his setting in life.

Life makes no guarantees about our *Sitz im Leben*. Circumstances change in a heartbeat. In those moments of unknowing, grief, and intense struggle, we may find our minds filled with thoughts similar to those of the Psalmist, *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God*. In the confusion and unknowing, the heartbreak and the grief, we pant for God's provision, we yearn to feel God's love, we thirst for the solace of the embrace of our loving and merciful God. The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that *God is with us, even unto the end of the age*. (Mt. 28:20) The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that *neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*. (Romans 8:38-39)

But, the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ also calls us to be people who are cognizant of, and responsive too, changes in the *Sitz im Leben* of those around us, even when we may not even be aware of what those changes are.

Allow me to illuminate this point with an illustration.

I was serving the church in Rhode Island. A couple requested a meeting with me to discuss a health issue. I was devastated when they revealed that one of them had just been diagnosed with dementia. She was only in her early 60s and the news hit like a freight train. They didn't want anyone else to know, they just wanted me to pray.

A few nights later I was at a meeting of the missions committee. The woman with the diagnosis was a member of the committee. I noticed that she had a short temper that evening. Those of you who are familiar with the disease of dementia are likely aware that being aggressive and short-tempered are often side-effects of the ailment. After the meeting, I overheard members of the committee grumbling, accusing her of being controlling and a you-know-what. Everything in me sought to defend her and explain the situation to the committee members whose feelings she had hurt that night. But, I value clergy confidentiality and so I kept my mouth shut as they continued to bad mouth her. There was pain and misunderstanding all around. It broke my heart.

But, it also taught me an important lesson. So often we do not know the *Sitz im Leben*, the setting in life, in which other people are living. We live in this world that values appearances, health, and success. That makes it hard to reveal hardships, vulnerabilities, and pain.

And so it is that, as followers of Christ, we are called to be patient, compassionate, and merciful with others. We are called to be sensitive to the reality that we've all got our *Sitz im Leben* and likely are going through some kind of struggle. And maybe, just maybe, we're called to go the extra mile and every now and again, when someone doesn't seem okay, to ask "Hey, there. What's your *Sitz im Leben*?"