



What the Psalmist Knew

Praying the Psalms

by The Rev. Lera Tyler

Praying the psalms? We recite them, yes. Some of us chant them or sing them (sometimes). But praying the psalms as a spiritual practice? We turn prayerfully to Psalm 23 for comfort in times of fear, despair, or sorrow; and we have other familiar or favorite psalms: “I lift up my eyes to the hills” (121) or “O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation” (95). Many lines and phrases from the Book of Psalms are also familiar: “Be still and know that I am God,” or “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it”

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or “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

But praying the psalms? We look at many of these ancient poems and hymns and feel

uncomforted and uncomfortable with many. They seem so foreign and “unchristian.” Yet, for centuries, monastic communities have centered their daily offices in prayerful recitation or chanting of the psalms anywhere from four to seven times daily. Why have Christian spiritual leaders encouraged the practice of praying the psalms for non-

monastic persons as well? Why did Thomas Cranmer outline a 39 cycle of reciting the Psalter for the Book of Common Prayer?

Those who practice praying the psalms regularly explain that it has led them toward new experiences of intimacy with God — especially for those of us who have been fearful of being fully open with God because we believe that God wants our best behavior in our prayers.

Many of the psalms make this clear: what we think of as unacceptable behavior in front of God was not a concern when the Israelites spoke directly to God. They ranted, questioned God’s judgment, called for blessings and vengeance, and demanded all kinds of responses from God. The psalms exposed wildly different feelings: from the petitioners’ arrogance to profound penitence, from victorious confidence to total submission. The truth is that we early 21st century people lack the godly audacity and fearlessness that many psalmists so boldly and disturbingly display. Consequently, our relationship with God is often limited, not because of moral failings or destructive addictions, but because we are fearful of being fully open with God.

The psalms provide an antidote to a kind of Christian piety and spirituality that is romantic and unreal in its positiveness and that speaks only of going from strength to strength, from victory to victory.

In reading the psalms, I found a voice saying things that I would not have dared spoken

(even inwardly), but my heart wanted to say: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10); or "O Lord, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve!" (94).

What happens when God seems to have turned against us? The psalms reveal our deep dilemma: do we follow our desire to run from shadows, or do we speak to the shadows in painful words? God calls us to enter that darkness, and the psalms encourage us to let down our defenses and disarm ourselves. Our naming the pain to God helps. Sometimes in the mystery of that relational

moment, the emotion is transformed, even if the situation is not.

The psalms of lament can be the model for an honest dialogue of the faith, a way to pass through adversity other than through denying the fears and anger within us. Through the psalms of lament, we can argue our innocence, demand a hearing, put the burden on God, and petition God. And in the psalms, words of personal anguish eventually move to praise and hope because the psalmists see God and God's light in the darkness.

Psalm 13 provides a short example. "How long will you hide your face from me?"

the psalmist begins. The pain, sorrow, and personal humility have lasted long, and the plea is direct -- if you don't do something, Lord, I will die. Then comes the statement of faith, turning lamentation into a prayer profoundly confident and even joyful:

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

There is a change after

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Bob Reed, a member of St. Stephen's, Wimberley, is part of the team that writes meditations for St. Stephen's website based on the daily lectionary. Below is one of Bob's recent meditations:

Psalm 74


***We are given no miraculous signs;
No prophets are left,
And none of us know how long this will be.***

Psalm 74:9

This is more than a psalm of lamentation. It is a psalm of utter despair. The time is after 587 B.C. The memory is still painfully fresh of the Babylonian soldiers smashing through the mighty gates of the magnificent Jerusalem temple (verses 5-6). They set up foreign idols in the sanctuary (verse 4), then burned the temple to the ground (verse 7), carrying off the golden chalices and objects of worship and dragging the priests, leaders and other leading citizens to exile in Babylon. The psalmist and his companions have now returned to the temple site and stare in disbelief at the smoldering ruins of their beloved temple. "How could God allow such a calamity to happen," they wail, "especially to us, his chosen people?"

The same question has been asked over and over throughout history, when hurricanes or tsunamis strike, when airplanes are flown into towering office buildings, when the doctor calls and says "your test results are in; you'd better come into the office so we can discuss your options." The same question was on Job's lips: "Why me, Lord?"

And yet, despite the hopelessness and despair, the psalmist remembers that "God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth" (verse 12). Somehow, from these smoldering ruins new life will arise. The gruesome pain and humiliation of the cross, the cold darkness of the tomb, all give way to the Easter joy that springs forth in resurrection.

Read the daily meditations at www.ststeve.org. 

such an experience; we understand the universe differently. The transformation in the middle of a lament psalm is like that. Here praise comes not from the delusion that things are “going just fine” when they aren’t, but praise that comes from real trust and the joy it brings. Here are models for encouragement, even praise, that re-enforce our faith -- even when we feel vulnerable -- by looking back thankfully at what God has done.

Then we understand the universe differently and God differently. In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris confesses that praying the psalms regularly in a Benedictine community taught her to overcome “the belief that one had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God.”

The prayers found in the psalter are often brutally honest as they cry for protection from those who arrogantly lie and flatter while the poor and needy are “despoiled” (12); for God’s presence in the face of death, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you” (63); for an understanding of God’s inaction in the face of injustice (73); or for healing and forgiveness (102).



Our own prayers often linger in our anguish, anger, and pain, but these psalms encourage us to move to trust and faith. Even the most violent images in the psalms are lifted up for God’s ultimate mediation.

The psalms can teach us to pray humbly with an awareness of our total dependence on God: “My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high” (131). Through them, we pray for release from distractions: “In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storm pass by” (57).

By praying the psalms, we also pray as Jesus prayed -- for submission to his Father and strength in time of trial, for the power of God to do God’s work, and for blessings and hope for the destitute and neglected. Regularly praying the psalms forms us into more faith-filled people: trusting totally in God, bringing us into God’s presence honestly exposing ourselves and our needs, and finally, drawing us into the steadfast love of God and the conversation of the Trinity.

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For your own reflection

Bob Reed (see the previous page) writes that throughout history the psalms have been sung, first in ancient Israel’s Temple worship, later in Gregorian chant in Christian liturgy, up to the present day. As you read the psalms, try chanting them to a tune you know or one that you make up.

The Episcopal Church uses a daily schedule of psalms and Bible readings (called the lectionary) in a two-year cycle, which means it repeats every two years. The reading schedule begins with the First Sunday in Advent; on November 29, 2009, we will begin reading Year Two. For a list of the readings, visit online at <http://satucket.com/lectionary/index>. or <http://www.missionstclare.com>. You will also find daily Pslam readings in Forward Day by Day and in the back of the Book of Common Prayer.

For more on the psalms, see Bishop Lillibridge’s column on page 23.