

"Ordinary Prayers: The Psalms"

Psalm 119: 161-168

Mark 15: 33-36

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I. Introduction

My Mom died in 1993 at the age of 53 after a couple of bouts with breast cancer. And as any of you know who have experienced the loss of a close loved one – family member or friend – there is a pain there that cannot be soothed by kind words or attempts to make sense of what happened. It is a raw pain that mocks our attempts to rationalize and challenges all of our ideas of the goodness and mercy of God.

And yet, rationalize it is exactly what we so often try to do when faced with that kind of loss. Whether it's our own or someone else's, it's just too hard to simply sit and experience the pain; we've got to try and make it go away with words of explanation or, even worse, exhortation. And in doing so, we often trivialize both the pain and our faith.

The Psalms offer us another way of responding: a way that values honesty and self-awareness in our relationship with God. It is a way that calls us not to shrink away from the tough stuff in our lives, but to bring all of that messiness into our dialogue with God.

We are spending time during our stewardship campaign this year reflecting on prayer; both because healthy stewardship grows out of – and supports – healthy prayer, and also because in times like ours of economic uncertainty, the statement of faith that stewardship is always about, needs to be strengthened by prayer.

This morning, we are going to look at what is, perhaps, the most important gift we have in learning about prayer: the Psalms. The Psalms are the prayer book of Jesus and have done more to shape the worship life of our church (and the synagogue) than anything else. Psalms teach us how to pray.

II. Sharing All of Ourselves

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the date and authorship of the Psalms. Roughly half of the Psalms are attributed to King David, and others are attributed to David's son Solomon or to Asaph (the leader of King David's choir), or to the sons of Korah (who were singers in the Temple). But some are even attributed to figures as early as Moses.

The consensus of scholarship at this point seems to be that some of the Psalms probably date as early as David in the tenth century B.C.E., making them some of the earliest writings in Scripture; while others may be as late as the 3rd century B.C.E, making them some of the latest

writings in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Psalms are separated into 5 sections by the insertion of doxologies, possibly imitating the division of the five books of the Torah.

The Hebrew title for the Psalms is *t'hillim*, which means “the praises.” And while many of the Psalms praise God, they are an incredibly diverse set of prayers, which include prayers of thanksgiving and lament, confessions, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, and liturgical psalms.

But Walter Brueggemann (who is perhaps the 20th century’s greatest Christian scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures) urges us to pay attention to the fact that “nearly one half [the Psalms] are songs of lament and poems of complaint. Something” he says, “is known to be deeply amiss in Israel’s life with God. And Israel is not at all reluctant to voice what is troubling about its life. . . . The lament-complaint . . . introduces us to a “spirituality of protest.” That is, Israel boldly recognizes that all is not right in the world. This is against our easy gentile way of denial, pretending in each other’s presence and in the presence of God that ‘all is well,’ when it is not.”

In the Psalms we have a witness that says that it’s alright to be mad at God. It’s alright to confront God with our frustration and our questioning of divine justice. “The Psalms commerce in raw emotion,” writes Thomas Hawkins. And in doing so, they give us permission to bring our own emotional life – all of it – into our prayer.

But we struggle with this in the church. Another great scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Samuel Balentine, wrote, “The church taught me how to pray, and more subtly, how not to pray. One was to praise God, but not protest; to petition God, but not interrogate; and in all things to accept and submit to the sometimes incomprehensible will of God, never challenge or rebel. Yet when life’s circumstances would not permit either such passivity or such piety, this advocacy of a rather monotonous relation to God seemed destined to silence if not exclude me and I suspected, other struggling questioners from the ranks of the truly committed, the genuinely faithful.”

“I am persuaded,” he continues “that at least the church of my experience has engaged in a conspiracy of silence – a tacit agreement among those responsible for steering the worship and educational emphases of the church to be optimistic in their outlook of the world, sometimes to the extent of denying radical evil. It is in the Psalms . . . that these darker dimensions of the life of faith have their opportunity of center-stage discussion.”

The Psalms are brutally honest in giving voice to some very unattractive emotions. Some of them are aimed at God, others are aimed at our enemies. Have you ever noticed that we almost never talk about enemies in polite Christian conversation? I think that most of us Christians have translated Jesus’ command to love our enemies into a command to not *have* any enemies. And before we can love them, we need to admit that they’re there.

Some of the language about our enemies in the Psalms is pretty disturbing. In Psalm 137, the Psalmist writes, “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”

That’s pretty raw language. But here’s the twist: it’s only when we can acknowledge that kind of anger that we can start the healing process. The Psalms give us permission to bring all of

our emotions into prayer. That kind of anger, and also the pain that lies behind it. Once the pain is acknowledged, the Spirit can show us the places of woundedness within ourselves.

And then, of course, what happens is that we start to realize that our enemy is not the person out there that we think we're mad at. Our enemy is inside us, the places that we have disappointed and angered ourselves. Our external enemy is simply the screen upon which we have projected our own frailties, so that we don't have to look at ourselves. Then those same Psalms take on a whole new meaning. That's when real healing starts to happen.

Psalms give us permission to bring all of our emotional life, all of who we are, into our prayer; and in doing so, we invite the Spirit to take those feelings and transform them.

III. Praying the Psalms

But the Psalms are more than wonderful examples of what healthy prayer looks like; they are prayers that have been given to us to use. For thousands of years, our church, and the traditions of the synagogue and temple before it, used these words to speak to God. They are time-tested words, words steeped in our experience as the people of God.

We have a great fondness in modern Protestantism to love new words, new ways of saying things. And in fact, we often don't feel like we are being authentic if we're not using our own words. That's why we do so little reading of prepared prayers in our service. Someone else's words coming out of our mouths feels contrived and insincere.

It is worth noting, however, that that is not the witness of our tradition. The great saints of our church have always used the Psalms as their primary source of prayers, and they teach us that one of the most profound spiritual exercises we can engage in is to make the words of the Psalms *our* words; to pray them and use them so that they become part of us and express what we're feeling. One of the great Jewish scholars of the last century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "it is more inspiring to let the heart echo the music of the ages than to play upon the broken flutes of our own hearts."

Jesus did this. When you read the Gospels, they are crammed with quotations from, and allusions to, the Psalms. He used them in his teachings, in his prayer: as we heard in our Gospel lesson this morning, when he is hanging from the cross, and he is in need of words to express his utter agony and despair, he goes to Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I want to encourage you this morning to explore the Psalms in an intentional way, to start to make them your own. Saints throughout history have done this by simply reading the Psalms at various points throughout their day; just taking a moment in the midst of work, or while walking the dog, to read through a Psalm, finding the places where the writer gives voice to something that you are struggling with, and making those words your own.

Poet Mark Van Doren writes, "You must not delight in the Psalms occasionally. Don't go to it when you feel some aesthetic impulse and say, 'Oh, isn't that a nice passage.' This is

something that must be your constant companion. The repetition isn't merely a repetition, it is a reinforcement."

IV. Conclusion

Psalms witness to the power of bringing all of who we are into the life of prayer: joy, wonder, thanksgiving, questioning, sadness, anger, loss. Psalms explore both the presence of God and the hiddenness of God; leading to praise and lament. All of that, the noble and the unattractive are material for prayer, because God loves all of us, and desires all of us.

And when we bring all of who we are to prayer, we are never alone. In the Psalms, we have the prayers of our forebears across the ages. We are speaking words that were borne at the beginning of our community and that have shaped the lives of saints across thousands of years: time-tested words that speak from our heart to the heart of God.

Amen.