



## The Psalms in Ministry

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How often in the course of parish ministry does a pastor reach for a psalm?

If liturgically alert, he or she will prepare a psalm for the congregation every Sunday and festive day in the Church year. How does this practice help our people draw close to God?

My research suggests that the appointed psalm selections were chosen to support, highlight, or underscore a major theme in the Gospel for the Day. Thus, half of the appointed psalm texts are only psalm portions, and may even exclude the dramatic stories presented in the whole psalm.

Were we to reach for the psalms only in our liturgical ministry, we'd have a very reduced Psalter! Is there a better approach to serving up the Psalms to people than merely reciting them as a minor part of common worship?

Most pastors, I'm sure, use psalms in funerals, weddings, baptisms, personal devotions, parish newsletters, and countless other occasions. In community settings the Psalms draw people together. When we are alone, the Psalms join us to the countless others who find meaning in their words. Whether the Psalms greet us through the medium of psalm quotations on bulletin covers or as readings in devotional materials, whether we chant them to psalm tones or sing them in hymn paraphrases (the hymnal of the United and Anglican Churches of Canada lists thirty-seven common hymns which paraphrase the Psalms), the Psalms work through the *associative power* of a few key words in any given psalm.

Take for instance this abridged version of Psalm 121 in which a dot stands for a missing word:

I . . . eyes . . . hills;  
. . . . help . come?  
. help comes . . Lord,  
. maker . heaven . earth.  
He . . . . foot . moved  
. . . watches . you . . . asleep.  
. . . . watch . Israel  
. . slumber . sleep;  
. Lord . . shade . . . hand,

. . . sun . . strike . . day  
. . moon . night.  
. Lord . preserve . . . evil;

. . . . . keep . safe  
. Lord . watch . your . . . . .  
. . . time . forevermore.

Although shorn of its modifiers and connectives, this Psalm still almost works. Its key words raise our fears from our deep places, then place them next to God to reassure us that he is active in the tensions we endure. Although this Psalm is a human voice crying out to God in the face of our fears and our mortality, the very repetition of God's sacred Name serves as a promise of future deliverance. We recognize the voice of our Lord teaching his community to invoke the power of the divine Name when danger looms.<sup>1</sup> No other word of the Psalter is so prevalent as the many occurrences of the divine Name and other vocative forms which scholarship has recently identified.<sup>2</sup> This suggests the primary arena in which the Psalms help people: in crossroad experiences, in the midst of dark mysteries, when trying to make sense of human experience, when we need to prepare ourselves for the greatest of all mysteries, Jesus Christ, the Psalms provoke our dialogue with God as they help us invoke his presence.

Consider how the various psalm types contribute to the effort to make sense of diverse human situations. Hymns of praise help us invite God into our joy. Laments shed light on the apparent absence or hiddenness of God. National songs relate the ambiguities of government to our belief that we use power as stewards of God. Royal psalms get us talking to God about how we who have been given responsibility for other people should exercise that role. Hans LaRondelle appropriately suggests that preachers should assess the needs and status of congregations and then choose a relevant psalm type as the basis for sermons.<sup>3</sup>

No life situation is more pressing, however, than that presented in the psalmists' awareness that death lurks in a thousand locations, ever eager to entrap, ensnare, devour, and bring down one's soul into the slimy pits of the nether world. In contrast, the omnipotence and majesty of the Lord gives the psalmists confidence to reconnect their souls to the God of the covenants. Until God's deliverance becomes a reality in either this world or in the Elysian fields of the next, the psalmists pray their way and keep the faith. Bernhard Anderson calls these sticky situations the adversatives in human life, the depths we cry out of.<sup>4</sup> In them we experience our spiritual life as an ongoing pilgrimage that is decidedly cross-shaped. We die to being proteins to rise as a conceived cell. We die to prenatal security to rise to semi-independence as an infant. We die to Mom's presence to rise as kindergarten students. We die to childhood to rise

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Matthew 18:20 and John 10:25.

<sup>2</sup>Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible, Psalms I* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966) xxxv-xxxvi.

<sup>3</sup>Hans K. LaRondelle, "Sermons from Psalms," *Ministry* 57, no. 5 (1984) 27.

<sup>4</sup>Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (New York: Board of Missions, United Methodist Church, 1970) 56.

through that great shredding machine called adolescence into our own identity as individuals and into intimacy as persons in relationships. We die to our couplehood to rise (usually at 3:00 A.M.) as parents. We die to parenting to rise to an empty nest fraught with loneliness yet pregnant with new opportunities. We die to that special soul-mate to rise, we hope, to life after their death. Finally, we face the capital D big Dying—not as they that have no hope—but as children of God

who finally have grown enough to trust that he always sends a bigger Rising ahead.

Because our life stories as individuals and as members of humanity really come close to Christ's in this encounter with passion and hoped-for immortality, the Psalms are the entryway par excellence to the Paschal Mystery. The Psalms "speak everywhere of Christ—living, dying, rising, coming again."<sup>5</sup>

Ministers of Word and Sacrament are called to serve up God's Word to his people who carry on Christ's ministry in all the arenas of their Monday through Saturday world. It seems clear, therefore, that four points must be kept in mind as we consider the role of the Psalms in Ministry.

First, as Wingren reminds us, the Word of God is never an in-house publication designed to keep the Church away from the world! Rather, God's Word is part of his ongoing counter-attack against his only real enemy, Satan.<sup>6</sup> The Psalms often celebrate this *universal work of God* as they call all nations and people to praise the Lord, for only as we worship together can we come to live together, a theme Pope John Paul II stressed on his recent epochal visit to my nation.

Second, the Psalms are a unique form of God's Word: *they are prayers*. Granted they may often sound more like curses (for instance, Ps 109), but even in unloading anger and bitterness on God, they testify that our Creator is big enough to handle what we can't. Nor are they always very happy prayers: there are more laments than any other psalm type. But then are we not usually smack in the middle between God's great promises and his deferred fulfillment?

As prayers, the Psalms may lack some of the finality of the prophetic oracles. Although both the poetry of Isaiah and the poetry of the Psalms are frequently quoted texts in the New Testament, many preachers feel more comfortable in preaching on Isaiah's poems than on the Psalms. Yet prayer is, as Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out, what we most want out of life, our dominant desire, regardless of what liturgies we may mouth on the side. When pastors help people share a common demand on life, "elevated, purified, and aware of Divine Alliance," they help them pray Christ's prayers, and he begins to pray through ours.<sup>7</sup>

Third, we need to help people *listen to the faith* of the psalmists. What they placed their heart in (cor) became their faith (credo).<sup>8</sup> Using Mitchell Dahood's brilliant analysis of the Psalms as well as other standard commentaries, I enjoy studying a Psalm until, in one sentence, I can write out that psalmist's dominant desire or heart-felt prayer. For instance, in Psalm 15 the psalmist cries out for the

<sup>5</sup>William G. Storey, editor, *Praise Him!* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria, 1973) 7.

<sup>6</sup>Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960).

<sup>7</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1949) 143.

<sup>8</sup>James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) 12.

wisdom to enjoy God's hospitality and to speak as the Lord's friend. Or Psalm 128 prays that our family life, rooted in the awe of the Lord, might become happy and prosperous and extend the peace of God. As a weary member of our local committee on wife abuse, I need to pray that prayer a lot lately.

One can help people hear these most heart-felt prayers through programs of Bible study, through psalm sermons, or, as we did in our parish, through groups that listened to tapes of psalm sermons and then responded. After a series of such psalm sermons, our parish reviewed the

course by praying about fifteen of these sentence prayers as our Prayer of the Church. Our experience was that psalm preaching and adult study groups did help people hear the Psalms better than just using them as liturgical pieces had done. One such study on Psalm 113 led us to that rhetorical question, “Who is like Yahweh our God?” After looking at the Lord’s job description, one person responded, “He sounds an awful lot like Jesus!”

Finally, ministers need to remember that the Psalms are a medium different from linear print. Keel’s book on Near Eastern iconography<sup>9</sup> is a must for anyone who wants to understand the world of the Psalms. Although the psalmists did not engage in rock carvings like their contemporaries, they encoded their faith world in the nearest equivalent to picture thinking, poetry! Inspired poetry, magnificently crafted, helped Israel come into the presence of their God who had expressly forbidden them any graven images. Their God would rather be encountered in Word than on walls, or through ecclesiastical structures of any kind that we erect!

*We, too, need to encounter this Word!* Yet how is such a meeting place possible when as members of the Christian community we all stand at different stages in our spiritual development?

Jesus Christ is the Omega point of all spiritual growth. In the Gospels he invites us to join our life stories to his ongoing story. At his invitation, we dare even cry out our “Abba!” to his Father. As my story and yours begin to share a common plot and denouement with his, more and more Jesus teaches us how to pray until our ultimate concern, our dominant desire is not for ourselves but for the deliverance of the whole universe, from animals to angels. As he more and more prays through our prayers we begin to see how in the deepest of dark valleys our Shepherd took upon himself the dark side of every human story in order to carry away the sin of the whole of creation. As we encounter the great Word of God praying the words of a brother sufferer, Psalm 22 invites us to likewise join our Lord in moving from absolute despair to God’s promise that, with Christ, we, too, shall yet testify of God’s great deliverance. Our enemies glare at us all too near—yet we dare confess that the last word spoken on our life will be his word of life and love.

To summarize: we rightly use the Psalms in our ministry when we move beyond using them as mere verbal supports for a following Bible reading. But this involves hearing the story behind each psalm well enough to pinpoint and eventually appropriate that psalm’s cry to God. As we offer that cry as our own prayer, in the spirit of Christ, our Lord can pray it through us.

<sup>9</sup>Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury, 1978).