



## Praying the Psalms

KATHERINE FINEGAN

**E**arly one summer morning, I was out walking with Zoey the dog, an unusually tall black Labrador that we had adopted after saying goodbye to our Border Collie mix, Cammie. We had had Zoey for about a year, and we were still getting used to this bouncy four-year-old, who was incredibly good natured but, compared to Cammie, was clearly not as smart. I heard someone describe Zoey as being about as smart as a bag of rocks. That seemed a bit unkind, but not entirely inaccurate.

I liked to walk with happy, energetic Zoey where I did not have to have her on a leash. So we would frequent the stretch of old highway that ended with a barricade and provided a long walk uninterrupted by much traffic. As we were heading home up a slight incline, the road rose with the light of the morning sun nicely framed by the fragrant woods on either side. And as I glanced at the misty morning sun, I saw a dark shape the size of a VW Beetle come out of the woods. But wait—it wasn't a car but, rather, a large bear the size of a Beetle, ambling onto the road, directly in our path.

I stopped and began to walk backwards, calling to the dog in a loud whisper, "Cammie! Cammie! Come here, Cammie!" Of course, the dog's name is Zoey and it only occurred to me later that in my nervous state, I was calling her by the dead dog's name, not that it mattered. Zoey was too happy eating some long grass on the side of the road to pay much attention to me, whatever I was saying. And neither

*In times of surprise and intensity, our inclinations to reach out to God are often given voice and shaped by phrases from the Psalms that we have heard and prayed many times before. Our faith is molded by such words as they come rushing back to us.*

did she notice the big, huge, VW Bear. While my loud and frantic whisper did not alert Zoey to our situation, I got the attention of the bear, who turned its huge, bigger-than-a-basketball head our way. Still, the dog was oblivious, but my hammering heart was trying to put together plan B and plan C. Thankfully, the bear turned its big old head away from us and ambled off across the road and continued on his way.

The following Sunday morning, I shared my encounter with the bear over coffee at fellowship time before worship, and one gentleman asked me, “Did you pray a prayer?” He wanted to know so that if he found himself in similar circumstances, he would have a prayer to pray and maybe, God-willing, he would get the same results that I did.

---

*I shared my encounter with the bear over coffee at fellowship time before worship, and one gentleman asked me, “Did you pray a prayer?” He wanted to know so that if he found himself in similar circumstances, he would have a prayer to pray and maybe, God-willing, he would get the same results that I did.*

---

I thought about it and realized that indeed, I did pray a prayer. I was glad to own that I had offered to God a heartfelt silent prayer during the whole of that encounter. And if I were to put that prayer into words, it would go something like this. Upon seeing the bear, I began my prayer with “O God.” And then my petitions continued with “O God, O God, O God, O God.” And then, after the bear continued on its way, my prayer concluded with a relieved “O thank God.”

Not very eloquent, I know. But it came from the heart. My prayer was flung in desperation at God with every hope and plea that danger would pass, that I would not be on the news, that God would please-oh-please grant me the fortitude to not panic, and that I would know what to do if the bear turned my way.

And if I were to try to articulate everything that I felt and prayed for in that singular moment, if I used poetic and descriptive language to express the depth of my fear and the expanse of my relief, if I managed to describe more fully what the bear looked like, and the beauty of the morning, and how many other fleeting thoughts and heartfelt hopes and glorious thanks to God filled my heart and mind, I might well have a psalm—a song of praise worthy of liturgy, in which all my fear, and then my gratitude and relief, was shaped into words of poetry and offered to the worshipping community as yet another expression of an experience of God.

That is what a psalm is, after all: an expression of faith born of the distress or joy or confusion of a given moment or experience. And yet, even though each of the psalms was written by an individual centuries ago to articulate the thoughts and feelings, faith and doubts of one person in a singular situation, they continue to give expression and voice to our ongoing experiences of God. Psalms give shape

to our communal worship, they give voice to our thoughts, they clarify our feelings, and they deepen our understanding of the challenges and blessings of faith.

In its introduction to the Psalms, *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship* offers the following: “Martin Luther considered the psalms the summary of all scripture, speaking to many situations and allowing the expression of a wide range of human response, such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, lament, confession, intercession, and teaching. The psalms proclaim hope and faith, yet make room also for deep distress and questioning.”<sup>1</sup>

Countless times have the ancient words of a psalm lived anew in someone’s current experience. When we pray a psalm at the bedside of the dying, in the hospital room of the recovering, along the sharp edge of some crisis, at the graveside with the grieving, and also in happier moments—at the birth of a child or in thanksgiving for healing—the experience, whatever it may be, in our reading of the psalm within the hearing of our listeners, then places their experience within reach of God’s action. Not that it was beyond God’s reach before, but having heard Scripture that seems to have been written just for that moment, it seems to me people then begin to believe it.

And the psalm becomes an even more effective tool in the proclamation of God’s care when we explicitly connect the dots and articulate the parallels between the psalm we read aloud and the current experience of the one for whom we pray. In the prayer we pray after reading the psalm, we echo the psalm’s words, and the one for whom we pray hears their concern, fears, doubts, hopes placed within the context of the Bible. The biblical text is given new life as it reframes their current experience and places it within the mind of God.

---

*In the prayer we pray after reading the psalm, we echo the psalm’s words, and the one for whom we pray hears their concern, fears, doubts, hopes placed within the context of the Bible. The biblical text is given new life as it reframes their current experience.*

---

Consider Psalm 121. This psalm of ascent begins, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (vv. 1–2). The pilgrims are walking upward, and they see the hills, where the robbers and thieves are, where the trouble is, where the danger threatens. So in current context, to lift up one’s eyes to the hills is to consider the troubles at hand. It might be the long days of healing following surgery, or a move to a nursing home, or the long road of divorce. To name a person’s troubles in the prayer after the psalm is read and ask God’s blessing and presence upon the listener in the midst of those troubles would be a good prayer. And then—for a

<sup>1</sup> “Introduction to the Psalms,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 335.

person to hear that the Lord, the very maker of heaven and earth, will watch over their going out and their coming in, from this time forward (v. 8), proclaims God's immediate care and attention. In your prayer, you can name the transition: the going out from this life and coming into the next, the going out from the hospital and coming into a new situation at the nursing home, the daily coming and going of a new job, a new school, whatever. Your prayer, after reading Psalm 121, has that much more meaning, more power to proclaim a word of hope, when you draw the parallel lines for your listener, showing them that these words have everything to do with *them*, and that God is with them as they face the unknown.

The psalms are timeless even as our experiences of God continue in the present. As we pray ancient psalms into current context, layers of meaning are added to ageless text even as different layers are peeled back to make way for new participants, new transformation, new proclamation. The psalms of biblical Scripture still speak to current experience, and contemporary challenges receive divine attention as connections are drawn between ancient text and God's current presence. God is still loving the world. Praying the psalms in old and new language proclaims a welcome word of hope and comfort to those ready to hear it. ☩

*REV. KATHERINE (VOLZ) FINEGAN grew up in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and received her BA from Christ College, Valparaiso University. She served as a youth director in St. Paul, Minnesota, while attending Luther Seminary. Ordained in 2002, she served for ten years as pastor at Bethany Lutheran in Michigan's Upper Peninsula before accepting the call to serve as assistant to the bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod in 2012. In 2017, she was elected bishop of that synod and was elected to a second term in May 2023.*