

Faith Mennonite Church
Psalms: Prayers Jesus Prayed
October 4, 2015
Joetta Schlabach

Psalms: Prayer's for Life's Journey
Psalm 104

The gospels preserve for us many of the stories that Jesus told, many of which were in the form of a parable. The gospels also refer to many times that Jesus prayed but, aside from the extended “farewell narrative” in the gospel of John, and the “Lord’s Prayer” of the synoptic gospels, we don’t have a written record of the prayers that Jesus prayed. Or do we?

In the Believers Church Bible Commentary on the Psalms, former pastor and author James Waltner writes that “Jesus quoted more often from the Psalms than from any other Old Testament book.”¹ This provides a clue that the Psalms, an ancient collection of poetic songs, was not only familiar to Jesus but likely the basis for his personal and community prayer life. Waltner describes the Psalms as a “treasured *hymnbook* inviting and expressing the people’s praise to their sovereign God... a *prayer* book, voicing the needs of individuals and the community in times of trouble...[and an] *instruction* book, as indicated in the opening psalm’s invitation to ‘meditate day and night’ on the life-giving word of God’s instruction for living.”²

Music, prayer, and instruction. The Psalms have it all! And what’s more they’re not about one single theme. In our corporate worship, we tend to draw on the Psalms of praise, often basing our opening Call to Worship on several verses of a Psalm. But even the songs of praise often take a tributary into more troubled waters. Words of praise do not overlook the pain and evil in the world but speak from within their midst. Whether we are starting the journey of family life as Nate and Abby are doing, or lamenting the absence of children or grandchildren in our lives....whether we are celebrating a new job and increased responsibilities or are frustrated by work that is not satisfying or a workplace that feels toxic...whether we enjoy good health or are plagued with chronic physical or mental illness....whether we have a wide circle of caring friends or feel cut off, separated, or misunderstood...whether we have known privilege most of our lives or have felt the burden of discrimination and exclusion, the Psalms speak *to*, and *out of* each (and likely *any*) situation that we can name.

Listen to a few examples:

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the paths that sinners tread... They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. (1:1, 3)

“O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory and the one who lifts up my head. (3:1-2)

“Answer me when I call, O God of my right! ... Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. ... I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. (4:1, 8)

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. (8:3-5)

“O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath.

¹ James Waltner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Psalms*, Herald Press, 2006 (24-25).

² *Ibid.* 17-18.

For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.

There is no soundness in my flesh... no health in my bones because of my sin. (38:1-3)

“As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My tears have been my food day and night...” (42:1, 3)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (46:1, 2, 7)

How did this collection that speaks to such a wide array of human experience and our relationship to God come to be? Waltner explains that the 150 psalms, “were not produced by poets sitting down to create poems after the fashion of modern poets. The origin of the biblical psalms lies, rather, in the cultic, the liturgical life of a community of faith. In this process, the community took over and expanded individual prayers for its own use. Many of the psalms come from the time of the monarchy in Israel (1000-600 BC).”³ Community laments reflect the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem. The psalms continued to be shaped during and after the period of Israel’s exile.

During the next two months we will focus on some of the themes in the Psalms during worship. We will also have an adult education class that will explore individual Psalms and consider ways to pray with the Psalms. Last weekend at our fall retreat we did an exercise with Psalm 104, parts of which we read this morning. During the retreat we contemplated the wonders of creation, and our privilege and responsibility of being part of this wonder. Psalm 104 lauds creation and the creator, but it refers to geographical locations and animals that are not familiar to us in Minnesota. We broke into small groups to rewrite sections and you can find those new verses in the October newsletter which is in your mailboxes this morning. Our work in groups was itself a form of prayer, perhaps mirroring the ancient practice of shaping and res-shaping the psalms.

As we prepare to gather at the Lord’s table for communion this morning, let us note that “all four Gospels let Psalm 22 shape the account of the crucifixion.”⁴ The words that Jesus spoke from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” are a quotation of verse 1. Other verses in the psalm express this desolation: “all who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads” (7)... “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax” (14) ... For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me” (15). The words and actions of others in the passion narrative can also be found here: the religious leaders taunting: “Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!” (8) and the military guards who “divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (18).

The final section of Psalm 22 does not end in defeat, however, but “on a note of vindication and the universal coming of the kingdom of God, that which we celebrate in the feast of the Lamb.

“For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;

God did not hide God’s face from me, but heard when I cried out. (24)

“All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations shall worship before God. (27)

“For dominion belongs to the Lord; God rules over the nations. (28)

Let us celebrate the gift of God’s love, through Christ, the power of love and life over fear and death as we gather at the table.

³ Ibid, 19.

⁴ Ibid, 25.