

sermon-9/19/10 Newport Pres. Church  
“Words for Us When Words Fail”  
Ps. 137 and others

“O Lord. . .how majestic is your name in all the earth! . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers. . .what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (from Ps. 8)

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”  
(from Ps. 13)

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . .” (from Ps. 23)

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”  
(from Ps. 19)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear. . .”  
(from Ps. 46)

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. . .Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . .” (from Ps. 51)

“I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.”  
(from Ps. 69)

“O Sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things. . .” (from Ps. 98)

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing.” (from Ps. 100)

“I lift up eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (from Ps. 121)

I could go on and on. The book of the Psalms has been a beloved book for Jews and Christians for thousands of years. It has inspired many great hymns and anthems. Our hymnbook has 174 hymns that were directly inspired by one of the Psalms. Favorites like “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,” “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “All People That on Earth Do Dwell,” “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” are all directly related to a Psalm.

It is an incredibly diverse book with something for everyone. When I asked the lectionary class to list their three favorite Psalms the list was incredibly diverse. They came up with 31 different Psalms between them, with Psalms 100, 23, 8 and 46 most mentioned.

Walter Brueggemann says that one of the nice things about the Psalms is that they allow people to enter into the scriptures at whatever level of knowledge they have about the Bible. One does

not need to be a biblical scholar to appreciate the Psalms. They can be read devotionally giving great comfort or prayed when words are hard to find.

The Psalms were meant to be sung. The book of Psalms were called the hymnbook of the second Temple. As one scholar notes, singing can create a thin place where we can encounter the Holy. Certainly music can be the purest form of worship. It gets below our intellects and touches the heart and the gut. Music moves us beyond our intellects.

Someone in the lectionary class mentioned how singing touches places inside that are very tender. That is why it is hard to sing when we are sad or grieving. The music brings deep emotions to the surface. I have found that some who have lost a loved one find coming to worship difficult because they end up crying. The tears come most often when we are singing a beloved hymn, often inspired by a Psalm. I always encourage folks to come anyway so they don't become isolated in their grief, but I think we all understand what they are experiencing.

There are a variety of different types of Psalms. Many love Psalms of praise like Psalm 8, 98, 100, and 150. Patrick Miller says praise is absolutely critical to the spiritual life. He says praise is so counter to our results-oriented culture that measures our worth by our capabilities and accomplishments. Praise, on the other hand, he says is useless. It doesn't accomplish anything other than to give glory to God.

We can see how praise, then, is subversive. As Miller says, it undercuts our tendency to see ourselves and our structures as ultimate. Only God is ultimate. And, he points out, praise is absolutely central to our identity and purpose as human beings. Those of us who had to memorize part of the Westminster Shorter Catechism remember the question: What is the chief end of man? (we would say humanity today!) The answer: "to glorify God and enjoy God forever." You can't get any more counter culture than that!

Praise, of course, is not the only type of Psalm. In fact, Laments are the most common type of Psalm in the Psalter. These are songs that speak of being in trouble and asking for help, of wanting revenge on our enemies, or just for God to show God's face. My Old Testament professor at Princeton, Bernhard Anderson, says the Psalms of Lament are praising God in God's absence or when God's presence feels so hidden. Even when the words feel like complaint, they are in the context of worship, and thus praise. Just because God feels so absent, does not mean that is the case.

These Psalms of Lament remind us that no emotion is off limits when it comes to praying or singing to God. Even anger and revenge are appropriate. The incredibly angry and vengeful Psalm 137 is a great example. Written while the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, being made fun of by their captors ("Sing us one of your songs" you poor things so we can laugh at you), the Psalmist writes, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones (your babies) and dash them against the rock!" It chills the blood to read it.

One of the greatest examples of a modern day Psalm of Lament happened on a television series. Sandy and I have been watching "The West Wing" on Netflix. It is the story about President Bartlett and his team in the White House. Bartlett is a devout Catholic. His secretary, Mrs.

Lanningham(sp?) has been part of his life since his college days. One evening she is killed by a drunk driver. The memorial service is at the National Cathedral. Bartlett asks to be left alone after the service. When he is alone he starts screaming at God, "You dirty little so and so! Why did you have to take her?" It is an incredible diatribe against God and God's justice, one rarely seen on network television. It is powerful and shocking. It bowled me over again as it did the first time I saw it.

I remember thinking this is a modern day Psalm. It sounded almost blasphemous, but God can take our anger. In fact, when we try to stuff our anger, afraid it is not appropriate, not something we can take to God in prayer, not something good Christians should be feeling, that anger just creeps out somewhere else in our life, often in inappropriate places. It can lead to passive aggressive behavior. Praying the Psalms of Lament is a wonderfully appropriate way to deal with our anger. It leaves revenge in God's hands. We don't have to act on it.

Spiritual director, Richard Rohr, in his book *Simplicity*, has this to say. "Negative feelings have the power to open us up to parts of ourselves that are still afraid and not able to trust. As long as we haven't become aware of these feelings we can't open ourselves to God; we don't even know who we are." The Psalms are a wonderfully appropriate way to be open to sides of ourselves we would rather not face. They hold our vulnerability in the context of prayer and worship.

If you have not taken advantage of the Psalms in your devotional life, I would encourage you to give it a try. You may find some that will touch your heart in a very personal way. You will certainly find some that give you words to speak in prayer you may have never dared utter before. Amen