

**July 24, 2011: WHAT GOOD ARE THE PSALMS? (corporate worship)  
Genesis 32:22-31; Psalms 13, 66, 104; Psalm 105:1-11  
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Week after week, my lectionary buddies and I have faithfully taken our turn at exegeting for each other the next Sunday's psalm. And week after week, none of us will use that exegesis to prepare a sermon. After finally asking, "What good are the psalms?" (at least for Sunday worship), I thought I'd try preaching from them. As I began study for this challenge, almost on cue, our denomination's online resource, The Thoughtful Christian offered a piece entitled, "The Use of Psalms in Worship." Feeling like it was a sign, I dove into the article, only to have my parade rained on as the author assured readers that, although a psalm is assigned to each Sunday by the Revised Common Lectionary, the intention is for the psalm to serve as a "musical response" not a Homiletical reflection. In other words, don't bother preaching from it. It was like discovering that the trophy fish you just wrestled into the boat is a wind-up toy. Despite my disappointment, I soldiered on, cheering momentarily to read that Jesus and the Reformers preached from the psalms. At least I was in good company.<sup>1</sup>

Today we focus on what *good* psalms are in corporate worship. Next week we'll address their usefulness in personal worship. Thoughtful Christian aside, most of you probably remembers hearing me read a psalm as we pour baptismal water at the beginning of worship. Or you may remember on occasion singing the text of a psalm. Some of you may have even used psalms for comfort or consolation in distress. But really—what *good* are they? I tend to think of psalms, not as systematic theology or teaching moments, but as *expressions* of faith. For something that sounds a little cooler, we need look no further than Walter Brueggemann, who says the psalms are "voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community."

Besides being articulate, Walter is systematic, so he categorizes psalms as that of orientation, disorientation, or new orientation. And, Walter has the scholarship cred to get away with putting what is actually Hebrew literature into a Christian theology of crucifixion and resurrection. For instance, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of that nice Jewish boy, Jesus of Nazareth, parallels psalms, if one only looks at Philippians 2—orientation ("Though he was in the form of God"), disorientation ("he emptied himself"), new orientation ("Therefore God has highly exalted him"). These categories reflect the universal rhythm of life. Even the sacrament of baptism, that which unifies and shapes our life of faith, follows this pattern. In baptism, we acknowledge loss of control of our lives (disorientation), which is the necessary precondition of new orientation.

What makes these categories helpful is that they reveal the usefulness of psalms. Through understanding the categories, it's possible to see that psalms express a reality of both deep loss and amazing gift. By appreciating their rhythm, we appreciate the powerful tension in which they are held, God always working for redemption. This is a book of hope—hope that, in the midst of loss

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<sup>1</sup> David Gambrell, ThePresbyterianLeader.com, July 13, 2011.

and darkness, God is present. Psalms may affirm the reality of darkness, but they also address the One who is in the darkness, transforming it, not out of an easy light, but by the power of relentless solidarity with us.

All of that to introduce reading today's psalms. We begin with Psalm 104 (p. 555), a psalm of orientation. I'm starting at verse 24, so you'll want to know that up to verse 23, the psalmist celebrates the order, symmetry, majesty of creation, and humanity's role is tending it. In this portion, God delights in creation, and God is portrayed as confident, in control of all things. [read 24-35] In other words, "orientation" that God is the very life-force of all things—animal, vegetable, mineral.

For a psalm of disorientation, we read Psalm 13 (p. 494). [read] This compact psalm is a model prayer—that we can have the gall and temerity to address God directly, expecting that God hears and helps. Not only does it teach us *how* to pray, it shows us *who* we are when we pray—simultaneously both anxious and elect. It could come across as a whiney psalm, except for its message that "those who belong to God matter to God." James Mays writes, "God is so much a God of blessing and salvation that one must speak of tribulation and terror as the absence of God. Yet God is so much the God of *hesed* that one must speak to God in the midst of tribulation and terror as the God of 'my salvation.' . . . [a radical faith that] cannot separate God from any experience of life and perseveres in construing all, including life's worst, in terms of a relation to God."<sup>2</sup>

By now we could use a new orientation—Psalm 66:8-20 (p. 528). [read] At first, this psalm seems to reflect a transactional faith: I worship God, the pay-off is that God gets me out of trouble. But a closer reading shows that God is the security of the ends of the earth; God rules the world. It is a communal song of thanksgiving that moves from corporate to singular prayer. It's a witness to God's saving activity, which in itself also reflects our human need of relationship with other people of faith to deepen and interpret our relationship with God.

You can see why Walter sees a universal pattern of life, death, and resurrection in the psalms. The reality is that deep loss and amazing gift are held in powerful tension in the psalms. Without the psalms, would people of faith have the means of expressing or witnessing to their faith? There is powerful integrity to their expression of hope in the darkness. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel writes, "Poets exist so that the dead may vote." Brueggemann adds that poets vote in the Psalms. They vote for faith, candor, pain, passion—and finally joy. "Their persistent voting gives us a word that turns out to be the word of life. . . . the psalm writers will not tolerate a faith in which human well-being is not honored. They are impatient with any God who thinks or acts otherwise. This Jewish insistence warns against any easy Christian spirituality. With force and regularity the questions of justice, righteousness, and equity are regularly brought" before God.<sup>3</sup> Useful, indeed—justice, righteousness, equity.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to James L Mays comes from *Interpretation: Psalms*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> All references to Walter Brueggemann come from his book, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg, 1984.