

July 31, 2011: WHAT GOOD ARE THE PSALMS? (Personal Worship)
Eileen Parfrey - Springwater Presbyterian Church
Psalm 139; Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 17:1-7, 15

The conclusion to which my lectionary buddies and I usually come, once we've exegeted a psalm, is that it's "the best psalm ever written." It's a running joke in our group, an indication that the exegete has delved into it deeply. But really, in the case of Psalm 139, don't you think that's true? Even a noted psalm scholar¹ calls it "the most personal expression in Scripture," because it understands the human as "enclosed in divine reality . . . a devotional classic, because . . . [it] nurtures an awareness of the Lord as the total environment of life." That's Biblish for, "the best psalm ever written."

I seem to recall that one Lent I challenged you to read this psalm every day for the duration, as a means of deepening your relationship with God. I know I took up the challenge and was deeply blessed for having done so. There is an interesting transition that occurs when a person adopts such a practice. Perhaps that is the enduring usefulness of the psalms. Through consistent reading, after the first flush of unfamiliarity has worn off and familiarity's boredom slogged through, one arrives at almost a conditioned response—you begin reading the words, and they move directly to your heart, evoking a sense of peace. For many of us, this is the effect of Psalm 139. Allow me, then to get geeky for a moment to unpack it as a piece of literature and theology. Then we can return to "what good" it is.

The first 18 verses are all praise, with the speaker's existence totally rooted and grounded in God. The end of the psalm is a prayer against the wicked, tempered by an admission that, "I could be wrong." It is a continuous speech to God, who both searches and knows the speaker, the classic "I/Thou" relationship of intimacy. Every line contains the words you/your and I/my/me. Even when "the wicked" figure, it is as the means of talking about that primary relationship. The God/human relationship is all "You *know* me," to the point that the psalmist cannot speak about him/herself without speaking about God, nor about God without speaking of him/herself. God is not an abstraction, an "out there" objectivity. God is a Knower, a Presence, an Actor in the very human, day-to-day existence of the psalmist.

This kind of theology is sometimes explained as the Big O's of Christian doctrine —omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence. Unfortunately, these are sometimes perceived as characteristics of a disinterested God. That is not Psalm 139—God as offstage writer/ director/ producer for a play whose plotline is known only to God. This psalm praises the God of improvisational theater, who is as delighted and surprised and grieved as the players are at the plot developments. Nor is this God the content of an Intro to Theology class, for which one's grade

¹ James L Mays, whose work, *Interpretation: Psalms*, is my primary exegetical source for this sermon.

depends on rote memorization of material, regurgitated for a computer-scored multiple choice test. This is a take home open book test, for a class whose subject is the relationship between student and teacher. The only grade given is love. This relationship is not unlike going on a cruise where, for the duration of the trip, the ship is the limit of existence. God is the limit of the psalmist's existence, but unlike a normal cruise, where passengers are stuck on board while the boat is moving and all ports are pre-arranged, the psalmist is free at all times—free *for* God.

Now we come to the part about the wicked. After all that lovey, gushy praise of God, this part is downright jarring in its vehemence. What we have as a context is the prophets, who identify so much with God that they speak with God's voice, and who identify so much with the people that they speak with the people's voice. This psalmist identifies with God. "The wicked" are a reality, but they are not the *psalmist's* enemies; they are the enemies of God, a part of the culture in which the psalmist lives, and because the psalmist identifies with God, they are mutual enemies.

When we finally figure out that's the petition (to destroy "the wicked"), it is mitigated with theological balance. The petition asks God to do now and in the future what God has done in the past, to destroy wickedness and everything which opposes or interferes with God's plan for creation. Which, of course, presupposes an intimate knowledge of God's work in the past. What saves the petition from being self-righteous or condescending blather is that the psalmist does not protest innocence. This is a plea from someone who knows God as a *righteous* judge, but a judge who knows and searches and tests human hearts, who understands with compassion the full scope of both human blessing and shadow.

Which begs the question, what possible good is this psalm? Many of you have confided that this is, if not the best psalm ever written, it is at least your favorite. As I've already suggested, it might be the psalm you read every day for a month, in order to deepen your relationship with God. That would be one use. It might be the psalm you paraphrase to fit your own life, that you re-write as a devotional practice. You could take its structure as a model for your own private devotional time or the time you share with a covenant group. A 20th century Roman Catholic theologian said there are really only two spiritual insights: 1) the wound which we find at the heart of everything is incurable; 2) and yet, we still must try to heal and are, in fact, driven to try.²

This psalm expresses those insights. This psalm asserts that humans will not know themselves until they know God, and to know God is to praise God. There's nothing "in it" for God in our praise. When the psalms praise, it's not because God has some hole-in-the-sock need for our praise. They praise because God knows that we need to. God knows that we humans are made better by praising something other than ourselves or the work of our hands. For us to

² Richard Rohr's July 25, 2011 Daily Meditation, quotes Hans Urs Von Balthasar. It was adapted from *Loving the Two Halves of Life*.

experience fullness of life, we need to learn how to do that. This psalm can help. If we aren't able to praise God, Thomas Merton says, we haven't really become conscious of who God is.³

These days, praise is cheap. We've so over-used superlatives that the paltry few we have left are barely useful. A rainbow arching over Mt Hood is "awesome" but so is the seasonal smoothie at Burgerville and the CD you've been listening to non-stop. "Sick" no longer means illness but has become a stand in for what used to be "awesome." We sing, "Our God is an awesome God," and that puts God in the same category as consumer goods and entertainment. What can we possibly do, now that we've run out of ways to say "Wow"?

We can do what the people of God have been doing for thousands of years. We can turn to the psalms, expecting to recognize in them our own experience—lived out, oriented to God, made "fruitful" by praise. If praise is what we were *created* to do, if praise is what makes us human, then as we recognize ourselves in psalms, we will be better able to recognize the mystery of God in them as well.

³ Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1956, p. 10.