

Praying With the Psalms in Lent

By

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Lent is a time to renew our faith commitment to God,
to acknowledge our faults and renew our baptismal vows.
The discipline of Lent includes fasting, penance and prayer.
Lenten praying can be done with the Bible's own prayer book, the Psalms.

In The Middle of the Bible and the Middle of Our Lives

When I was in the third grade I remember a nun telling our class: "Now take your Bible and open it right to the middle. There you will find the Psalms." I think it is appropriate that these psalms are found in the middle of the Bible for they have a way of turning up in the middle of our lives. They show up at times of joy and gratitude, of sickness and health, of loneliness and blessing, at childbirth and death.

Prayed equally by expectant mothers, monks, teenagers, and people as they die, the psalms are also sung at the celebration of the Eucharist, the daily liturgy of the hours, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. In brief, the psalms are a tapestry and treasury of prayers that transcend time, history, and culture. They appeal to the emotion and intuition that is in all of us. Like all of us the psalmists have mood swings, from praising, to thanking, to lamenting, to seeking forgiveness from God.

Hymns of Praise

When the abiding presence of God is experienced, an individual or community expresses this in the psalms known as hymns. "Praise the Lord all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord." (Psalm 117). A hymn rises readily from a person at prayer: "I will sing of loyalty and justice; to you, O Lord, I will sing" (Psalm 101:1). The whole universe is invited to join in: "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1); "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it" (Psalm 96:11).

Hymns are also sung and prayed in worship by the faith community: "O come let us sing to the Lord, for the Lord is a great God" (Psalm 95:1-2). "Come, let us worship and bow down, for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95:7). Psalms in the context of liturgy are the assemblies' response to God and to the Word of God, just as the responsorial psalm is at Mass.

Hymns of Thanksgiving

It is natural for people to express thankfulness to God for their blessings. Individuals thank God for his help and deliverance in Psalms 40 and 63. Psalm 107 is a community thanksgiving hymn for deliverance from many troubles as well as gratitude for many blessings. Psalm 65 thanks God for the earth's bounty, while Psalm 103 expresses gratitude to God for God's goodness and Psalm 138 thanks God for being present to the community. Praying with these thanksgiving psalms can be part of our own expression of gratitude to God.

Laments

In the Bible, laments are quite common (see Job 3:11; Jeremiah 15:18). A lament is an expression of prayer for help coming out of a deep feeling, and or experience of pain. Over one third of the psalms are either individual or communal laments.

It is normal to cry out in pain when we are hurt physically. When we are hurt emotionally or spiritually we cry out in lament. The lament psalms are the expressions of the psalmist's personal profound ache to God. All of the lament psalms are directed at God. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice! (Psalm 130:1)." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1)" In a lament the very core of a person praying is in deep turmoil. "My soul, too, is utterly terrified; but you, O Lord, how long...?" (Psalm 6:4).

When we lament, like the psalmist, we ask God heartfelt questions that bubble up out of our deepest feelings. "How long, O Lord will you utterly forget me?" (Psalm 13:2). "Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress" (Psalm 10:1). These are cries of pain born of sickness, loneliness, alienation, and abuse. They are revelations of chaos, brokenness, and suffering. They are not requests for God to provide information. As a matter of fact in none of the lament psalms does God respond with information. Rather these psalms are our pleas to have God be with us in the midst of our suffering. They are acts of faith. For even if we do not experience God's closeness, we wholeheartedly believe that God does care. Even if God seems deaf we believe we can shout loud enough and speak our confusion to God. The lament psalms remind us that our human minds can take us only so far, and where logic fails feelings and faith take over. Lament is a constructive way to express these feelings. Raging with God and doubt is not a lack of faith, despair is. True lamentation requires great faith.

Interestingly, almost all of the lament psalms end on a note of praise (see Psalm 6:9-11; 22:23-32). The psalmist teaches us that it takes time to let out all the pain and anger before praise can set in. It is only after we lament and get all of the negativity out, that healing can begin. Jesus knew and believed this when he prayed Psalm 22 from the cross (see Matthew 27:45-50). What sounds like words of despair in Jesus' mouth are actually words of promise for the psalm ends by praising God for hearing and rescuing those who cry out.

Penitential Psalms

We can all sin and need to seek God's forgiveness. The penitential psalms can help us do this. There are seven of them: Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143. In these psalms people are conscious of human frailty, sin and failure and seek the mercy and forgiveness of God. Of the seven, Psalm 51 is a powerful prayer of sorrow and remorse. It is attributed to

King David who is seeking forgiveness and a fresh start from God after committing adultery with Bathsheba. Whenever anyone is feeling the weight of sin psalm 51 provides a marvelous way to seek God's forgiveness and ask for God's help in starting over.

Praying the Psalms

Prayer is both conversation with God and reflection on life. The Psalms can help us to do both. The purpose of prayer is to partake of the activity of God in our own lives, in the lives of our faith community, and in the world we live in. Prayer is always emotionally charged; so are the psalms so we can readily identify with them.

Some suggestions for praying a psalm include

- ❖ Read the psalm out loud more than once preferably in a quiet space.
- ❖ Concentrate on the images found in the psalm. These can be animal, human, or nature images. Staying with the images found in the psalms can help us to better pray the psalm.
 - For example when Psalm 27 states "the Lord is my light" reflect on the effect of light, or the lack of it, on your own life. How do sunlight and daylight make you feel? How are these feelings helpful in encountering God the divine light?
 - When Psalm 62:2 says "God is my rock" try to image how solid and immovable a gigantic rock is. The same is true of God.
 - When Psalm 139 refers to God as "you knit me together in my mother's womb" (verse 13) imagine that God gave us life long before we saw the light of day.

The Psalms do have some very negative images as well. The Psalmist asks God to "break the teeth of the wicked" (Psalm 3:7). What the psalmist is saying is "God, this is how I really feel." Interestingly God does not rush out and do everything we ask of him when we are angry. Rather, God listens and respects our honesty in prayer. In Psalm 137:9 the psalmist asks God to smash Babylonian babies against the rock. We are shocked, yet we also know that nowhere in the book of Psalms does God actually do this. This is the wish of the person praying, not God's. Expressing one's anger to God in prayer is a lot less abusive than expressing it toward another human being. God can handle our anger and will not run away in fear.

Praying with or from the Psalms is not difficult. Find a psalm or portions of a psalm that you are comfortable with, and live with it for a while. Done regularly, not just during the season of Lent, the psalms will become part of you. They will seep into your bones and like the very marrow of those bones, will provide new blood and nourishment for the life of the spirit in your soul. "Praise the Lord, O my soul!" (Psalm 146:1)