

Serving up the Psalms
Menno Mennonite Church
March 22, 2020

Purpose: To place the Psalms in the varied context of life and living that they serve.

Message: As God's people we are invited to bring all of life's experience to God in worship, care, and love.

It is hard to know what to say when the world has turned upside down. In the course of the last couple of weeks, we have seen life as usual fly out the window, seemingly never to be seen again. The change is enough to make your head spin. How do we wrap language around all of this? How do we know what to think, what to say? Are we allowed to bring our concern, our pain, our confusion before God? Are we ready for that? Are we allowed to be angry at what we have lost, are losing before the mighty God?

I would say yes. And the best source I can direct you toward to do this work with is the Psalms. The psalms are the words of the people of God dealing with the world as it is, where it is, how it is, with all the complication, argument and pain that this implies. Within the Psalms lie the whole range of human experience, human emotion.

Think of it as a menu, full of that which you like and you don't like. I offer this in three parts.

Hear the words of the Psalmist:

Psalm 8

O Lord, Our Lord,
How majestic is your name throughout the earth,
You who have covered the heavens with your splendor
From the mouths of infants and suckling
You have founded strength on account of your foes
To put an end to the enemy and the avenger.
When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and stars that you set in place,
What are people that you have been mindful of them?
Mortal humans that you have taken not of them,
That you have made us little less than divine
And adorned us with glory and majesty;
You have made humans master over your handiwork,
Laying the world down at our feet
Sheep and oxen; all of them,
And wild beasts too;
The birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,
What ever travels the paths of the seas.
O Lord, or Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Sometimes there is only one thing that will satisfy us. When life gets complicated, sad, lonely, or just plain hard, often it is our stomachs that speaks to our souls most clearly and quickly. Our taste buds often heal our hearts, transporting us in time, space and spirit with the mere mention of the dish of our desiring. The first home grown tomato of the Summer. The regional delicacy that speaks of home; the kraut runza from the freezer perhaps. The hankering for our favourite chocolate bar, never mind whether we ought to eat it not. For me, it is Hamburger, noodle and pea casserole that puts me right. It's an eminently simple dish that transports me right back to a brightly lit kitchen full of family and safety, assuring and placing me in a single bite. Despite my mother's considerable skill in cooking more complex dishes, often this was what I would select on birthdays and the like, and what I make for myself when I find myself out of sorts. Its what I make for myself when I come to the end my rope. The comfort of food is essential to us, and it has nothing to do with nourishment. We need that which would tell us that all is well, or soon will be provided when we have our Mac and Cheese to keep us company and a dollop of Cookies and Cream for desert.

We have spiritual comfort food as well. There are those snippets and quotations that root us fast in the promises of God, and what God is doing for us, and promised to us. Most of the time these are Psalms that resonate on this level for us. These are the verses of our memories, often learned and memorized at our parent's instruction, and the voice of God that comes most quickly to mind. We have our playlist of personal favourites: The Lord is my shepherd; I lift my eyes unto the hills; shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. These are the verses that root us to faith and the presence of God, and where we turn when we find ourselves in greatest need of comfort. All of which is well and good. When you need them, you need them.

I grew up with this guy: Psalty, the singing song book. As you can see he is a giant blue book who, given his name, sings the words of the psalms by way of reassuring us that all was well. If you were a kid or raised kids in the church in the 80's I am guessing you know this character and his inclinations well. For me, Psalty served a very specific purpose. He was my bed time soundtrack. When the hallway light was insufficient to banish the monsters from the darkened corners of the room, or to sooth my imaginations of what train whistles in the night might represent, Psalty tapes on repeat sung me to sleep with the words of reassurance of God's

presence and the virtues of a faithful life. There is much to like about Psalty—his dog was a walking rhythm section; he engages the values of faith and hope in many ways; his was that reassuring voice that connected me to the comfort food of God’s love, provision, and presence when I needed it most. We need our Psalms, our ways of talking to God that root us and comfort us, and make us feel at ease. I would never let this go, or take this away from anyone.

But what do we do when our experience of life and living goes beyond the language of praise and reassurance? We know all too well that the world, life, and living are much more discordant than how we would like it to be. There are realities in our lives that don’t fit the tuneful praise that we associate with the Psalms. Are we allowed to talk to God at all, let alone honestly, when life gets tough, when we are mad, sad, disappointed? What happens when Psalty just isn’t enough?

[read psalm 13]

Psalm 13 (JPS)

How Long O Lord; will you ignore me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long will I have cares on my mind,
Grief in my heart all day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
Look at me, answer me, O Lord, My God!
Restore the luster to my eyes,
Lest I sleep the sleep of death;
Lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him,"
My foes exult when I totter.
But I trust in your faithfulness,
My heart will exult in your deliverance.
I will sing to the Lord for God has been good to me.

There are times where we simply do not like what it is that we have on our plates. We have moments where we simply cannot stomach another bite. I am not talking about a be nice and choke down your liver and onions sort of experience; the stuff of life which we just make our way through. I am talking about those moments where the inner two year old that lies just below our well polished surfaces is alive, well, and kicking (a metaphor with which I am becoming more acquainted with every day. Say what you will about the stage, you know where they stand without a whole lot of ambiguity). These are the moments that send the food flying, that screams "No; its just not fair" at the top of our tear soaked lungs. We all have been there, and we all know what it is to be in these depths of despair. Some of you are no doubt there this very day.

Ironically, it is these times when we need God the most that I find we are at the greatest loss of words to say to express ourselves, when we can feel most distant from God. What we know of worship and prayer is quite often limited to the comforting and comfortable sections of the text. We filter our lives and our language, leaving any negative feelings well away from our spiritual lives. We apply the age-old wisdom of "if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all" to our relationship with the one who knows how we feel better than we ever have or ever will. Our worship is a filtered experience more often than not, leaving any negativity at

the door. Ultimately, we expect God to be like us—preferring the happy Facebook ready highlights far more than the messy reality of life and living. It takes work to risk true intimacy and openness with ourselves; even more so with God. Most of us have little to no exposure to a language of the faithful that deals with doubt, pain, anger, injustice, and lament, and we are the poorer for it.

That is the true gift of the Psalms. They are words of worshipping people. They are songs to God, but in every key, mood, emotion, and tone you might imagine. In short, they are honest, encompassing all of life, not just the comfortable bits. They provide us a way of speaking our experience of the world to a listening and wanting God. Some of the most disturbing images and poetry in the whole of the Bible are those of the Psalms as the singer of songs pours out the completeness of anger. It is not every day that we muse that it would be better if we might bash our children's heads against the rocks than continue in torment (that's Psalm 137 in case you are wondering). This is the real stuff of real living, but seldom do we find these more complicated expressions on our playlists. We seem to prefer the comfort food by in large. But we do well to be reminded from time to time that the language, all the language we need and that we have, is available and is available between you and God.

Psalm 23: The Message

1-3 God, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.
5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
6 Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

We are what we eat. We hear that time and again, in which case I wonder at how many French Fries can make up a guy. As much as we would love to be all mac-n-cheese all the time, we know that this would not bring us to where we really need to be. Rather, we need to serve up a balanced diet without too much of any one thing. By all means, eat ice cream; enjoy it, relish it. But make sure you get a little bit of kale in there too along the way, maybe even some Brussel sprouts.

I think we do well to explore the wide language of the Psalms, especially in times such as these where we are at a loss for words. Because within the Psalms, there are already words for what has been. If there is an experience of life to be lived, there is a psalm for that. There are any number of ways of organizing the Psalms and to think about their content. One of the ones I have found helpful is laid out by theologian Walter Bruggeman that gives 3 broad categories for the Psalms:

- Psalms of orientation. This is the comfort food, those verses that speak to our heart and soul pointing us to God. Psalm 23 is a fine example of this. These are the praise and confession, declaring that our God is not like the gods of money, wealth, control and power that would seek to rule us. These orient us toward God and the kingdom of God.
- Psalms of disorientation are those psalms that speak into those moments when the world is upside down, and we may not know which end is up. These are the psalms of lament, confusion, and honesty naming that which we must name; that life is not always as we would have it be. Think here Psalm 13 that was read. These are the psalms that cry out that of our souls to God and invite God to come and set things right.
- Psalms of reorientation are what come after. They are honest psalms as well which name the problems of the world candidly, but articulate God's saving grace within these sticky places. These are the stories of the world being set right side up once again, but not looking the same way it once was. It acknowledges change, and embraces a new way of being.

Orientation, dis-orientation, re-orientation. If that is not the story of life, the story of our world, I don't know what is. Most of us are likely at least a little bit disoriented right now. We find our selves in these stages at very times and places in our lives, just as people of faith always have. It is part of life and living. We must embrace the whole experience of life in our experience of faith, and that means we need the whole Psalms.

I wonder where this is a moment to expand our playlist of the Psalms, enlarge our language of faith with God. Can we invite ourselves to bring God all of our words of praise, even when those words are the most challenging even to us. You are invited to find your self—your real self—before God in the Psalms. God looks to us not out of expectation or need to hear what might be easy, fun, or particularly sweet, but rather for honesty. I believe with all my heart that this is pleasing to God because it means we trust God even with the hard stuff that hems us in from time to time. Its not that God doesn't know—of course God knows what we are going through. But often it is we who benefit from finding the words to say as much before God as part of our process of healing, hope, and re-orientation toward God toward the world in which

we live. What we have words for; what we can say we can start, however slowly, to process to heal. It is often that which goes unsaid the festers, boils, and can remain difficult. In time like this, we must bring all of our lives before God—the praise, the petition and also the pain.

The point isn't to say that you must feel or say or do any one thing. If you are like me, in this cycle of revelation and adaptation we feel all of it at different moments of each day. The point is simply that all of it—all of the fear, all of the pain, frustration, anger, disappointment, apprehension, praise and wonder—all of it is the stuff of God, and the work of worship in these days and every day.

We are invited to find our orientation within the story of God coming alongside God's people. It is a story written in music and hope, the words of centuries of worship and living. It is a story still being written in equal complexity and full beauty still today. May we be given the strength to serve up the whole Psalms, knowing deeply and fully all the ways that God is present to us in worship and living, daytime or darkness, in love, hope, and compassion.

Children's Time

- What is your favourite food?
- Why is that your favourite?
- Would it be good if that was all we had to eat? Why?

The Psalms are in the middle of the Bible and they are like a prayer book for many, many people. We have inherited them from the Jews. Jesus prayed the Psalms and knew them so well that they were the last words on his lips when he died.

- God loves it when we are happy
- God cares when we are sad
- The Psalms give us language to be real with God and to have a balanced meal of spiritual food.