

SECOND PSALMS READING: Psalms 34:1-10, 17-19 pg 508 OT

I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. 2 I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. 3 Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. 4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. 5 Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. 6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. 7 The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. 8 O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. 9 O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. 10 The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing... 17 When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. 18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST PSALMS READING: Psalm 77

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I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. 2 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. 3 I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. 4 You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. 5 I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. 6 I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: 7 “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? 8 Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” 10 And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.” 11 I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. 12 I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. 13 Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? 14 You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. 15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. 16 When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. 17 The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. 18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. 19 Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

***“The Message of the Psalms”**

***The Psalter** “*might well be called a little Bible. In it, is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Cannon. It is really a fine handbook*”¹ –Martin Luther.

***In the** Book of Psalms, “*there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal*

salvation”² --John Calvin. ***The Psalms**, “*in sublimity, pathos and originality, or in one-word, poetry, are superior to all the odes, hymns, and prayers in any language.*”³—John Adams.

Some of you are very familiar with the Psalms. Some of you may not have spent too much time with them. But whichever is the case, when you read this collection of writings, you might wonder what in the world Luther, Calvin and Adams are describing. “*Superior to all songs in any language?*”... “*Comprehended most beautifully?*”...REALLY?

When I began to read the psalms, all of them, I remember initially wondering why this book is even in the Bible! At least, I wondered that about parts of it. I was so taken back by what are called the lament psalms which complain and question and rail at God, at God! The words are angry, praying for such horrible ills to come upon their enemies and on the children of enemies! Maybe you’ve wondered this too. Well, today, friends, let’s seek out a new perspective on the Psalms, one which sees them as a tremendous gift from God, for they are honest and real, and provide for us words, permission, and direction to live all of life’s experiences, even the hard ones. ***Rolf** Jacobson, OT scholar, has probably the best of descriptor. He simply says, “*The Psalms are a soundtrack of my life.*”⁴

***The Psalms**, which means songs, are not written history. They instead have a history. They are a collection of collections which was accomplished over centuries. The final form of the book was probably completed by 3rd century BCE. Some psalms reveal the struggle against idolatry during early years in Canaan. Some debate the theology of the Law during the period following the exile. Some are obviously more recent and speak of God and Zion, prophesying the coming of the Messiah. The sequence of the collection in the Book is not chronological, nor

¹ Martin Luther. “*Luther’s Works*”, Vol 35:254. In: Interpretation. A Bible Commentary by May JL (Louisville: John Knox Press; 1994),1.

² John Calvin. “*Commentary on the Psalms*”, 34. In: Interpretation. A Bible Commentary by May JL (Louisville: John Knox Press; 1994),1.

³ McCullough DG. “*Letters to Thomas Jefferson*”. In: Biography of John Adams. (New York: Touchstone Pub; 2012), 630.

⁴ Rolf Jacobson. “B39.2: *The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (2018)*”. <https://asermonforeversunday.com/>. Accessed 8-16-2018).

are they arranged by author. Although loose, the sequence of the psalms, is probably best determined by their purposes in Israel's corporate or individual worship....purposes like celebration, confession, thanksgiving or petition, etc. You may have noticed, our collection of songs, our hymnal, is organized by purpose too...Adoration, Christmas, Life in Christ, Mission.

***Walter Brueggemann**, one of the foremost experts on the Psalms today, has analyzed the tremendous fund of scholarship and found a fascinating pattern or a scheme in them.⁵ He, however, makes it very clear that his scheme is "*not a master key and not intended to be a straitjacket, but a paradigm which might serve to be helpful.*" Regardless, he suggests that there are psalms of *orientation*, psalms of *disorientation* and psalms of *new orientation*. He states that at any given time a human life is either IN one of these places of orientation, disorientation or new orientation or is in MOVEMENT from one to another. The length of time spent can certainly vary from minutes to hours, to days to years.

For instance**, the psalmists were sometimes in places of satisfied well-being, with feelings of gratitude for their many blessings. Corresponding to these times they were led to write psalms of orientation which expressed their joy and delight in the goodness and faithfulness of God, the beauty of God's creation, and truth of God's Law. *These are the ones that Marjorie Williamson told me on Thursday from her hospital gurney that she loves the most because they were so often ones she'd sung in the choir.* *** Then she** began to say by memory one of her favorites: Psalm 103, "*Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless God's holy name!*" This made me recall one of my favorites, Psalm 8, and our funny experience with it. ** **You see**, Mike and I had taken some 4th – 5th graders camping. I had planned to have worship at daybreak in a beautiful clearing that I'd spotted on our hike the day before. I'd picked it out because I knew *THERE* we'd be in the midst of nature at its finest. "*Psalm 8 would be so perfect,*" I thought. However, when we were walking to the clearing, somebody said something about watching for snakes and suddenly all the kids ran screaming to the nearest trees. I soon found myself standing in the center of a circle of Texas live oaks laden with children, and I was

⁵Brueggemann W. *The Message of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg; 1984).

*hollering, reverently, of course, those ancient words: ***O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!**... * **When I look** at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? Yet you have them little lower than angels, and crown them with glory and honor. You have them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!* Now THAT is a song of orientation! (long pause)

***Walter Brueggemann** also points out that when life has times of great pain, torture, alienation, persecution, rejection, quite naturally feelings of rage, doubt, loneliness, resentment, even hatred can result. Matching these feelings then are psalms of “disorientation”, poems that the psalmists wrote to reflect the abrasive experience. ***Probably** the most famous of these lament songs is Psalm 137. It has an historical reference: the Hebrews were being mocked while being held captive in Babylon. They had watched their home city leveled, their king blinded, many countrymen killed, all prior to their being brutally forced to march hundreds of miles to Babylon by their captors. ***They remembered** their earlier lives, their hearts ached for them, and their anger burned. *Psalm 137: “Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. For there our captors demanded a song of us. Our tormentors requested a joyful hymn: “Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!” But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” ... O LORD, remember what the Edomites did on the day the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem. O Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy is the one who pays you back for what you have done to us. Happy is the one who takes YOUR babies and smashes them against the rocks”* A psalm of unspeakable pain, rage, disorientation. And while it may seem repulsive, there are plenty of crimes against humanity today, that, if we were honest, would drive us to such feelings as well. Consider for instance if your loved one was a victim of the brutal

genocide occurring in Yemen, Myanmar, in the South Sudan, or of kidnapping & trafficking, or child abuse, or animal cruelty.

***Finally**, the Psalms of new orientation are written when the psalmist is in a place of ridiculous joy, giddiness even, having come from a place of complete despair. The writer is simply overwhelmed with the shining light which has entered into his darkness, the new replacing the old. ***An example** of this type is Psalm 34, our second reading today. The psalmist is praising God and testifying to having been delivered from his afflictions. (*I sought the Lord, and the Lord answered me, and delivered me from all my fears*) ***And Psalm 97**, the final hymn we will sing today is also a psalm of new orientation. It affirms the final victory of God over the evil which threatens us...God's light in darkness. *"Now filled with God's own peace and love, our hearts resound with praise. Rejoice, Rejoice. God reigns! Let earth rejoice"*.

Psalms of orientation**, disorientation, new orientation...certainly so many can be characterized as one of these three, but also there are those which move from one of these states to another as is often the case in life. For instance, did you notice in the first reading today, Psalm 77, the psalmist midway changes his tune? Can anyone spot where it happens? I've printed it on the screen. **(three clicks as we read)**. Did you see it? Check out vss 9 to 11. *"Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion? And, I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord."* ***The psalmist** is full of anger & then, he remembers. He remembers. ***(click)** He remembers who it is that he is praying to. And a new orientation begins to dawn out of disorientation.

Reading the psalms which move from disorientation to new orientation can be a tool to help people in difficult places. *I once was visiting an elderly woman who was in true despair, "circling the drain", we used to say in the medical field. Everything was falling apart: her health (she just felt lousy); her family (they'd started fighting with each other and leaving her); her finances (she'd run out of money to pay for meds, for help around the house, bill collectors*

hounded her). The house was filthy. Food had not been put away for days, and the woman was just sitting, literally in her own mess when I arrived. Rather than tell her that I understood or that things were going to be fine, I let her vent, and stomp her feet, and just rail at God for a while. She had a right. And God is big enough to take it. Eventually however, I remembered the advice I'd been given that "when you are ready to give up, remember the cross". I told her that many others had been in her place too, and I read Ps 77 aloud. I paused at vs. 10 and lowered my voice. I noticed that she was quiet too. As I moved on, I watched her begin to recall God's steadfast goodness as well. By the time I finished, there was a tangible relief in the room, and then...and then a request to have it read again. I've had this experience repeated several times and am convinced that the language of the psalms is a gift to KEEP US, to KEEP US in relationship with the One who meets us in the darkness and there transforms it by the power of the words, "fear not" and "on the third day". "When you are ready to give up, remember the cross." If we did not have the words of the psalmists already ready for our use, how easy it would be to think we're unique, to sink in despair, and walk away from God!

The psalmists, friends, whoever they were, were writing of their lives...the good, the bad and the ugly parts. And they were people who did not doubt that all of their feelings could and, of course, should, be vigorously addressed to God, from profound praise to terrible anger and dismay. Their words are a gift to us, a wonderful, amazing gift from God. So, I'm here today to tell you to keep them with you...pray them daily...sing them, memorize them...cherish them always. ***O Give** thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. (Ps 136) Amen.