“The Wisdom of the Psalms: Praying Wisely” Jessica Hawkinson

Romans 8:24-27; Psalm 1 First Presbyterian Church

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Romans 8:24-27

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

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At first glance, the book of Psalms starts out much like the selections from Proverbs that Christine read last week. If you happened to open up your pew Bible to read along with Psalm 1 this morning, you will even see a heading at the very beginning that reads: “The Two Ways.” Here in Psalm 1, as in much of Proverbs and a handful of similar Psalms known as the Wisdom Psalms, we see a world relatively balanced in its morality. The way of the wise is to delight in the law of the Lord, and to meditate on it day and night. The way of the wicked on the other hand, is the way that sinners tread, the seat of the scoffers who do not follow the way of the Lord. There is comfort in the logical mathematics of it. If x is true, then y is predictable. If we only use the right tool for the right time, we begin to accumulate the kind of wisdom that God hopes for us, even when life is complicated. Here’s the really complicated thing, though. Proverbs hardly anticipates the kind of chaos that God’s people encounter. The wisdom of the Psalms doesn’t emerge from anything close to a world of equilibrium (Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 4). Only a few Psalms later, by the time we get to Psalm 6, we have seen God’s people quickly spiral into a reality of disorientation and chaos: “I am weary with my moaning,” says the Psalmist. We hear God’s people crying out later: “You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations...Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!” In Psalm 60: “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses...now restore us!” Rather than a handbook for a well-balanced life, we receive in the book of Psalms an invitation to an honest relationship with God throughout realities of secure orientation, painful disorientation, and surprising reorientation (See Brueggemann). So what does this have to do with us?

Most of the time, we can get away with lives that are a useful training ground for the types of instruction found in Proverbs. We can generally choose between the most obvious of wise and wicked ways, and we find time and energy to pursue the righteous and just ways of the sort reflected in Psalm 1. Our “posture” of decision making, like divers aiming for perfect form, is a choice between one way or the other. For example, part of my work here is to guide our church’s mission endeavors. From our place in the South Parlor, we can choose the just way and invest in the work of Boys and Girls Club, something we judge as far more aligned with God’s covenant than, say, squandering church funds at the local casino. In our own lives, we go to work, do our homework, and pay our utility bills because it means we can use our gifts for meaningful occupations, educational successes, and a comfortable place to live when it’s fifty degrees above or below freezing. We come to church and most of the time we are fine and the answer to “How are you?” is “Fine, good, pretty well, great, thanks.” I’m guilty of this, and the most striking example is that the only answer I know to the Spanish “Como estas?” is “Bien, gracias.” Fine, thank you. I’ve settled into a life where nothing else seems necessary to learn. It’s too complicated to adopt a new vocabulary.

From our place of equilibrium, we can choose our own adventure and even welcome contradictory proverbs that help us maintain self-confidence and settledness. The end-goal we can keep in sight, most of the time, is a quest for an obedient and God-driven life, even if the learning of wisdom isn’t linear and we have to start over a fair amount of the time. We just keep making the right next decision. The risk of this life, though, is the kind of prayer that emerges from being “well-settled, knowing that life makes sense and God is well-placed in heaven, presiding but not bothering” (Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms,* p. 3). The risk is that when God asks “How are you?”, our answer is always “Fine, thank you.” This shallow practice keeps us in relation to God rather like old friends who keep saying they’ll get together for lunch, but never really do. It’s hard to go deeper when you don’t share at least a kernel of truth.

The risk of approaching wisdom texts from this vantage point is that our prayer for others and our response to disorientation, grief, uncertainty, you name it, uses only a vocabulary of equilibrium. When someone close to us has passed away, we hear “They’re in a better place” or “It was her time to go.” When someone faces a difficult diagnosis or a long recovery, we hear “God won’t give you more than you can handle” or “If you just pray hard enough, healing will come.” When you don’t get into the college you hoped for, or you lose a job, or a relationship fails, the answer is “When God closes a door, God opens a window,” or “It just wasn’t meant to be.” Edwin Searcy, a pastor for the United Church of Canada, writes that we have forgotten the power of bold and daring biblical speech in favor of “the languages of techno-speak, market share, and sentimental cliche” (Bruggemann, cover). If we read Psalm 1, or the other 149 Psalms, only from a place of equilibrium and orientation, we miss the true wisdom of the Psalms in their boldness and transformative power.

That means we will often need to confront our own disorientation. The Psalms are meant to be sung. In fact, they have been sung for generations and generations. They were the the hymnbook of God’s people in the wilderness, the refrain of the earliest church being persecuted, and still the core of worshippers around the world today. One of the reasons I worked with Tom to set so much of our worship to music was because of this fact. It is only recently in our tradition that we have stopped singing. The early reformer John Calvin referred to the Psalms as the anatomy of the soul, and for good reason. Their music and poetry reflects the human experience of lament, celebration, thanksgiving, and a combination of all of the above. The Psalms are unique because “they are undisguisedly human utterances...Only the Psalms in our Bible are formulated as prayer, as human words to God” (Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved With God*, p. 9). I only recently learned to sing many of the Psalms, during my time with the choir at Princeton Seminary. The Reformed Church of America recently published a Psalter, a hymnal of Psalms, with numerous settings of each Psalm. Many of the selections from today’s service are from that resource. What is remarkable about them for me is that their poetry and their resonance in song captures wisdom in ways that snippets of spoken word can’t do. They parallel our unique experience of Sunday worship. We are called to worship from the equilibrium of our lives, then we are disoriented by our prayer of confession, and we somehow go out into the world reoriented and re-dedicated to God’s purpose. If we listen carefully and pray carefully, and sing boldly, the multifaceted and contrasting voices of the Psalms reveal more. They mirror the stirrings of our souls, the beat of our hearts. Equilibrium does not prevail here in the way of black and white choices. Instead, a sense of disorientation is presumed, a disorientation that hides itself in the more polite company of Proverbs. Psalm 6:6-7 reveals this very quick shift away from the comparative equilibrium of Psalm 1:

I am weary with my moaning;

every night I flood my bed with tears;

I drench my couch with my weeping.

My eyes waste away because of grief;

they grow weak because of all my foes.

This isn’t an exaggeration, and maybe you know that already from the truth of your own experiences. Unlike Proverbs, a consistent mood of the Psalter is one of disorientation, reflective of the experiences of God’s people from bounty to wilderness and back. In Psalm 90 we hear: “All our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!” In Psalm 85 we hear the cry: “Restore us again, O God...Will you be angry with us forever?” Authorship and timeline are uncertain, and they appear in no particular order. While some Psalms are attributed to King David and other authors, about one third are anonymously written. This is further invitation for our use of the Psalms as words for our own honest prayer. The wisdom Psalms and the book as a whole are unique in their grappling with the disorientation of life. They emerge from contexts of confusion, lament, destruction, firm trust, fulfilled hope, and thanksgiving in spite of it all. The Psalms give us a resource to turn to when the question is not “what do I do,” but merely “what can I possibly say.” The Psalms emerge largely out of a context of disequilibrium, not confident well-being (Brueggemann, p. 3). Even Psalm 1, so reminiscent of the wisdom of Proverbs, speaks into a context of disorientation. It is an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. The world is chaotic, but the ones who cling to God’s word night and day, whatever comes, will be like trees planted by the water.

During Women’s Bible Study on Wednesday, I asked this question of everyone gathered there, and I am curious about those gathered here as well. Do you have a favorite Psalm? Think about it for a moment. If you are feeling brave, raise your hand if you can think of a Psalm that has been important to you. The stories I encountered on Wednesday have been consistent with my experience in other places. Our favorite Psalms are not merely pithy statements. We ask for Psalm 139 to be read in times of trouble and in hospital rooms because it proclaims: “Even if I make my bed in Sheol...even if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.” Many of us remember the twenty-third Psalm, even if we have no other scripture committed to memory. One person at Bible study couldn’t remember hers, but called me shortly after to say that Psalm 127 was important to her when she spent the late night hours working and even baking, of all things. I could tell she grinned as she said: These were God’s word to me: “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.” Yet another woman shared that her mother read Psalm 46 each day, relishing the words: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Psalm 46, sung in the form of A Mighty Fortress is Our God, sustained one of my older friends through her experience of wartime in the Middle East. She says: God was a shelter from the stormy blast, and the bombs were blasting. These are just a few of the many that we share with one another.

The language for prayer we discover in the Psalms is “honest and freeing, daring and frightening.” It differs so much from the false equilibrium we often pretend when we say we are “fine.” The words of the Psalms are in stark contrast “to the often dulled, mundane, and passionless vocabulary of contemporary speech” (Brueggemann, p. 7). The wisdom of the Psalms is an invitation to pray wisely. If we are honest about the painful disorientation that exists in so much of our lives, the Psalms can teach us the way to pray. They can reorient us toward the things that truly matter and toward a more profound relationship with God.

In the text from Romans 8, we encounter another context of disorientation in the formation of the early Christian community. We read of the faithful people’s groaning in labor pains, the wasting away of the body, the sufferings of the present time. And yet, the work of the Spirit reorients the speaker toward future glory. The Psalms encourage a similar reorientation of our souls and relationship to God. The prayers of the Psalms are not for the faint of heart: there are such instances of “the psalmist’s pious wish that his enemies would melt like a slug on a hot road” (Davis, p. 9). But they are especially relevant for those who admit to failing at a life of uninterrupted continuity and equilibrium. They are relevant not because they have answers or easy ways out. They are relevant because we experience life when it seems like God has forsaken us at one point or another, and the Psalms give us words to hope for something different. They demand something different of a God who we remain faithful to. As scholar Walter Brueggemann notes, “The language of the Psalms does not manage/describe what is...it evokes into being what does not exist until it is spoken...it is boldly anticipatory.” The Psalms teaches us the language of ‘face-to-faceness’ with God, a way to articulate chaos in honest relationship with the One who has covenanted with humanity for good purposes. Psalm 1 becomes a preface to the rest of the 149 Psalms when we read it with the presumption of disorientation. We discover the words for hard-earned wisdom.

Even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit intervenes for us in the form of sighs too deep for words. Turning to the Spirit-filled words of the Psalms gives us a taste of the wisdom found in words outside of the equilibrium we try so hard to fake until we make. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis describes the wisdom of the Psalms this way: “These biblical prayers expose the hollow sentimentality that often masquerades as prayer, the dangerous falsity of things we have heard...about how we ought to think and talk when God is around. Things like this: God does not have any use for our anger...There is no place for despair or fear in the Christian life...You must never, ever be mad at God” (Davis, p. 8).

So we inherit in the Psalms the revelation that anger has a place in how we talk with God. We can express our despair and fear. We can yell at the top of our lungs, demanding that God show up already. In moments of despair, there is a reason that blindly opening your Bible right in the middle results in finding the Psalms with shocking frequency. Try that sometime...it really works. The challenge of wisdom is to recognize the truth when we are not fine. The challenge of wisdom is to sustain trust and faith in God through all of that. It is not a one-size fits all, learn once kind of wisdom. It is earned only through prayer and song, rejoicing and despairing, over and over again.

Some good news. Admitting our own disorientation in prayer, as the Psalmist does, is not the description of an unfortunate permanent condition. Instead, the daring of the Psalmist’s admission of suffering moves the one who prays (or sings) from the places of desolation into hope-grounded confidence in God. The admission of suffering in our prayer and song begins the experience of reorientation. Reorientation differs from the original orientation we thought we had in the first place. It differs from “fine, thanks,” because the reorientation is no longer naive or ignorant of suffering. It can’t pretend that suffering and struggle don’t exist. It does discover that suffering and struggle isn’t all there is. That wisdom, hard-earned, is worth its weight.

In the Psalms we are given prayers to speak, prayers that others can speak for us when we are crushed by the weight of the world, prayers that change us and call into being a new relationship between us and God. While the Psalms are human words, they are also “God’s word to us...the Psalms are God’s word *in* us...the Psalms are the Spirit of God speaking through us, helping us to pray when we do not know how to pray as we ought, which is most of the time” (Davis, p. 9) We are given words that over the ages have participated in the cosmos being formed, the wonders of creation being born, the contours of life and death being shaped by a loving God. Listen for the wisdom of these words. Listen for the ceaseless worship of angel hordes, for the words that set stars in place, for the praise that rings from deep within our spirits. Sing for joy at the wisdom of being rooted like trees planted by the water, watched over by a God who never slumbers or sleeps. Praise the Lord! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Sing Alleluia, Amen!

Sources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*

Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved With God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*