

Breath & Spirit

If we stop to think about it, The Book of Psalms holds a very unique place in our life together. The funny thing is that we seldom *do* stop to think about the Book of Psalms. We read or sing from it every week, but it seldom provides the focus for a sermon. It's kind of an inside joke among preachers that when the gospel of the day is a bit too challenging, either for us or perhaps in our limited judgement for you - and let's face it the gospel sometimes is pretty challenging - we might go have a look at the psalm appointed for that day. Lol. When preachers meet we ask each other, "How did Sunday go?" and one of us might say, 'Oh ya well I preached on the psalm,' and there is a little wry smile and the other might say, 'Oh. Yeah:) Me too:)' with that same little wry smile because we know we gave ourselves a break that day maybe.

But, I just want to say, not today. Not today. I'm preaching on the psalm for a reason. The gospel for today *is* challenging. It is. And I challenge us all - as the passage bids us do - to put aside anger each and every time we come to this Altar. Each and every time. Leave it behind. Let's *all* just make that a practice every time we come here and leave it that.

Today I want us to stop and think about the Book of Psalms, because it is a fantastic resource for prayer. As we move into the season of Lent I'm hoping we can renew our prayer life a bit with a new approach to the Psalms. So while we're stopping to think about the Book of Psalms let's take a look at it as well. [BCP pp. 331ff/BAS pp. 705ff]. This will work best if each person has their own copy, so no sharing. We've got enough for everyone to have their own.

Wow what a *source* this book is. It's like a deep, deep well of spiritual riches - so *full* of the spiritual life of its writers that its cup still runneth over into our lives and for generations to come

It's the songbook of the bible, from before the birth of Christ. 150 psalms written for singing in worship. It might *also* be our most familiar book of *poems*. I'm not absolutely sure if that's true but I'm kind of testing that idea. Think of the 23rd Psalm for instance: *'The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.'*

I was able to write down those verses from memory - as I think many of us could - in the King James Version, because the book itself is kind of like those green pastures. They restore our souls,

though when we know the psalms we know their waters are not completely untroubled by any means. The psalms take us to the depths of the human heart, and the heights.

And what poems these psalms are! Familiar as they may be, their form is completely unlike the English poems we know by heart:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (Wordsworth)

That is the kind of poem we understand. It plays by the rules we know. It's rhythm is simple and regular, with the same four beats per line (*I wandered lonely as a cloud, That floats on high o'er vales and hills*), and most especially we recognize it as poetry because it uses end rhyme: cloud/crowd, hills/daffodils, trees/breeze. But not the psalms. Although various attempts have been made through the centuries to discover the characteristics of English and European poetry here, the main formal characteristic of the psalms are different. The differences in their form are complicated - especially because we read them in English

translations from the Hebrew - and I don't want to dwell on it all too much because there is just so much to know about this amazing book, but two characteristics are especially apparent to us: firstly their profound *faithfulness*, their unflagging focus on the word, the law, the *presence*, and the worship of a single monotheistic God, and secondly their use of parallelism: the repetition of ideas between halves of the verses, in various ways.

If you've still got your book open to Psalm 1 [BCP pp. 331ff/BAS pp. 705ff] you'll see this parallelism right off the top in verse 1:

- . Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

The second half of the verse - after the little asterisk - repeats the idea - develops through repetition - the idea expressed in the first half of the verse.

Psalm 119 is uniquely amazing among the Psalms. Let's take a look at it. It starts on [BCP p. 485/BAS p. 868]. If you flip through a bit you'll see that it's really long. At 176 verses it is the longest psalm in the collection by a considerable margin. But it is 176 verses long not just because the psalmist had a lot to say and needed 176 verses to say it in. It's more that the writer had something to say about God - and about the *word* of God - and

she figured out a way to say it through a *form* that took 176 verses to complete. Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem. It has 22 sections, because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and there is one section for each letter from Aleph to Tav. There are 8 lines in each section because there are 8 terms, 8 words for “law” - or ‘word’ - in the Hebrew language and each section uses all 8 words, each with their own verse - roughly speaking. 8 times 22 = 176 verses. [We chose to sing another psalm today for musical reasons, but the psalm appointed for today is actually this first section of Psalm 119.] [In the BAS] You see the word ‘Aleph’ at the top because in Hebrew the first word of each of the 8 verses begins with ‘A’ or Aleph. It’s the same with each of the 21 others sections as you can see.

The great discovery of the past 20 odd centuries with the Book of Psalms though - for both Jews and Christians - is that the psalms become most powerful when we don’t just read them or study them, but when we also *pray* them. Various ways of praying them have been explored, but there is one way which is particularly deep in the tradition of the churches globally. Our Bishop, +Melissa, is especially committed to teaching this way of praying the psalms and I’d love for us to join with her in learning this way. It’s a very deep way of praying because it involves not only our speaking and our minds but also our bodies.

We're familiar with a particularly excellent form of body prayer called *yoga* that comes from the Hindu tradition, and when we think of meditative prayer we tend to think of Buddhism. What many don't realize is that Christianity has ancient disciplines of both body prayer and meditation which go back millennia. In my view, our unique traditions of body prayer and meditation began to be forgotten by Christians when we turned our backs on the monasteries, perhaps beginning in the 16th century. That might also be when we stopped thinking of Christianity as 'spiritual,' something we very much need to begin again.

But these resources are still available to us and praying the psalms is among the deepest and best. A sign of that is the little asterisk [slash] found between the halves of psalm verses. This is actually a breath mark. It's purpose is to have us pause as we read, shift our attention to our breath, and wait for the breath to return before we proceed. If we do this all together through successive verses, we eventually experience something wonderful in the gradual synchronization of our breathing, and perhaps eventually of our heartbeats. This is of great spiritual importance.

It is no accident that 'breath' and 'spirit' are the same word. This watching and synchronizing of the breath is a spiritual practice of great depth, especially when practiced regularly over a period of years, as regular worshippers have always done. It may be in fact that we cannot do spiritual work at all until we begin to trust, listen to, and follow our breathing. Allow me to demonstrate and then we'll give this approach a try by saying verses 1 to 8 together.

119 Aleph

- . 1 Happy are they whose way is blameless, * who walk in the law of the Lord!

- . 2 Happy are they who observe his decrees * and seek him with all their hearts!

- . 3 Who never do any wrong, * but always walk in his ways.

- . 4 You laid down your commandments, * that we should fully keep them.

- . 5 Oh, that my ways were made so direct * that I might keep your statutes!

- . 6 Then I should not be put to shame, * when I regard all your commandments.

- . 7 I will thank you with an unfeigned heart, *
when I have learned your righteous judgements.

- . 8 I will keep your statutes; * do not utterly forsake me.

Notes:

- Book of Psalms
 - perhaps our best known book of poetry
 - Psalm 23
 - Poetic form completely different from English poetry
 - no end rhyme
 - no rhythm
 - Parallelism
 - synonymous parallelism
 -
 - conventional language
 - music
 - psalms themselves instruments, tunes, the choir director
 - Unity in the Book of Psalms = One God
- Psalm 119
 - longest psalm
 - 176 verses
 - not just because the psalmist had a lot to say
 - acrostic poem based on the letters of the hebrew alphabet
 - 22 sections of 8 verses each (= 176)
 - each of the 8 lines in each section begins with the relevant letter of the Hebrew alphabet
 - one set of 8 verses for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet from Aleph to Tav
 - 8 verses per section because there are 8 words in the Hebrew language which can mean 'law' or 'word' or 'teaching,' referring to the Word of God (Kraus, Psalms 60-150, p. 415)