

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's
LENT 2017 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES
"The Psalms: Tools for Being & Becoming"

Study #1: "The Pursuit of Happiness"- Feb. 28/March 1, 2017
Psalms 1 & 2

Opening Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, you have modeled for us a life of prayerful intimacy with the Father; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to see how we can use the Book of Psalm to develop our relationship with God so that we may become the people he wants us to be. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

From what I observe around the parish, I see a good many members are skilled at using tools - gardening, woodworking, etc. Daily we use tools like pots and pans to prepare our food or knife and fork to get it to our mouths. Eugene Peterson,¹ to whom I owe a great debt for many of the ideas in this study, points out that every distinctive human behaviour requires tools, some made of wood, some of metal, and some - of words.

"Prayer is a tool that is made mostly, of words."² Just as a plough is for farming, a book for learning, and pots for cooking, prayers are tools for being and becoming. Rather than tools for doing or getting, which most of often use prayer for, "Prayers are tools that God uses to work his will in our bodies and souls. Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us."³

The Book of Psalms in the Bible is a book of prayers – a collection of poems and songs originally compiled for singing in worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. We are going to be looking at the psalms in six sessions for our Lenten Bible studies. We will examine psalms that deal with suffering, sin, creation, despair, thanksgiving, praise, and resentment. As prayers that lead us to connect with God at every level of our lives, I have therefore entitled the whole series: "The Psalms – Tools for Being and Becoming."⁴

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God, The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); Eugene H. Peterson, "The Psalms and Spirituality", tapes of a course given at Regent College, Vancouver. BC.

² *Answering God*, pg. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*.

THE PSALTER

Today, we will look at the first two psalms, which are not really prayers at all, but preparation for prayer. They get us ready to pray. Before we look at these two psalms specifically, however, I want to give a bit of background.

First, we need to look at where the Psalms, or Psalter, as they are called collectively, fit in with the rest of the Bible. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, was originally organized into three sections – Torah, Prophets and Writings. The Torah gives the early story of redemption and the giving of the law; the Prophets show how the law was or was not lived out and call us back to it; and the Writings – which include the Psalms and Proverbs and other poetic books - describe our response to God – to Torah, to the Prophets – in daily life.

There is a parallel in the make-up of the New Testament. The first 5 books (Gospels and Acts) give the story of redemption through Jesus and his placing of his law in our hearts by the Holy Spirit; the letters speak about working out the implications of the Gospel and Revelation is the response to all this in worship and prayer – challenging us to obedience in times of darkness, wrestling with suffering, and God’s ultimate victory. Much of Revelation is poetic with echoes of the Psalms and has itself given rise to many songs of praise.

Now many of us see the Writings or poetic parts of Scripture as less essential, not as important as Torah and the Prophets or the Gospels, Acts and the Letters – an “added extra” if you have time or are that way inclined. I would include myself partially in that category; I find poetry difficult and prefer clear statements and facts, concrete instructions and direction. I am the poorer for it.

This leads us to the second point about the Psalter – as prayer, it speaks in the language of relationship. Eugene Peterson has helped me a great deal in this area by his explanation that in life, we learn and use three languages:⁵

- **Language 1** is the language of intimacy and relationship. It is our primary language which is at first inarticulate speech - the coos and cries of a baby and its parents, which is rich in meaning but not very coherent. But they are ways of building up trust and relationship. It develops in adolescence and in courtship – teenagers can converse on the phone or over the internet for hours, but when the parent asks what they have just been talking about, the reply is, “Oh, nothing.” Then in old age, when you visit an aging loved one or friend and they tell you the same old story over and over again – don’t say, “Oh, I’ve heard that one before,” for the telling of the story is not primarily a means of conveying information but of building up and living out relationship.
- **Language 2** is the language of information. Here we have facts and names and everything which defines our objective environment. This is the major language of school and exploration.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), pgs 90ff and *Answering God*, pgs. 39ff. Some of the following are direct quotes from Peterson.

- **Language 3** is the language of motivation. Here we use words which have the power to make things happen and get people to do things. An infant wails to bring food and a parental command stops a childish tantrum; we learn how to get people, who are often more intelligent and bigger than ourselves, to do things for us. This is the predominant language of politics and advertising.

In society, it is clear that we major on the latter two and minimize the first. We are the poorer for it because we allow the language of intimacy, the language that develops relationships of trust and hope and understanding, to languish. But this language is the language of prayer – we use it to establish relationship and intimacy with God. As such, like a baby’s cooing or teenager’s telephone call or senior’s anecdote – it may often be repetitive or incoherent, poetic or exaggerated.

Prayer is Language 1 –

- “It is not language *about* God or faith (informational);
- it is not language in the service *of* God and the faith (motivational);
- but it is *to* and *with* God in faith

it is language *to* and *with* God in faith (relational).⁶ It is the language of intimacy – “Abba, Father.”

The Psalms are Language 1. Those of us who approach the Psalms looking primarily for information and direction will be disappointed. I am not saying doctrine and instruction are not there – they are; but the primary purpose of the Psalms is to connect with God at the level of love not facts. We don’t sing “The Lord’s My Shepherd” at funerals because we need to find out about Biblical animal husbandry – we need to be touched by the living presence and care of God in time of need. Don’t allow yourself to be frustrated by the seeming repetition or rehashing of old themes in the Psalms. Knowing that the Psalms are Language 1 is helping me to expand my prayer life (ever so slowly, mind you) away from doing and getting to being and becoming.

One way the Psalms can help us expand our prayer life and relationship with God has to do with the manner in which we approach God. The Psalms depict a more candid and blunt way of relating to God than many of us would feel comfortable with. Statements like:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever...

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God” (Psalm 13:1, 3);

***As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God. (Psalm 41:1)***

***Confuse the wicked, O Lord,
confound their speech. (Psalm 55:9)***

are much more direct and from the gut than many of us with British-Canadian backgrounds would be comfortable with. The Psalms are full of frank and open communication with God. This has led to a uniquely Jewish way of praying. This is depicted well in some films such as “Ushpizin” - “The Guest.” which shows the ultra-orthodox main character and his wife pray to God in the most direct and intimate, even confrontational way. At times, this interchange can

⁶ *The Contemplative Pastor*, pg. 93.

become almost playful and verge on bartering, as we see in another movie, “Fiddler on Roof,” where Tevye, sitting on a roof, prays to God,

*Dear God, you made many, many poor people.
I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor.
But it's no great honour either!
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?*

And then bursts into the song, “If I Were a Rich Man,” describing what his life would be like if he were wealthy. This song is not just daydream but prayer, as it concludes:

*Lord who made the lion and the lamb,
You decreed I should be what I am.
Would it spoil some vast eternal plan?
If I were a wealthy man.⁷*

Tevye’s song is not an abstract dissertation on how God rewards the righteous – it is a frank and open conversation with God. Prayer is conversation with God; the Psalms help us develop that conversation.

PSALMS 1 AND 2 – AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALTER

In the time we have left we will look at Psalms 1 and 2, which, as I said earlier, are not really prayers at all, but preparation for prayer.

They are like a two-pillared porch through which we enter the Psalter. First, they each contain the word “blessed” - Psalm 1 in the first verse and Psalm 2 in the last. To be blessed means to be happy or filled with goodness. What does this involve? We are not sure yet, but the presence of this word in both psalms links them together and arouses an expectation and anticipation in us that we might enter into the blessed state through our encounter with the Psalms that follow.

Then second, the Spirit-inspired compilers knew that we don’t find it easy to pray – we get distracted by our fantasies and circumstances and we need help to focus our attention. Psalm 1 speaks to this. It calls us to move **from distraction to attention**. But there is more - we become intimidated by the world around us – what’s the point of praying when those who don’t follow God’s way seem to do so well; does praying make any difference? We need to see reality from God’s perspective and be moved to adoration. So Psalm 2 calls us to move **from intimidation to adoration**.⁸

1. Psalm 1 – from distraction to attention

In Psalm 1, there are two prominent things – an action and an image. The action is Law-meditation, the image is a transplanted tree:

*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,*

⁷ “If I Were a Rich Man” from film, “Fiddler on the Roof”; lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, 1971.

⁸ I credit Eugene Peterson with the ideas that follow

*which yield their fruit in due season
and whose leaves do not wither. (vss. 2- 3).*

Law here is the word Torah. Specifically, it refers to the first five books of the Bible but can be expanded to all of God's word to us. Torah is related to the word "to aim something – like a javelin - so that it hits its mark." The idea here is that God has targeted us – he has spoken to us – he has come to us intentionally, personally. This leads to delight, spontaneous joy. Here is not something we have to study as for an exam but a love-letter to ponder over and drink in. This is the concept of "meditate" – not so much an intellectual process but a savouring and enjoying of a good meal.

The image of a tree planted by streams of water can be better translated, "a tree transplanted alongside irrigation canals." When the Psalter was compiled, the Israelites were **depressed and distracted**, languishing in exile under the hot Babylonian sun, bewailing their plight, sitting beside the network of irrigation canals. There they sang "The Babylonian Blues"⁹:

"How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4)

They were distracted - how could they pray in such a situation of despair? The psalm gives the answer – let God's word enter your life again, immerse yourself in meditating on God's word and you will begin to see things differently. You can live for God anywhere – put down roots, put out leaves and produce fruit. Our natural tendency is to "Put off praying until we think we are where we should be, or want to be...We are always looking for the 'right' conditions for prayer."¹⁰ Don't let your circumstances distract you. When that happens – Psalm I tells us to go and look at a tree – that's where praying to God begins – by looking at what's in your own backyard. Start where you are and drink in God's word/Torah – let the image focus your will to allow God's word to pull you into attentiveness from distraction.

2. Psalm 2 – from intimidation to adoration

Moving on now to Psalm 2, we find the same word used for "meditate" in Psalm 1:2 reused in Psalm 2:1, only this time the context requires the translation, "plot":

"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?"

Here, the action is not to receive the word of God but to get rid of it. These people don't see the word of God as a love-letter to them, penetrating their hearts with truth, but as a chain restricting their freedom. These people are intimidating. They are impressive – they are both numerous (nations and peoples – verse 1) and prominent (kings and rulers – verse 2); they "gather together against the Lord" (verse 2). Here is intimidation. When we look around us we can become overawed by the secular world of politics and culture, business and science. To counter that intimidation we need a new perspective – we need to see that God is ultimately in control, not the powers that be.

The way we get that new perspective is by seeing what God has done in history - especially through his chosen one, his king, his "Anointed One" or Messiah. *"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy mountain" (verse 6).* Now this would originally have been seen as King David – an ordinary person, the youngest in his family, a simple shepherd who defeated those larger and

⁹ Peterson's term.

¹⁰ *Answering God*, pg. 27f.

more powerful than he. This is a reminder that God works by taking what is weak and ignored by the powers of the world and turning it into a vehicle of his glory to accomplish his plan.

Now, when this Psalm was arranged here, the Davidic kings had long since disappeared – so the use of “Anointed One” now points to a greater king yet to come. In hindsight, we know that this is Jesus, of whom God said at his baptism,

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased” (Luke 3:22)

echoing the words here,

“You are my Son, today I have become your father” (verse 7).

Jesus is the implausible one who came from a local family and whom people scoffed at, (“Can any good come out of Nazareth” – John 6:42), and who was finally crucified as a common criminal. How could he be the chosen one, the Messiah? But he was – although “Great David's greater Son,” he followed the same pattern – exercising God's power through weakness and self-sacrifice. The One whom people despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3) is the One who will rule the nations (verse 9).

Two other details confirm God's ultimate control in spite of present appearances. One describes God laughing at the world's rulers:

“The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (verse 4)

Laughter restores perspective; don't take the world's arrogance and silly posturing too seriously. The other detail is the call to adoration:

“Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way” (verses 11-12)

The rulers need a Ruler; the kings need a King. Their world is much smaller than they think and very precarious. They need a wider perspective and the way to it is through adoring reverence before the One who is more than they are. Those who worship and recognize God for who he is will find that they are blessed as confirmed by the psalm's concluding words: “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (verse 12). The psalm's prophetic voice calls people to move from intimidation to adoration.

CONCLUSION

We have come full circle from where I began. I spoke earlier of how the Bible functions – the story of salvation (Torah) and God's call to us to follow it (Prophecy) are to lead us into a relationship with him which is expressed through prayer (Psalms/Writings). We have seen that Psalms 1 and 2 work as funnels, directing all the Torah (through Psalm 1) and all the Prophets (through Psalm 2) into the way of prayer, that is into the Psalms. Psalm 1 is quiet, gathering our distracted lives into an act of supreme attention. Psalm 2 is vigorous, countering the bullying world that intimidates us into hiding. By means of Psalm 1 we become a tree putting down roots into the soil and streams of Torah; we are collected and recollected before God's word. By means of Psalm 2 we observe Messiah, God personally involved in the world, often incognito, but *here*, and ruling.

- Psalm 1 concentrates our energies into listening attention.
- Psalm 2 expands our vision to take in messianic revelation and worship.

At attention and in adoration, we are ready to enter the Psalter and pray and be blessed – which is what we will do in the weeks to come.¹¹

¹¹ Much of this conclusion is taken directly from *Answering God*, pg. 32.