

## *Learning to Pray the Psalms: an introductory sermon*

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Today we embark on a summer study of the Psalms. During this introductory sermon in our summer series, we'll be looking at the psalter as a whole. Basically, 30,000 foot view of how to read and pray the Psalms. As a guide for our overview of the Psalter, let us reflect together on Psalm 42:8:

*Day by day the Lord pours out his steadfast love upon me, and through the night I sing his songs and pray to God who gives me life.*

This verse points us toward two chief functions of the Psalms. First, The Psalms reveal God's steadfast, outpouring of love upon His people. In other words, the Psalms tell God's story. And second, the Psalms show us how to bring our whole selves into the presence of God in the full spectrum of human experience. The Psalms are the defining biblical example of how to faithfully talk to God in every situation of life. In other words, the Psalms teach us to sing God's song day after day, night after night, in prayerful, worshipful conversation with God, and with God's people.

From despondent sorrow to ecstatic joy, from ravaging guilt to profound gratitude, the Psalms are in touch with the rawest, most elemental issues of human life.<sup>1</sup> A simple way of putting it is that when we take up the language of the psalms, we can be unfiltered before the Lord.

Think about what it would mean for you to be unfiltered, uncensored in God's presence. We put filters on our pictures to make them appear just the right way; we set filters on our phones to show only the news stories that align with what we already believe; we sometimes wrongly filter out truth that needs to be spoken, because we are afraid of how people will reaction. In this filtered world, it is a powerful gift to be able to present ourselves before the Lord unfiltered. The Psalms give us this gift.

In the pages of the Psalter, the community of faith comes to face to face with God and His promise of faithfulness to Israel; His justice for the oppressed; His mercy toward all; and His salvation that brings renewal and shalom. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, the Psalter depicts Israel's struggle with God over her suffering and her hope, her cry of lament, her grappling with injustice, her honest confession, her expression of doubt, and ultimately her gratitude toward God. Interestingly, Israel's journey from faithfulness doubted to faithfulness trusted, from anguish to praise, from doubt to hope, seems to follow the fluid movements of human existence -- of your life, and mine.

Human existence often seems to flow between three locations or experiences: from settled, familiar rhythms into seasons of total disruption; and then from those dark times of dislocation into new rhythms that hold fresh beauty all their own.

Walter Brueggemann, among others, uses the framework of *orientation – disorientation – new orientation* to describe this movement of human experience as it plays out in the Psalms. Imagine a warm, lazy afternoon, like what Patty Griffin describes in her song, *Heavenly Day*. You're outside in a beautiful meadow, playing with your dog. Suddenly the skies darken, the heavens are rent by a mighty storm, and you are caught unprepared in the surprise downpour. The earth turns to mud and you have nowhere to retreat. But, soon the rain begins to lighten, and before too long the sun breaks through the clouds once again. Your rain-soaked skin begins to warm, and the clouds part to reveal a sparkling sky, and a freshly cleansed earth.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship*

That's what Brueggemann is getting at in talking about the movement between orientation to disorientation into new orientation. Now, this three-fold paradigm is not intended to be a straitjacket into which we force every psalm or every experience to fit. Instead, it is a locator or framework to wrap our hearts and minds around the way the psalms provide examples of and language for the spectrum of experience and emotion within the life of faith. In other words, the psalms show us how to bring ourselves before the Lord, uncensored, unfiltered, whether in the heights of celebration or the throes of anger and doubt.

Let's take a closer look at this framework by considering psalms of orientation. Many of our favorite Psalms, like Psalm 8, 103, and 145 focus on the wisdom of God the creator and the goodness of His creation. This is where we imagine familiar sunshine of Patty Griffin's *Heavenly Day*, with chirping birds and green grass. Psalms of orientation reflect the good order and wisdom in which the world was created, and into which it will be re-created. They describe the orderliness and reliability of life as God intended. In the psalms of orientation, God is known to be trustworthy and reliable. Thus, these psalms often include a summons to the community or the individual to join in the hallelujah, the praise of this good and wise God.

Take Psalm 33, for instance. In the opening line, the psalmist summons the community of faith to join in the song of praise to the Lord. Why should the community praise the Lord? Because God's Word, God's actions, and God's character are righteous, just, faithful and loving. (vv4-5) God has created the world to reflect the goodness and order of God's character. Because of this, all people can see why God is worthy of worship.

Some of the songs we sing in worship echo the themes of these psalms of orientation. Consider Isaac Watts' *I Sing The Mighty Power of God* or Hillsong's *100 Billion X*. Both of these songs reflect a posture toward God marked by gratitude for His good ordering of the world. We see God's character through what He has made, and we praise God for it.

About a year ago, Davin and I were enjoying a season like this, a season of figurative sunshine. With a few years of marriage under our belt, we had begun to forge a path of what life as a couple looks like. A year ago, we had recently returned from an epic trip to Scandinavia to explore our family heritages, and to celebrate a babymoon, because I was six months pregnant with our daughter, Ellia. Davin and I were grateful for the steadiness of our life and the ways God was providing. Life felt good, familiar, and somewhat expected.

Maybe this experience of God and of the world resonates with you. If so, as we study the psalms together this summer, allow these psalms of orientation, like Psalm 19, 37 and 104 to give you language to express gratitude to God for His wisdom, goodness, and reliability. The psalms of orientation equip us for faith in seasons of stability, order and familiarity. They remind us that God's goodness is a gift. God bestows His goodness upon us as an outpouring of His love, day after day, night after night. These psalms remind us to receive that gift with prayerful gratitude toward the Giver.

Maybe you right now are settled in an experience like what is described in the Psalms of orientation. Or maybe you're not. As many of us have experienced, it's rare to remain in one season for very long. Perhaps you have found yourself sliding from settled equilibrium into disruption and dislocation. Are you noticing rain clouds on the horizon of your heavenly day? Brueggemann and others describe this upheaval as a movement from orientation to disorientation.

In my own life, the familiar, settled orientation from one year ago slid into disarray just a few short months later, when our daughter Ellia was born. Last week as a sermon illustration, Davin told the story of he and I waiting in the hospital for our daughter to be born. But he didn't tell how disruptive Ellia's arrival was to our lives. Now, before I talk about how hard those first few weeks were, let me first say how much joy and laughter and wonder she brings to our family. And of course, as her very biased parents, we think she's pretty cute too.

Last September, we checked into the hospital to be induced. At the same time, Hurricane Dorian was making landfall on the coast of North Carolina, so it's no wonder our baby got saddled with the nickname Storm-Born. In spite of the parallels with Ellia being born during a hurricane, we had no idea how hard the rain would fall when the storm clouds of disorientation broke upon us after her arrival.

For several weeks last September, I was limping down on the arduous road of recovery from the trauma of childbirth, while learning how to care for a helpless baby who could only stay alive by leeching energy and nourishment from me. This was compounded by the fact that Ellia didn't sleep much, and when she did, it was always at the wrong times! The first few weeks of Ellia's life were for me, the hardest and most disorienting weeks of my own life. Everything was exhausting. Nothing made sense. I was frustrated and emotionally spent much of the time.

Some of you share or are about to share this disorienting experience of having a newborn. Others' lives have been turned upside down by medical diagnoses; or by relationships ripped apart; or by haunting and unexpected loss. Many of us currently find ourselves entrenched in the furrows of disorientation, whether because of personal circumstances, the coronavirus, or the racial tensions in our country. Our nation seems to be splitting at the seams. The shadows seem to deepen around us. The deaths of George Floyd and others have been like a startling, societal thunderclap announcing the arrival of the storm. The world groans under the weight of sorrow, violence and unrest. It is not only George Floyd who couldn't breathe; all of creation seems to be suffocating under the dark cloak of brokenness in which it is wrapped. How often we want to cry out in lament over these things. And yet how infrequently we employ the language of lament in our worship. As Walter Brueggemann notes, why has the American church continued to sing the songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disorientation?<sup>2</sup> Why do we falter or fear to bring the language of negativity into our worship?

I wonder if the American church has unwittingly come to believe that negativity in worship is somehow unfaithful. Do we wrongly think the life of faith only unfolds on sunny days, and not in the midst of the storm? Whether in confessing our sin, or in talking about ways the church has failed, or simply in acknowledging the sorrow carried by so many, I wonder if the American church shies away from confession and lament because we fear that it reveals a lack of trust in God. Or maybe it just feels too unsafe to sit in our own darkness.

Yet, the poets of the psalter make clear that it is not a lack of faith, but rather a bold act of faith to cry out to God in distress. It is the most faithful thing we can do, in seasons of disorientation, to trust God to lead us into consuming darkness as the necessary path to new life. Consider Psalm 13, for instance. If we follow the model of the psalmist, nothing is out of bounds in our conversation with God. We don't need to put on a filter to blur out our blemishes. We don't need to brighten up the shadows in order for God to see us. We learn in the Psalms, and indeed in all of Scripture, that it is precisely in these moments of disorientation, in these deathly places described in some of the psalms, that new life from God breaks upon us, like sunshine breaking through the clouds.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*.

In our sermon series, we will be exploring some of these psalms of disorientation. As we consider the psalmists' descriptions of life in the storm, I encourage you to take heed of one of the most oft-repeated phrases in Scripture: *don't be afraid!* Don't be afraid to raise your voice with the psalmists in bitterness, agony and even anger. Don't be afraid to identify with the psalmists in their pleas, petitions and complaints brought before the Lord. Don't be afraid to join your voice in the psalter's mournful song, especially right now as you consider the plight of our black and brown brothers and sisters. After all, a common theme in the psalms is the unjust treatment of the oppressed, and the anger of God that burns against this oppression. What better way to call for justice and to stand against racism than to allow our words and voices to be shaped by the language of the psalms? Day by day, as God's love is poured out upon us, even when we can't see or feel or believe in it, the psalms of disorientation teach us to sing God's song even in the anguish and isolation of darkest night.

On occasion, the psalmist is left "in the pit", so to speak, the tears of lament still wet on his cheeks. But there is a more common occurrence that unfolds in the psalms of lament. Disorientation gives way to a new orientation. The heavy clouds scatter to reveal a freshly watered earth, like a garden after a storm bursting with new growth. The Psalms of new orientation, including Psalm 30, 40, 103, and 116, regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life, to unexpected deliverance, to the reversal of circumstances. The psalmist and the community of faith are often surprised by grace, when new possibilities burst onto the scene, wrought only by the power and goodness of God. This should not surprise us, for the God of new orientation in the psalms is the God of the eighth day, the day of re-creation, when all the world was infused with the new and abundant life of the resurrected Jesus.

Let's consider Psalm 40 as an example of new orientation. The speaker articulates his patience in waiting on the Lord in a time of distress, and how God indeed delivered him from it. In response to God's action, the speaker reaffirms his posture of worship toward God in praise and gratitude for this deliverance. Because of the psalmist's witness, many people will see the Lord's faithfulness, and will thus put their trust in Him.

In the early days after Ellia's birth, I felt trapped in a season of disorientation. I wondered if I would ever see an end to the sleeplessness, exhaustion, physical pain, and the wearisome pattern of feeding her what felt like infinity times each day. But sure enough, slowly, slowly, our rhythms started to change. A new orientation began to take shape for our family. Something as seemingly-simple as sleep made a world of difference. Ellia began to sleep better, so we began to sleep better. I felt like a new being was emerging from the exhausted shell of a human I had been in those early weeks. I began to feel more alive as Ellia's parent – not just attentive to the essential needs, but delighting in those earliest aspects of her personality that began to develop: her first smiles, her hilarious, giant inhales that signal her laughter, her cooing and giggling. You see, the storm of disorientation was beginning to pass, and signs of newness, joy and vitality were breaking through. Don't get me wrong. Not every day was or is marked by energy, vigor and laughter. Being a parent is hard! But the dizzying storm of disorientation seems to have passed, at least for now. And every night as I rock Ellia to sleep I give thanks to God for the new family rhythms He has provided for us, for the precious gift of life He has given to Ellia, and for entrusting her to Davin and me as her stewards.

As we saw in Psalm 40, the psalms of new orientation express some of these same things: signs of new life and deliverance, wonder at the gifts of grace that have emerged, and gratitude to God for the redemption and renewal He has granted. The psalms of new orientation give us the language of faith in season marked by fresh rhythms and unexpected beauty. Day by day, night after night as God pours out his love upon us, the psalms of new orientation teach us to sing God's song of re-creation and redemption. The famous hymn writer John Newton gives us a helpful picture of what this new orientation in the life of faith can look like: *I once was lost by now I'm found; was blind, but now I see.*

As you can see, the psalms give us language for the very things you and I are grappling with and experiencing today – the good, the bad, the ugly, and the surprising. The Psalms are so important because they give you and me a window through which we see examples of how to talk to God in every situation.

But the Psalms don't only matter in a personal, individual way. They also matter in a corporate, communal way. I can hardly think a more pressing moment to be reminded of the power of the Psalms. The psalms give us voice to lament the injustice and brokenness around us and within us – especially, in this moment as we lament the racism experienced by the black and brown community who have long suffered under the weight of an oppressive system that puts them at a disadvantage.

The Psalms give us language for interacting with God in the full spectrum of life, even, especially, for such a time as this. And so I encourage you, I challenge you, to read the psalms every during this 12-week sermon series. There are 150 psalms in the psalter. That means if you read 2 psalms a day, which will only take about 10 minutes of your time, you will have read through the entire book by the time we start our next sermon series. If you want a reading buddy, please send me an email! I'll be glad to be a partner for prayer and dialogue as we read the psalms together this summer. Start with Psalm 1. Start today! As you progress through the psalter, pay attention to which psalms resonate with you, and why. Pay attention to which psalms make you uncomfortable, and why.

And don't just read the psalms. Pray them. Allow the language of the psalms to shape your conversation with God, and with the community of faith. Before you take to social media or to the streets, before you discourse or debate, let the Psalms provide you with the language of prayer, the language of worship, the example of bringing yourself before the Lord, unfiltered, uncensored. And don't just leave it there; don't just talk to God; allow yourself to *listen* to Him, to learn from Him, to become like Him. Like a compass pointing north, the Psalms point us toward God's faithfulness, love, justice, compassion and mercy. Allow yourself to be transformed into the image of this faithful, loving, just, compassionate, merciful God as you meet with Him in prayer.

In these days of upheaval, piercing questions, and raw grappling with the injustice, pain, and violence punctuating our nation, the Church must rise in witness to the God who reigns sovereign over it all. We must pick up the refrain of the Redeemer who subjected Himself to injustice in order to right all of our wrongs. The Church must sing God's stirring song of creation to new creation. It is an anthem of shalom and restoration, not just for individual souls, but for all the earth. It resounds with the goodness for which this world was made, and yet bows low with the anguished drones of lament; it echoes the cry of the oppressed, and finally lilts with the soaring melodies of reconciliation and re-creation. The song of the Psalter must be on each of our lips, day after day, night after night, as God pours out His love upon us. We must sing this song for the world to hear. Let us echo the anthem of the psalter, singing the salvation song of the God who gives us life. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. Let's pray.

*Oh God of love, of justice, mercy, and salvation, God of the Psalms, God who give us life, as you pour out your steadfast love upon us each day, may we be strengthened in Christ by the power of Your Spirit to receive that love. And in response, may we find on our lips the language of faith to talk to you any situation, in order to be shaped into your image of love, justice, mercy and compassion. Amen.*