

Sermon Series on the Book of Psalms

Book of Psalms 1: Songs of Praise

Psalm 145

6 April 2008

The psalms are probably one of the least-preached-on books of the Bible. At any rate, I've never preached on the book before. Theoretically there is an incentive to preach the psalms. The lectionary assigns four scripture readings for each Sunday in a three-year cycle, and one of those four is a psalm. They say if you focus on just one of those readings each week, you should have sermon topics to last twelve years, but I've never quite bought in to that. Can you imagine three years of preaching on the psalms? I'm not up to such a task, I can tell you that! Three years would equal 156 psalms, even though there are only 150. But it turns out that not all psalms appear in the lectionary. Some get repeated more than once, like the ever-popular 23rd, but others are skipped altogether, like the 109th – and you'll find out why next week.

The Book of Psalms is very well-loved, enough to be the only Old Testament book included with those slim New Testament editions. Yet I imagine even fans of the psalms have seldom read all 150. Certain ones really lodge in our brains and in the popular imagine. For example, I was told in seminary *never* to conduct a funeral without reading the 23rd Psalm, preferably the King James Version. But others are almost as well known: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence does my help come?" (121). Odds are, that sounds familiar to you. Or how about, "The fool in his heart says there is no God." (53) "As the hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God." (42) "How pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity." (133) "Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever." (many) "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." (137) That one is a gospel song and a beautiful opera chorus by Verdi. "I waited patiently for the Lord, he inclined and heard my cry," set to music by the contemporary psalmists, *U2*. The psalms may not be preached on often, but they are frequently set to music!

And they are songs. They often contain musical instructions. Our pilgrim ancestors believed that psalms were the only acceptable songs to sing, and they evened out the meter and set them to standard tunes. All the hymns we are singing in today's service are based on psalms.

Music speaks to us at a primal level. In fact, scientists of the human brain are beginning to believe that music predates speech in our development, and certainly that we could not talk if we couldn't sing – whether or not we can actually carry a tune. And so we are grateful that the psalm proclaims, "Make a joyful *noise* unto the Lord!" Songs use poetic, evocative language, and the tunes! The tunes add a whole other layer of meaning that shoots straight to our hearts. Teenagers may not be able to discuss their inner lives with adults, but ask them about the music on their *iPods* or their favorite songs, and you'll gain an insight into what makes them tick. I've sung hymns to people on their deathbeds, when they are well past speech, but it's amazing how often they will tap in time, their lips moving silently – sometimes even one last tune will rise from their throats. We would be less than human without our songs. We would be less than Christian without the psalms.

But it still doesn't make it easy to preach on them! I wanted to challenge myself, though, so here I am. And I will be relying heavily on Walter Brueggemann's commentary, "The Message of the Psalms." Even he doesn't go through each and every psalm, though! With good reason. They do tend to repeat themselves. In fact, categorizing and grouping the psalms has been the favorite approach of Bible scholars. That can be overdone, as with any attempt to sort and categorize types of music, for example, but it is helpful to know that there's a certain theme or pattern to the psalms taken as a whole.

Brueggemann says it very unpoetically as: orientation, disorientation, reorientation. Little children will recognize this pattern in terms of “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” (Can you tell I spend too much time hanging out with a toddler?) But we can also express it in Biblical terms. As the nation of Israel: establishment, exile, and restoration. Of the Exodus: blessing, slavery, liberation. Of Jesus: mission, crucifixion, resurrection. Of the Bible as a whole: grace, fall, redemption. This same theme is echoed in the psalms – in the book as a whole, but in a subtle way, it is present in almost every individual psalm as well, and we’ll be exploring that three-fold theme the next couple of Sundays.

But all this “lah-dee-dah” isn’t just academic. It is a very insightful way of looking at our own spirituality. You see, most of our favorite psalms are the positive, hopeful ones like the 23rd. The 137th about the waters of Babylon is one of the few negative psalms that gets much airtime, and even with that one, the last few verses usually get left out, about “happy are they who take your little ones and dash their heads against the rocks.” Compared to that, “the Lord is my shepherd” is so much nicer! More peaceful. And as people of faith, we’re *supposed* to be like happy sheep safely grazing, right? We’re not supposed to have the negative feelings of psalm 137 or 109.

But it is not natural to always be in a state of bliss and contentment. Life deals us harsh blows. Sometimes it is unfair. Sometimes it is even evil. We all have doubts, crises of faith, moments of dire and hateful feelings. We need to acknowledge that, so it is good that the psalms give voice to the negative side of faith and show how we can move on from that. But we’ll hear more on that next week. For now, let’s talk about the starting point of our theme, that state of grace, of blessing, of peace and well-being. To illustrate, Brueggemann chose the 145th psalm as the ultimate example.

I will extol thee, my God and King,
and bless thy name for ever and ever.
Every day I will bless thee,
and praise thy name for ever and ever.
Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.

The psalm opens, appropriately enough, with praise. But notice that, for a poem, it doesn’t rhyme. It doesn’t even have a regular meter, like ~/~/~/~/~. The poetry of the psalms is not based on rhyme or meter, but rather on repetitions and echoes, often put together as couplets. So the second verse is a synonym for the first verse. The third verse stands alone, but it repeats the word “great” three times. To we moderns who believe so much in editing, this seems redundant, but these echoes serve to emphasize a point, which is particularly useful in oral tradition where people are listening and not reading. By the way, this quality of the psalms makes them very easy to translate into rap!

Another poetic technique found in this psalm is that it is an acrostic. The first letter of each verse comes from the Hebrew alphabet, so verse one in Hebrew begins with an “A”, verse two with a “B”, verse three with a “G,” which is the third letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Any psalm with 22 verses is written that way. (The 145th psalm only has 21 verses due to a typo: two verses were accidentally combined.) Unfortunately, this acrostic technique doesn’t translate very well into other languages. Now, it’s a neat little trick, but why do it that way? In fact, there is a message in the method. As we would say in English, God is A to Z. In Greek – God encompasses Alpha to Omega. In Hebrew, God contains aleph to tav. Everything is contained in God, all letters, all language, everything that language can name. This is especially appropriate when you consider that God created the world by speaking. This alphabet acrostic creates an inherent structure and order to the psalm, and the message is that God has created structure and order in the universe. Nothing is random. Everything has a place and a purpose, and nothing is left out.

As another example of this kind of poetic structure, we find that the first and the last verses of this psalm echo each other: “I will extol thee, my God and King, and bless thy name for ever and ever....My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.” The universe that this psalm represents begins and ends with the praise of God, praise that will repeat for ever and ever. Just as God never changes or ends, so it is with the praise of God, and the first seven verses talk about who will praise God and how.

Verses eight and nine speak about God’s qualities, and this should sound very familiar to you. These qualities are named in many ways throughout the Bible. It is a very ancient formula or praise song: “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” Here we see that it is not simply that God created this terrific world. It is equally important to know that God is love, that God cares for everyone and everything in all of creation. This is not a dispassionate or uninvolved God. This is not an angry or apathetic God. Ancient mythologies abounded with those kinds of gods. But the God of the psalms abounds in steadfast love. The psalm expresses faith not only in the order of the universe, but that it is a benevolent order. Brueggemann says that the issue here is one of trust. We know that God is loving and faithful because we have experienced the bounty and blessing of this life. This isn’t a prosperity gospel which says if you are good, then God will reward you with riches. Rather, it’s a reflection of that most basic of human relationships: that between parent and child. Students of child development have said that the most essential thing a newborn child needs to learn from its caregiver is trust. Not the emotions of love and affection, but a trust that the caregiver will meet the child’s basic needs for food and shelter and diaper changes. When those needs are met, then trust is established and love flows, even when times are hard. When those needs are not met, then the child does not learn trust, and will wither away and die. The psalmist here speaks of God’s faithfulness as one whose needs have been met by God. There is a trust that God will be with us, even through difficult times, because God’s steadfast love endures forever.

In the second half of the thirteenth verse (which is actually the fourteenth letter), the psalm shifts a bit to say that while God cares for all of creation, God cares especially for the needy. “The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to thee...The LORD is near to all who call upon him.” All are included – and indeed, the word “all” appears a number of times in this section – but special note is made of those who are most in need. Again, this is no disinterested God, but a God who actively intercedes on behalf of those who most need him.

And in all of this beautiful, loving psalm, there is one half of one verse that interjects a negative note. Verse 19 says, “The LORD preserves all who love him; but all the wicked he will destroy.” The language may be extreme, but it serves as a reminder that creation is not just about all the lovely things God gives us. Rather, we owe God something back. We owe God our obedience. God is faithful to us, therefore we have an obligation to God. The order of the universe includes a place for our faithful response to God.

Aside from that one half-verse, this psalm is about how “God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.” It is a song of establishment, of a well-ordered universe. A psalm of blessing, extolling all of God’s gifts. It sets out the basic truths of our faith, that God is gracious and merciful, and God’s steadfast love endures forever. It is almost childlike in its trust in God, and that is not a bad thing. Nothing in this psalm questions these basic truths. Nothing challenges this view of the universe, of God, and of our role in relation to both. If this psalm were all we had, then beautiful as it is, it would be rather shallow. But it is not all we have. It is merely and importantly the starting place. If we are able to sing the song of this psalm, then we will be better prepared to face the negativity of the psalms we will sing next week. Until then, “My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.” Amen.

