

Engaging with the Psalms in Worship

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“Stories are fundamentally oral and communal in nature. They are meant to be told, dramatised, sung, danced, and expressed through visual arts... In an oral culture.., learning involves all the senses and the imagination as well. In an oral culture truth is poetic, and storytelling is understood as the doorway into the realm of the sacred.. The biblical story becomes a sacred story that is to be imagined and participated in, not studied objectively...

The church is a story-formed community... Baptism is our adoption into a story, God’s re-creative story, which is recorded in the community’s story book (the Holy Scriptures), incarnate in the community’s life, and made present through it’s sacramental rituals, especially the Holy Eucharist. Each of us also has a story. To each community Eucharist we bring our stories and re-enact God’s story so that God’s story and our stories may be made one story. In the context of our liturgies we are initiated into God’s story and we appropriate its significance for our lives so that it might influence our common life day by day... Our most important and fundamental task as Christians is to learn God’s story.”

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, Seabury Press, Minneapolis, 1984.

The Psalms

And, among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given.

The Letter of Athanasius, Our Holy Father, Archbishop of Alexandria, to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms

Unlike many parts of the Bible, the Psalms are not the voice of God addressing us, but the voice of us addressing God. They reflect the depth and breadth of our human experience.

In Hebrew, the Psalms are known as the “Book of Praises”. It seems to be divided into five ‘books’ by doxologies – 41:13, 72:18-19, 89:52, 106:48 and 150:6. There are Psalms attributed to David, Asaph and the Korahites, with another section (42-83) called the Elohites by biblical scholars because of the frequent use of the name *elohim* for god.

A range of types of Psalms can be identified [Source: Metzger and Coogan, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*.]

Hymns or songs of praise – Ps 46, 47, 48, 74, 78, 84, 87, 93, 95-99, 103, 104, 114, 117, 122

In particular these describe God’s work in Creation, God’s intervention in history, and God as king.

Thanksgiving Psalms – 18, 30, 40, 66, 100, 106, 107, 116, 118

These are prayers delivered after deliverance or distress.

Laments – 6, 7, 13, 22, 38, 41, 42, 43, 51, 69, 88.

This is the most frequent kind of Psalm, with about 40 psalms of this type. The psalm is a cry for help on behalf of either an individual or at times a group. The cause of the cry varies – sin, sickness, death, false accusation, persecution by enemies. The writers appeal to God's steadfast love, and offers loyalty and trust as incentive for God to act. In most cases it is acknowledged that God has heard the plea, but there is no immediate respite or change of mood.

Royal Psalms – 2, 18, 20, 21, 28, 45, 61, 63, 72, 101, 110, 144

Some psalms reflect royal occasions such as a coronation or anniversary, a thanksgiving, military activity or a wedding. They would have referred to the reigning king at the time, however since the fall of the Jewish monarchy, they would have held out a messianic hope.

Wisdom Psalms – 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 90

This is a debatable classification of Psalms, however one view is that these Psalms reflect characteristics of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament (eg. Proverbs)

Liturgies – 14, 23, 50, 75, 85, 136

While most of the Psalms can be considered as being 'for worship', some in particular have the character of a formal liturgy, particularly 'call and response' or a pronouncement (oracle).

Walter Brueggemann talked about the following kinds of Psalms:

- **Psalms of orientation:** all is right with the world
- **Psalms of disorientation:** lament
- **Psalms of new orientation:** new beginnings

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*

The Psalms in Worship Today

Why should we read, speak, sing and show the Psalms regularly in worship?

- The Psalms tell us about God and Creation
- The Psalms tell us about God's story of salvation
- The Psalms reflect our human experience – our hopes, our fears
- The Psalms express our relationship with God – our praise, our confession, our concerns
- The Psalms turn us toward a world who shares our humanity

Their language forms us to speak our own prayers.

Their story forms us to trust and turn to God.

Their breadth forms us to understand who God is and who we are.

Their depth forms us to be still, to know and at times to not know.

Their speaking forms us as a community of prayer.

Expressing the Psalms in Worship

How do we allow the Scriptures to 'come alive' in worship – to engage us, draw us in, open up God's story of salvation, bring it to the 'here and now', lead us to a deep encounter with the Living Word, Jesus Christ?

For me, the main thing is to have some sense of what the Psalm is about, and to tap into the deep sense of the Psalm. In the first instance, this would be about the reader have spent time with the Psalm and reading it clearly with a sense of feeling and timing. (Psalm 139 is a good practice Psalm for this.)

1. Rehearse the reading. Three times. Aloud. Record yourself and listen.
2. Practice in the church and ask someone to sit in the back row and listen.
3. Introduce the reading with some explanation.
4. Read slowly.
5. Pause between phrases to allow people to reflect on the words.
6. Invite people to read the Psalm silently to themselves.
7. Read the psalm responsively.
8. Invite people to repeat a key word or phrase aloud.
9. Add a few gestures as you read the Psalm.
10. Invite the congregation to do a simple hand movement as the Psalm is read.
11. Prepare a reading with several voices.
12. Have a congregational sung response to each paragraph or stanza.
13. Have the Psalm sung by a group or soloist.
14. Sing the Psalm.
15. Give people a symbol to hold as the Psalm is read.
16. Display one or more images while the Psalm is read.
17. Invite people to read the Psalm themselves and find a phrase or word that stands out and to contemplate it in silence.
18. Give each person a paint colour card. Ask them to compare colours with others and choose a card that represents the Psalm.
19. Cut the Psalm into phrases and hand them out to different people. Invite them to read aloud in any order.
20. Cut the Psalm into phrases and hand them out. Read the Psalm. Invite people to reflect on the phrase they have been given.
21. Read or sing the Psalm as a response to the Word rather than at the start of the service.
22. Use a different Bible translation than you would usually use.
23. Read the Psalm dramatically using some simple props – a chair, a shawl, a cushion for kneeling.
24. Give people something they can taste during the Psalm. eg. some salt for a dry desert (Psalm 63)
25. Spread parts of the Psalm throughout the whole service.
26. Invite a person to read the Psalm in their first language while the congregation reads along in their Bibles.
27. Make sure that everyone has a Bible in hand so they learn to find where the text is in the Scriptures.
28. Give people a copy of the Psalm to take home and pray during the week.
29. Use the same Psalm over two to four weeks. People will find different things in it each time they hear it.
30. Invite people to memorise a verse of two. Say the verse/s aloud together in worship over several weeks.

A cry of anguish and a song of praise

Psalm 22.1-31

Lonely person My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
 I have cried desperately for help,
 but still it does not come.
 During the day I call to you, my God,
 but you do not answer;
 I call at night,
 but get no rest.

Singer You are enthroned as the Holy One,
 the one whom Israel praises.
 Our ancestors put their trust in you;
 they trusted you, and you saved them.
 They called to you and escaped from danger;
 they trusted you and were not disappointed.

Despised person But I am no longer a man; I am a worm,
 despised and scorned by everyone!
 All who see me jeer at me;
 they stick out their tongues and shake their heads.
 They say:

Accuser 1 You relied on the Lord.
 Why doesn't he save you?

Accuser 2 If the Lord likes you,
 why doesn't he help you?

Lonely person It was you who brought me safely through birth,
 and when I was a baby, you kept me safe.
 I have relied on you since the day I was born,
 and you have always been my God.
 Do not stay away from me!
 Trouble is near,
 and there is no one to help.

Despised person Many enemies surround me like bulls;
 they are all round me,
 like fierce bulls from the land of Bashan.
 They open their mouths like lions,
 roaring and tearing at me.

Lonely person My strength is gone,
 gone like water spilt on the ground.
 All my bones are out of joint;
 my heart is like melted wax.
 My throat is as dry as dust,
 and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.
 You have left me for dead in the dust.

**Spirit:
 Amen.**

**Spirit:
 r. Amen.**

- Despised person** A gang of evil men is round me;
like a pack of dogs they close in on me;
they tear at my hands and feet.
All my bones can be seen.
My enemies look at me and stare.
They gamble for my clothes
and divide them among themselves.
- Lonely person** O Lord, don't stay away from me!
Come quickly to my rescue!
Save me from the sword;
save my life from these dogs.
Rescue me from these lions;
I am helpless before these wild bulls.
- Lonely person** I will tell my people what you have done;
I will praise you in their assembly:
- Singer** Praise him, you servants of the Lord!
Honour him, you descendants of Jacob!
Worship him, you people of Israel!
He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering;
he does not turn away from them,
but answers when they call for help.
- Lonely person** In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done;
in the presence of those who worship you
I will offer the sacrifices I promised.
- Despised person** The poor will eat as much as they want;
those who come to the Lord will praise him.
May they prosper for ever!
- Lonely person** All nations will remember the Lord.
From every part of the world they will turn to him;
all races will worship him.
The Lord is king,
and he rules the nations.
- Despised person** All proud men will bow down to him;
all mortal men will bow down before him.
- Lonely person** Future generations will serve him;
men will speak of the Lord to the coming generation.
People not yet born will be told:
- Cast** The Lord saved his people.

Cast [This is] the word of the Lord. **All Thanks be to God.** OR **All Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:**
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.

Cast: **Lonely person, Singer, Despised person, Accuser 1, Accuser 2** (can be the same as Accuser 1).

- Worshipper 2** To God, my defender, I say:
Worshipper 1 Why have you forgotten me?
 Why must I go on suffering
 from the cruelty of my enemies?
Worshipper 2 I am crushed by their insults,
 as they keep on asking me:
Enemies Where is your God?
Worshipper 1 Why am I so sad?
Worshipper 2 Why am I so troubled?
Worshippers I will put my hope in God,
 1 and 2 and once again I will praise him,
 my saviour and my God.

Cast [This is] the word of the Lord. **All** **Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:**
All Thanks be to God. **OR** as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.

Cast: **Worshipper 1, Enemies** (two or more), **Worshipper 2**.

God is with us

Psalm 46.1-11

- Psalmist** God is our refuge and strength,
 an ever present help in trouble.
Worshipper 1 Therefore we will not fear:
Worshipper 2 Though the earth give way
 and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea—
Worshipper 3 Though its waters roar and foam
 and the mountains quake with their surging.
Psalmist There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy place where the Most High dwells.
 God is within her, she will not fall;
 God will help her at break of day.
 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
 he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
Worshipper 1 The Lord Almighty is with us.
Worshippers The God of Jacob is our fortress.
 2 and 3
Psalmist Come and see the works of the Lord,
 the desolations he has brought on the earth.
 He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;
 he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
 he burns the shields with fire.
The Lord Be still, and know that I am God;
 I will be exalted among the nations,
 I will be exalted in the earth.

Psalmist

The Lord Almighty is with us.

Worshippers

1-3

The God of Jacob is our fortress.

Cast [This is] the word of the Lord. **All** **Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:**
All **Thanks be to God.** OR **as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.**

Cast: **Psalmist, Worshipper 1** (can be the same as Psalmist), **Worshipper 2, Worshipper 3, The Lord** (preferably unseen).

God is with us

From Psalm 46.1-11 (LIT)

Leader

God is our refuge and strength:

All

an ever-present help in trouble.

Leader

Therefore we will not fear:

All (group 1)

though the earth should shake,

All (group 2)

though the mountains fall into the sea,

All (group 1)

though the waters surge and foam,

All (group 2)

though the mountains shake and roar.

All

The Lord Almighty is with us:

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Leader

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God: the holy place where the Most High dwells.

All (group 1)

God is within her, she will not fall:

All (group 2)

God will help her at break of day.

Leader

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall:

All

God lifts his voice—the earth melts away.

All (group 1)

The Lord Almighty is with us:

All (group 2)

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Leader

Come and see what God has done:

All

his devastation on the earth!

Leader

He stops the wars throughout the world:

All (group 1)

he breaks the bow and shatters the spear—

All (group 2)

he sets the shield on fire.

Voice of God

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted over the nations, I will be exalted over the earth.

All

The Lord Almighty is with us:

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

All

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.

Cast: **Leader, All** (group 1—two or more persons/part of congregation), **All** (group 2—two or more persons/part of congregation), **Voice of God.**