

Sing Psalms

Rev. John Allen

Open the Bible right to the center and you will find the book of Psalms.

A collection of songs, something like the hymnal of ancient Israel.

I have always thought it was wonderful that if you simply place a Bible in your lap and let it fall open, it opens right on the book of Psalms. Almost as if the Spirit placed the words we most need in the place easiest to find.

Now you may have picked up on this already, but during Lent this year we are going to be turning our attention to the Psalms.

As we have done already this morning, we will sing a Psalm each week between now and Easter.

And these beautiful posters around the outside of the Sanctuary. We will be coloring one in each week. Bringing each one to life, and bringing the beauty and power of these words into our space, little by little, until by Easter the room is flush with color.

The kids and youth will be working on them, and we are going to have them at coffee hour as well so that all of us can take part in creating these works of community art.

You should join in, make your mark, add a bit of yourself to the place in which we gather to worship God.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, which Doug read part of for us this morning, Paul is making a list of all the things he thinks that the fledgling Christian community should do to ensure a faithful life.

There are plenty of lofty ideals we would expect.

Be loving, kind, and compassionate.

Live in peace. Forgive one another.

Let God's word live in your heart.

And then he ends with a much more practical action item: Sing Psalms.

Important enough that it makes Paul's overview of what the Christian church should do. Sing the Psalms.

And so we will, we will sing the Psalms, joining our voices to that ancient chorus stretching across millennia.

At first the words may sound strange. Unlike other parts of the Bible the Psalms do not tell a story, nor do they offer moral teachings or wisdom. Instead they are the words of people lifted up to God. Prayers and please, longings, despair, pain, hope, faith, and joy.

The Psalms give us beloved lines of praise and thanksgiving like:

“This is the day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it”

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”

“For as high as the heavens are above the Earth, so great is God’s love”

“God is slow to anger and abounding in Love.”

“The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?”

And, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

But the Psalms speak also out of the depths of human pain offering lines like:

“God, why are you so far away?”

“I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish.”

“My God, why have you forsaken me?”

The early reformer John Calvin called the Book of Psalms “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”

That is that in reading the Psalms we find words given to express every part of our soul, our fears, our trust, our hope, our despair, all of it.

In the Psalms the Bible preserves not just the most pious things people might say to God, but also words of anger directed toward God. Words that express a feeling of abandonment. Words that long for vengeance against enemies, words that wonder if God is with us after all.

The 20th Century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was killed in a Nazi concentration camp wrote his very last book from his cell about the Psalms. In that thin volume he expressed gratitude for the words of the Psalms.

And given his imprisonment, he was not drawn particularly to the beautiful and floating language of serene and joyous faith, but rather he found great comfort in the verses which, he said, “do not deceive us with pious words.” That is, they tell the truth. Even when the truth is that God feels far away, and that the world around is filled with suffering.

And so from his cell he would read words like these from Psalm 13:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

Where much of the Bible is God's word to us.

The Psalms are our words to God.

This is the great gift in the Psalms. They show us that no feeling is the end of faith. No suffering, no despair, no feeling of abandonment, no hopelessness, need be the end of our hope in God.

And I don't know about you, but I need that this week.

I need Psalms when I hear that another young man has carried a military-style assault rifle into school to massacre his classmates and teachers.

I need to know that the pain in my heart is not the end of faith.

I need to Psalms when I find our nation so bereft of moral imagination that we are seriously considering arming school teachers as our best option to protect our children.

I need to know that my hopelessness is not the end of God's hope.

I need the Psalms as a vehicle for my exacerbated anger.

I need words that don't deceive with the sweet sounding piety of gentle prayers.

"How long, Lord? Have you forgotten us?"

"How long will violence triumph?"

"How long will our hope be cut off?"

The Psalms hold it all. They give voice to every part of our souls.

They give us the most beautiful language imaginable to sing God's praises and thank God for the beauty of life.

They give us the assurance that even the hardest things we feel today, faithful people have felt these things all along, and no experience, no matter how unimaginably tragic, can mark the end of faith.

Which makes suddenly clear why singing Psalms made Paul's list of the top 5 things for a church to do.

Because singing the Psalms gives us our vocabulary for prayer. It teaches us that God can hold all that we bring before God in prayer.

Singing Psalms reminds us that faith is not just for the moments we are feeling good. Rather faith is what holds us when we have gotten beyond the end of our rope. It is the net that catches us when we lose

our grip. It is the arms into which we fall when nothing else is able to hold us up.

This will be our shared practice during the season of Lent as a community. We will deepen our faith by engaging with the Psalms. Discovering the treasure that lies in these words. Expanding our vocabulary for prayer. And reminding ourselves that God's love for us can hold anything at all.

So let's follow Paul's advice:

Let's be loving, kind, and compassionate.

Let's live in peace. Forgive one another.

Let's set God's word to live in our hearts.

And let's sing Psalms.

