

Praying ✻ the Psalms

*Engaging Scripture
and the Life of the Spirit*

Second Edition

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Letting Experience Touch the Psalter

✻ WE PRAY TOGETHER REGULARLY “FOR ALL sorts and conditions of men” (and women), as the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it.¹ We know all about those sorts and conditions, for we are among and like all those others. When we pray for all those others, we pray for ourselves along with them. We are able to pray for the others precisely because we share a “common lot.” They are like us and we are like them in decisive ways. Thus one way of knowing about “all sorts and conditions of men” and women is to be attentive to what is happening in our own lives.

A second way in which we know about those others is to be attentive to what is written—in the daily newspaper as well as in great literature. The daily newspaper is a summary and chronicle of what goes on among us, the healings and betrayals, the reality of power sought and gained, of brokenness and gifts and victories. All of that belongs to these “sorts and conditions” for whom we pray.

In addition to our own experience and the testimonies of print, the Psalms of the Old Testament offer a third presentation of how it is with all sorts and conditions of men and women. The Psalms, with a few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own

1. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 355.

common humanity—gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for in those deeply human dimensions the same issues and possibilities persist. And so when we turn to the Psalms it means we enter into the midst of that voice of humanity and decide to take our stand with that voice. We are prepared to speak among them and with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage. We add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all.

In order to pray the Psalms, our work (liturgy is indeed work) is to let our voices and minds and hearts run back and forth in regular and speedy interplay between the stylized and sometimes too familiar words of Scripture and our experience which we sense with poignancy. And when we do, we shall find that the words of Scripture bring power, shape, and authority to what we know about ourselves. Conversely, our experience will bring to the words of Scripture a vitality and immediacy that must always be reasserted within the Psalter.

Beyond Our Time of Equilibrium

Before turning to the Psalms, let us consider what are those “sorts and conditions” which are true of all of us and which come to speech in the Psalms. I suggest, in a simple schematic fashion, that our life of faith consists in moving with God in terms of:

- (a) being securely oriented;
- (b) being painfully disoriented; and
- (c) being surprisingly reoriented.

This general way of speaking can apply to our self-acceptance, our relations to significant others, our participation in public issues. It can permit us to speak of “passages,” the life-cycle, stages of growth, and identity crises. It can permit us to be honest about what is happening to us. Most of all, it may provide us a way to think about the Psalms in relation to our common human experience, for each of God’s children is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

The first situation in this scheme, that of being securely oriented, is a situation of equilibrium. While we all yearn for it, it is not very interesting and it does not produce great prayer or powerful song. It consists in being well-settled, knowing that life makes sense and God is well-placed in heaven, presiding but not bothering. This is the mood of much of the middle-class Church. In terms of the Bible, this attitude of equilibrium and safe orientation is best reflected in the teaching of the ancient book of Proverbs which affirms that life is equitable, symmetrical, and well-proportioned. This mood of humanness is minimal in the Psalms but may be reflected in Psalm 37, which is mostly a collection of sayings that could as well be placed in Proverbs. And the same is more eloquently reflected in such a marvelous statement as Psalm 145, which trusts everything to God. Such Psalms reflect confident well-being.² In order to pray them, we must locate either in our

2. Note that Psalms 37 and 145 are both alphabetic acrostic poems. Each full line (145) or every other line (37) begins with the sequential letters of the Hebrew alphabet—thus reflecting the “orderliness” and “symmetry” of the poems’ contents. See also Psalms 9–10; 25; 34; 111; 112; 119; Proverbs 31:10–31; Lamentations 1–4; Nahum 1; and Sirach 51:13–30; as well as Psalm 155 and the Apostrophe of Zion from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

lives or in the lives of others situations of such confident, buoyant, "successful" living.

But that is a minor theme in the Psalms and not very provocative. The Psalms mostly do not emerge out of such situations of equilibrium. Rather, people are driven to such poignant prayer and song as are found in the Psalter precisely by experiences of dislocation and relocation. It is experiences of being overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, and surprisingly given life that empower us to pray and sing.

In the Rawness of Life

Recently there has been considerable discussion of those events which drive us to the edge of humanness and make us peculiarly open to the Holy One. This investigation, pertinent to our theme, is undertaken because many persons conclude that the "religious dimension" of their life is void. And so there is an asking about those elements in our life that relate to the "hunger for transcendence." In a variety of ways, it is suggested that the events at the edge of our humanness—the ones that threaten and disrupt our convenient equilibrium—are the events that may fill us with passion and evoke in us eloquence. Thus the Psalms mostly reflect such events of passion and eloquence when we are pressed by experience to address the Holy One.

We have noted the convergence of: (a) our experience, (b) the account of the newspaper, and (c) the Psalms as being articulations of our deep human experience. But we should distinguish the Psalms in one important point as being different. Unlike our own experience and that of the newspaper, it is the Psalms that present "all sorts and conditions of men"

and women addressed to the Holy God. Thus the events at the edge of humanness which are so crucial for us and that are reflected in the Psalms tend to: evoke eloquence, fill us with passion, and turn us to the Holy One. As we enter into the prayer and song of common humanity in the Psalms, it is helpful to be attentive precisely to the simple eloquence, the overriding passion, and the bold ways in which this voice turns to the Holy One.

And what situations drive us to the edge of our humanness? They are situations of extremity for which conventional equilibrium offers no adequate base. Peter Berger refers to these extremities as experiences that are filled with "rumors of angels," that is, hints of some surplus of meaning. He suggests they include experiences of order, play, hope, damnation, and humor.³

Langdon Gilkey speaks of experiences of "contingency" when we become aware of how precarious our life is and aware also of the inexplicable givenness of it.⁴ For him, these dimensions include experiences of givenness, threat, limitedness, value, freedom, and condemnation. Paul Ricoeur refers to "limit-experiences." Following Karl Jaspers, he includes death, suffering, guilt, and hatred; but they may also include "'peak experiences,' especially experiences of creation and joy which are no less extreme than are experiences of catastrophe."⁵ These articulations by Berger, Gilkey, and Ricoeur tell us something important about prayer, especially in the Psalms. Reflect for a moment on the coined phrases of "rumor of angels," "the

3. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*.

4. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind*.

5. Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 34.

whirlwind," "contingency" "limit-experiences." In different ways, all these writers—a sociologist, a theologian, and a philosopher interested in psychology—all of them are pointing to the deep discontinuities in our lives where most of us live, on which we use most of our energies, and about which we are regularly preoccupied.

Thus we follow them in suggesting that it is the experiences of life that lie beyond our conventional copings that make us eloquent and passionate and that drive us to address ourselves to the Holy One. And it is experiences beyond conventional orientations that come to vivid expression in the Psalms. That is what we mean by "all sorts and conditions of men" and women—that we have to do here with the powerful, dangerous, and joyful rawness of human reality. And in the Psalms, we find the voice that dares to speak of these matters with eloquence and passion to the Holy One. Psalms offer speech when life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control.

Anticipating Ricoeur in important ways, Karl Barth wrote:

It is no accident that of all the books of the Old Testament the Psalter has always been found the most relevant. This is not in spite of the fact, but just because of it, that in so many passages it echoes the people of the covenant trembling for its preservation in final extremity before its all-powerful enemies. The Christian community always has good reason to see itself in this people, and to take on its own lips the words of its helpless sighing, the cries which it utters from the depths of its need. It turns to the Psalter, not in spite of the fact, but just because of it, that as the community of Jesus Christ it knows that it is established on the rock (as power-

fully attested by the Psalms themselves), but on the rock which, although it is sure and impregnable in itself, is attacked on all sides, and seems to be of very doubtful security in the eyes of all men and therefore in its own.⁶

Note that the Psalms thus propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much human speech and conduct which is in fact a cover-up. In most arenas where people live, we are expected and required to speak the language of safe orientation and equilibrium, either to find it so or to pretend we find it so. For the normal, conventional functioning of public life, the raw edges of disorientation and reorientation must be denied or suppressed for purposes of public equilibrium. As a result, our speech is dulled and mundane. Our passion has been stilled and is without imagination. And mostly the Holy One is not addressed—not because we dare not, but because God is far away and hardly seems important. This means that the agenda and intention of the Psalms is considerably at odds with the normal speech of most people, the normal speech of a stable, functioning, self-deceptive culture in which everything must be kept running young and smooth.

Against that, the speech of the Psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and dangerous. It announces that life is not like that, that our common experience is not one of well-being and equilibrium, but a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation. Perhaps in our conventional, routinized prayer life (for example, the daily practice of the office) that is one of the reasons the Psalter does not yield its power—be-

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, 671.

cause out of habit or fatigue or numbness, we try to use the Psalms in our equilibrium. And when we do that, we miss the point of the Psalms. Moreover, our own experience may be left untapped and inarticulate and therefore not liberated. Such surface use of the Psalms coincides with the denial of the discontinuities in our own experience. Ernest Becker has written of "the denial of death."⁷ By "the denial of death" Becker refers to the given limit of human reality and the refusal to accept that horizon of mortality. That refusal is evidenced in both the endless attempts to outflank the diminishment of our bodies (diet, exercise, cosmetics) and in the lethal ordering of the body politic in a frantic attempt to maintain control over a life that cannot finally be controlled. But such denial happens not just at the crisis points. It happens daily in the reduction of language to numb conventions.

Thus I suggest that most of the Psalms can only be appropriately prayed by people who are living at the edge of their lives, sensitive to the raw hurts, the primitive passions, and the naïve elations that are at the bottom of our life. For most of us, liturgical or devotional entry into the Psalms requires a real change of pace. It asks us to depart from the closely managed world of public survival, to move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy One.

Complaint as Speeches of Disorientation

So let us consider in turn the experiences of disorientation and reorientation that characterize human life and that are the driving power of the Psalms. If we move from the premise of equilibrium, we may speak of chaos (disorder) and new

7. Becker, *The Denial of Death*.

order. And these are elemental dimensions, both to our experience and to the Psalms. The Psalms, by and large, emerge from and reflect precisely such situations of chaos and new order. And any attempt to take these speech-events of chaos and new order and make them instruments of conventional equilibrium is a travesty. To make the Psalms serve "business as usual" misunderstands the Psalms, even though habitual use of them has tended to do just that.

So first, the reality of chaos, disorder, disorientation. Each of us knows about that in our own life. It may be a visible issue like a marriage failure, the loss of job, a financial reverse, the diagnosis of the doctor. Or it may be nothing more than a cross word, a disappointing letter, a sharp criticism, a minor illness. Or it may be disturbance of a public kind, anxiety over the loss of energy, revulsion at the sickening spectacle of war, the sense that the world is falling apart before our very eyes, the unspeakable horror of a possible nuclear war. It may be the discovery of loneliness or the sense of being rejected and unloved. All—or any—of these is the awareness that life is not whole, that it is not the romantic well-being that we may have been comforted with as children and that is so shamefully and shrewdly reflected in television ads. Indeed the world is a dangerous, frightening place, and I am upset for myself. And when I can move beyond my own fear and grief, I do not need to look far to find the hurt and terror in others, whether these others are my own friends or people I see and hear about in the media.

The Psalter knows that life is dislocated. No cover-up is necessary. The Psalter is a collection over a long period of time of the eloquent, passionate songs and prayers of people who

are at the desperate edge of their lives. The stylized form of such speech is the complaint or supplication psalm, of which there are many examples in the Psalter. The best known is Psalm 22 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). The neatest, simplest example is Psalm 13. The angriest, most hopeless is Psalm 88, which ends in unreserved, unrelieved gloom:

Your anger has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me.
 They surround me like a flood throughout the day;
 from all sides they close in on me.
 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
 my companions are in darkness." (Psalm 88:16-18)

Thus I propose a direct link between the experience of dislocation in which we all share and the complaint psalm of Israel. There are those who know about disorientation but have no speech which can adequately say it. But there are also those (and this is our primary concern here) who face the complaint psalm but do not bring to it the raw disorientation that is all about us and that is the intended agenda of the psalm. It is the work of the one who prays a psalm to be actively engaged in holding this linkage in a conscious, concrete way. For when we do, we discover that this psalm is affected by our experience. And even more surprising, we find that our experience has been dealt with by the psalm.

We must not make these Psalms too "religious" or pious. Most of the complaint psalms are the voice of those who say "We are mad as hell, and we are not going to take it any more," as the character Howard Beal says in the movie *Network*. They are not religious in the sense that they are courteous or polite

or deferential. They are religious only in the sense that they are willing to articulate this chaos to the very face of the Holy One. Thus the complaint psalm, for all its preoccupation with the hard issue at hand, invariably calls God by name and expects a response. At this crucial point, the psalm parts company with our media evidence and most of our experience, for it is disorientation addressed to God. And in that address, something happens to the disorientation.

The Surprising Songs of Newness

The other movement of human life is the surprising move from disorientation to a new orientation that is quite unlike the old status quo. This is not an automatic movement that can be presumed upon or predicted. Nor is it a return to the old form, a return to normalcy as though nothing had happened. It is rather "all things new." And when it happens, it is always a surprise, always a gift of graciousness, and always an experience that evokes gratitude. It may be thought that in our daily experience the events of reorientation are not as frequent as are the times of dislocation. Perhaps that is so. Perhaps we have not learned to discern the ways the wondrous gift is given. We dare to say that in our existence there is the richness of life along with the reality of death. We experience the power of resurrection as well as the inescapability of crucifixion. The conquest of chaos and the gift of fresh life-giving order must also be brought to speech. Such experiences include all those gifts of friendship and caring, all those gestures of reconciliation and forgiveness, all those risky signs of hope in public life: the initiative of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to go to Jerusalem, the bold women in Ireland who march for peace,

the great festivals of reconciliation in the Church. In recent time we have witnessed the fall of the Soviet Union with its coercive governance, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and more recently attestation to the gift of God's reconciling order is evident in the new "unity government" in Northern Ireland brokered by Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams. There are, of course, many less well known wondrous gifts of God's new order in local settings, for example that The Church of the Savior (Washington, DC) daily receives seventy or so newly released prisoners into its welcoming presence. It is not possible for the faithful to view these astonishing turns in human history apart from the working of God's governance. All these experiences may touch us deeply and announce that God has not left the world to chaos (cf. Isaiah 45:18-19).

These events we may not notice unless we practice the language of praise and thanks. And for this, the Psalter offers us the celebrative language of hymns and songs of thanksgiving, which sometimes assert the abiding rule of God, as in Psalm 103:

Bless Yahweh, O my soul,
and all that is within me his holy name.
Bless Yahweh, O my soul,
and do not forget any of his benefits. (vv. 1-2)

But at other times it announces the surprising intrusion of God who just now makes things good,⁸ for example Psalm 30:

8. On the cruciality of thanksgiving for the faith and worship of Israel, see the fine discussion by Guthrie, *Theology as Thanksgiving*; and idem, *Israel's Sacred Songs*, 147-57.

I will exalt you, O Yahweh, for you have pulled me up,
and you did not allow my enemies to rejoice over me.
O Yahweh, my God, I cried out to you for help,
and you have healed me. (vv. 1-2)

That is what is meant in those psalms that announce that "God is King," for example:

Proclaim to the foreigners:
"Yahweh is king!"
The world is firmly established;
It shall never be moved.
He will rule the peoples with equity. (Psalm 96:10)

Yahweh is king! Let the earth rejoice!
Let the many coastlands be glad! (Psalm 97:1)

Yahweh is king!
Let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned between the cherubim!
Let the earth quake! (Psalm 99:1)

They celebrate some experience that has brought the world to a new joyous orientation that is experienced by the speaker. Thus I suggest that there is a linkage to be maintained between the experiences of reorientation and Israel's psalms of thanksgiving and hymns. There are those who have a sense of the new gift of life and lamentably have no way to speak about it. But there are also those (and this is our primary concern here) who have regular access to the psalms of high celebration but have been so numbed to their own experience that the words of the psalm have no counterpart in their own life experience.

The collection of the Psalter is not for those whose life is one of uninterrupted continuity and equilibrium. Such people should stay safely in the book of Proverbs, which reflects on the continuities of life. But few of us live that kind of life. Most of us who think our lives are that way have been numbed, desensitized, and suppressed so that we are cut off from what is in fact going on in our lives.

The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage. Rather, we are expected to submit it openly and trustingly so that it can be brought to eloquent and passionate speech addressed to the Holy One. If we are genuinely attentive to these linkages of speech and experience, we will discover that we pray a prayer along with our brothers and sisters in very different circumstances. Others may give a different nuance to their speech, but they also have the realities of disorientation and reorientation in their lives. And they thus join in this resilient voice addressed to the Holy One.

It is clear that those who pray for and witness to God's newness never do so alone. While there are (thank God!) spectacular individual persons who receive headlines for their courage, such individual persons are invariably evoked and sustained by communal affirmation. Thus Martin Luther King Jr. was situated in a vibrant African-American Church. Daniel Berrigan is clearly the product of the Eucharistic community to which he belonged from his earliest time in family. In the ancient Psalms and in current usage, the saints are always participants in "the communion of saints." Otherwise

boldness could not be sustained but would quickly eventuate in cynicism or despair.

The Psalms are not used in a vacuum, but in a history where we are dying and rising, and in a history where God is at work, ending our lives and making gracious new beginnings for us. The Psalms move with our experience. They may also take us beyond our own guarded experience into the more poignant pilgrimages of sisters and brothers.