

This morning we are reflecting on Psalm 43, yet in doing so we have actually stumbled into the *middle* of a prayer.

The book of Psalms (150 psalms in all) was divided into five sections, each one concluding with a benediction. (Presumably five books of Torah, five sections of psalms, numbers were important).

Part II of the book of Psalms (psalm 42-72) begins with Psalm 42 which is believed to be the *first* part of today's psalm.

What we can piece together about the writer of these psalms is that he was a descendant of the "Sons of Korah," a people descended from Moses' cousin Korah, who were tasked with temple responsibilities that might have included leading the people in singing.

(If you have any interest in learning the psalms through music, there is a band called "Sons of Korah" that has put all 150 psalms to music (or back to music) that you should check out.)

On one level, this is deeply personal psalm. The writer has experienced oppression, persecution and exile from the temple.

We are unsure of the reasons, but scripture does detail some of the in-fighting that happened between the Levites and the Korahites.

Worship committees have had a long history of being deeply contentious places.

The Psalmist writes:

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

The livelihood, the very core of his identity and purpose has been ripped away. He is a ship lost at sea, reaching out to God. His memories are all he has now, but even those only cause him more pain:

*These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?*

*I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

By the time we arrive at Psalm 43 the tone has changed. No longer is he content to just lament, now he speaks a bold imperative to God, making his

demands known! “*Vindicate me!*” Psalm 43 starts, or another translation could be: “Establish justice for me!”

*Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.
Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.
You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?*

The original context of the psalms is hopefully helpful and interesting, but the power of the psalms is really less in the particular context and more in their universal application.

There is something powerful about the way the psalmists bear their souls and express their hearts, because in doing so, they touch something in us, and their prayers become our prayers.

It was quite common for the Israelites to take these deeply personal poems and prayers of individuals and recommission them for the whole community or congregation.

Years after the composition of this psalm, perhaps after the name and the original context of the psalmist had been lost to history, Israel prayed and sang this psalm to express their anguish and heartbreak over being exiled from their homeland.

“Why have you forgotten me” takes on a new and different meaning,
“Vindicate me my God” takes on a new and different meaning, and yet the
power of the psalm remains.

I have spent this week imagining this psalm through the voices of different
people.

In the voice of those who find themselves in a spiritual desert, for whom the
words: “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my
God*” come from a place of holy longing, or a sense of abandonment.

I have always seen beauty in the imagery of the deer, and yet in reading it
again, I am drawn to the desperate state one is in when the need for water is
so great that they actually pant for it.

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as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?*

Those in a spiritual desert may cry out for a time when the presence of God
came easy, when their worldview and faith was a simpler place.

I hear this psalm in the voice of an Israeli mother, whose child was killed by a
complete stranger, whose motive was nothing more than desperation and

hatred. A woman who wanted nothing more than a good life for her and her family, and now wrestles with the urge to inflict the same pain on the people who turned her life to ruin.

*Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
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Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.
You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?*

I hear this psalm in the voice of a Palestinian father, who shelters with his family in the rubble of what used to be their home, watching his children suffer from lack of food and water and being completely helpless to do anything about it. For whom the panting and thirsting for God is incredibly literal.

*I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,*

Not only are we invited to recommission these psalms of lament, psalms of challenge, psalms of petition, we *must* do so.

Walter Brueggemann writes that:

the God of Israel enters the hurting world and in doing so both “protests and invites us to protest.”¹

Genuine covenant interaction therefore must not only contain praise and adoration, but also the petition of lament.

Israel cries out to God regarding the incongruity between the promises of Yahweh and lived experience. These psalms insist that “things are not right in the present arrangement, that they need not stay this way but can be changed, that the speaker will not accept them in this way, for it is intolerable, and that it is God’s obligation to change things.”² In so doing “the tradition of biblical lament juxtaposes trust and doubt, lament and praise in sometimes extreme tension.”³

The words of the lament psalms are notably recommissioned another time in the Gospels, from the lips of Jesus, as he hung on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Even Jesus’ who fully embodied dependence upon God, could not escape disquietude of soul.

Neither do we.

Neither *should* we.

Brueggemann concludes:

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm,” *Christian Century*, November 12, 1980, pp. 1094-1099, accessed October 16, 2021, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/covenant-as-a-subversive-paradigm/>.

² Brueggemann, Walter. “The Costly Loss of Lament.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11, no. 36 (1986): 57–71.

³ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1999), 30.

“Suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into the pain and giving it voice.”⁴

Sometimes to protest the way things are is an act of worship.
To express dismay and anger and to expect more of God is an act of
faithfulness.

Let us be a community that finds our voice in the psalms, which are
repurposed time and time again to express the depths of the human heart.

It is right to be outraged by pain and injustice.
And it is right that through it all, and despite it all, we orient towards hope.

As the last verse of *both* Psalm 42 and 43 conclude:

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 88.