

Proper 13A: Matthew 14:13-21  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
August 6, 2023

### **The Psalms as Tools for Prayer**

What do these items have in common? (Display hammer, knife, and other tools.) They're all tools of one kind or another. Human beings, say anthropologists, are fundamentally tool-making animals. We make tools in order to do things we can't do by ourselves or to do things we can do better. Now, some of the tools we make are made of wood, some of metal. Others, though, are made of words. Yes, words can be tools too. We use them to identify things and categorize them, to communicate ideas and emotions. Words can create realities and relationships (think constitutions and contracts) or destroy relationships (think of a divorce decree or a criminal charge).

Of all the word-tools, prayer is particularly powerful. Now, we don't often think of prayer as a tool. We are used to tools that enable us to *do* things and to *get* things (a machine to clean the carpet, a computer to get information). But we are not as familiar with tools that enable our being and becoming human. Which is funny—for all of our claims of technological advancement, when it comes to the task of being and becoming human, we are technologically impoverished in comparison to those who lived centuries ago.

For, the modern person may know how to use a smart phone or navigate the internet, but they know far less about how to use the primary technology we have for becoming human—prayer. And if prayers are the tools, the Psalter is the requisite toolbox. The prayers contained there, the psalms, are the best set of tools available for the work of faith—one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers that deal with the great variety of operations that God carries on in us and that attend to all the parts of our lives, parts that are, at various times and in different ways, rebelling and trusting, hurting and praising. When people of faith take possession of the Psalms, we do so with the same attitude and for the same reason that gardeners gather up rake and hoe on their way to the vegetable patch, and students carry a notebook or laptop into a lecture hall. It is a simple matter of practicality—having the right tools for the job. If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to grow closer to God, and to glorify Him with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are indispensable. We neglect them to our detriment.

So today we are beginning a five-part series on the Psalms, to explore together how the psalms can help us to pray, to appreciate the psalms as a “school for prayer,” a kind of curriculum for learning to pray and to mature as pray-ers. The Psalter can do this, because it is the only part of the Bible that is clearly intended for us to speak, packaged ready to be put into our mouths. All the rest of the Bible represents God speaking to us—directly, in the Prophets, or less directly through the history of Israel, or the Gospel narratives, or the wise sayings of Proverbs. Only the Psalms are formulated as prayer, as human words to God. Yet because they are part of the Bible, we understand them also as God's word to us—or better, the Psalms are God's word *in* us. As Eugene Peterson has put it, the psalms are the Word of God given to us to speak back to God, that is, to teach us how to pray, to give voice to our soul when we have no words.

But the Psalms are more than prayer, or rather more than what usually passes among us as prayer. There's a quality to the psalms that is lacking in most prayers, a poetic quality. I say 'poetic' not in the

sense of decorative speech. (As verse, the psalms are not especially pretty.) Rather, they are poetic in the sense that they speak with personal intensity. Like good poetry, the psalms grab for the jugular. Far from being cosmetic language, the psalms are intestinal, gut language, root language. They cannot be otherwise, for they speak out of an encounter, an encounter with God, in whose presence the experience of being human is exposed and sharpened.

Indeed, there is no book in the Bible that more accurately reflects all the varieties of human life than the Psalms. Those who wrote them knew life's ups and downs. There are angry psalms and contented psalms. There are psalms about success and psalms about failure. There are psalms about riches and poverty, about greed and generosity, about coping and not coping. Instead of forgetting God in these times, the psalmists used their circumstances, turning their situation into material for prayer. They turned to God in praise, as well as in anger, in hurt and in sorrow, and in so doing they show us we can bring into our conversation with God feelings and thoughts that most of us think we need to get rid of before God will be interested in hearing from us. We don't need to hide our feelings from God. We can be honest about where we are. The point of this honesty is not, however, to sanctify what is shameful (for example, the desire for sweet revenge) or to make us feel better about parts of ourselves that stand in need of change. Rather, the Psalms teach us that profound change happens always in the presence of God.

But this change can only happen through praying the psalms, not just talking about them. The psalms are for praying, talking to our Maker and Redeemer, not for theorizing about him.

So, with that, let's dive into the Psalter. And of course, where better to begin than at the beginning? Turning to Psalm 1, though we are immediately stopped in our tracks, because Psalm 1, strictly speaking is not a prayer, but a pre-prayer. That is, it gets us ready to pray. At some point in Israel's history, when the psalms were all collected and arranged, Psalms 1 and 2 were set as a kind of an entrance to them, pillars flanking the way into prayer. The psalmists it seems knew better than to unceremoniously dump us into the world of prayer; we needed to be courteously led across an ample porch, a place of transition where we are adjusted to the realities of being in the presence of God. You see, the non-praying world is a pushing, shoving, demanding world. Voices within and without harass us constantly, insisting that we look at this image, read this headline, listen to this appeal, feel this guilt, touch this charm. It is asking too much that we move from this high-stimulus world into the quiet concentrations of prayer without an adequate transition. Psalms 1 and 2 are that transition. Psalm 1 opens with a declaration, or perhaps more accurately an invitation.

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! (v1)

The first word of the first Psalm, *happy* (or *blessed* in other translations), sets the tone: happy, fortunate, lucky with holy luck. This first word, *blessed*, is a directional antenna, a mind-set for picking up signals we would otherwise miss. We don't know precisely what are we getting into, but the *blessed* arouses expectation, a readiness for a "more" that is also a "good."

The psalmist continues:

Their delight is in the law [*torah*] of the LORD,

and they meditate on his law day and night. (v2)

Torah, translated as law or teaching, are best thought of as God's words that hit the target of the human condition. I don't say that to sound lyrical, the noun *torah* actually comes from the verb, *yarah*, which means to throw something, a javelin, say, so that it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is *torah*. The idea is that, in living speech, words are javelins hurled from one mind to another. The javelin word goes out of one person and pierces another. Not all words are javelins, though; some are only containers, carrying information from one place to another. But God's word has this aimed, intentional, personal nature. When we are spoken to this way, piercingly and penetratingly, we are not the same. These words get inside us and work their meaning in us. So, as we prepare to pray, to answer the words God addresses to us, we learn that all God's words, including the Psalms, have this characteristic: they are *torah* and we are the target. God's words, God's creating and saving words, hit us where we live.

and they meditate on his law day and night (v2b)

The delight in these words develops into meditation, *torah*-meditation. Meditation (*hagah* in Hebrew) is a bodily action; it involves murmuring and mumbling words, taking a kind of physical pleasure in making the sounds, getting the "feel" of their meaning as the syllables are shaped by the larynx and tongue and lips. Isaiah used the word "meditate" for the sounds that a lion makes over its prey (Isaiah 31:4). A lion over its catch and a person over the torah act similarly. They purr and growl in the pleasure of taking in what will make them more themselves, strong, lithe, swift. We are to chew the Psalms, to savor them. Meditation as mastication. This is quite different from merely reading God's word, or thinking about it. This is not so much an intellectual process, figuring out meanings, as it is a physical process, hearing and rehearing these words as we sound them again, letting the sounds sink into our muscles and bones.

Psalm 1 goes on to give us a picture of what happens to the person who meditates, who chews on these godly teachings day and night:

They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;  
everything they do shall prosper. (v3)

"Everything they do prospers"—this is an extravagant promise, but not a glib one. The psalmist envisions meditating on the Psalms deeply enough that through them we might become "planted," secretly established in wisdom and righteousness. The Old English word for "tree," *treow* also gives us the word "true," as in a "deeply rooted idea." A "tree" person has roots deep in God's ways, in God's deeply rooted truth; he or she delights in it and meditates on it. Takes life from it, as the tree takes life from the river. Not everyone enjoys this life, though.

It is not so with the wicked; [the psalmist intones]  
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.  
Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,  
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous. (v4-5)

In contrast with the “tree” person, the “chaff” person won’t be too entangled in such earthy permanence. “Too limiting” this person would probably say. Yet it is the case that for those who are so planted, everything yields some good fruit. Not that everything happens as we might wish, but rather the fruit of their action is that “God knows [their] way” (1:6). In everything they do, they are still recognizable to God. The Psalms have long been seen as uniquely valuable for those who seek to prosper in this way.

As we see from Psalm 1, we prepare to pray not by composing our prayers but composing ourselves. The pre-prayers that is Psalm 1 gets us ready, forming the inner life so that it is ready to receive God, not just to acquire facts. But we cannot make too much of this preparation though. For when we engage in the act of prayer itself, there is no preparing, no getting the right words, no posture to take, no mood to assume. We simply do it. We do not first learn how to do it, and then proceed to do it; we do it, and in the doing of it we find out what we are doing, and then deepen and mature in it. This is why we pray the psalms and why we are focusing on them this month —because they give us prayers that we can use and in the process of using them can learn from them.

But, so that we get as much out of our study of the psalms as we can, I have homework for you. For the next four, five weeks I’d like you to pray the psalms. It’s easier than you think. They’re found in every Bible and every prayer book. In fact the *Book of Common Prayer* gives you a helpful schedule for reading the psalms every day. Following this schedule, found in the Daily Office Lectionary in the back, you can read all 150 psalms, in a month. That may be a little ambitious. But even if you can’t do all of them, I encourage you to read a psalm or two each day. What we talk about during this series will make sense only if you engage in the psalms yourself, if you dive into the psalter and come to know the psalms personally, and so know God and know yourself through them. Such is the purpose of the Psalms, and the purpose of this sermon series. So grab your “toolbox” and let’s get to work! Thanks be to God!