

Praying with a Psalm: Give it all to God.
January 22, 2023: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, our Rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

I want us to look at the psalm today. I probably don't preach on or about the psalms as much as should. They are a central part of both the Christian and Jewish tradition, sitting almost literally at the center of the Bible. I believe that Jesus likely knew many of the psalms by heart, good Jewish man that he was, and in fact, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark both portray Jesus on the cross crying out in the words of Psalm 22, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

The psalm is one of 150 (or 151) depending on which religious tradition is counting. The Hebrew word for Psalm actually means *melody*, so that if we were being true to the spirit of these beautiful texts, we would sing them. It's a bit like saying Happy Birthday. We sometimes do sing them at the 10am service, and I believe we may do some of that during Lent.

We don't know really who composed them, though tradition has connected them with King David. I'm going to take some poetic license and assume at least some of them might have been composed by women. Why not? There's nothing anywhere that says they were not composed by women. And some women, though likely in the minority, must have been literate.

The Psalms were put together in more or less in their current form roughly 2500 years ago. According to scholars, they fall into a number of types—hymns, songs of Zion, enthronement psalms, laments, songs of trust, thanksgivings, sacred histories, royal psalms, wisdom psalms. Taken together, they lay before God just about all human troubles, fears, hopes, rages, aspirations, loves, joys, and reasons for confidence— just about every conceivable human emotion, and thus are suitable guides to prayer.

So, let's look at today's Psalm, Psalm 27. I confess it's one of my favorites. Thank you for reflecting on it with me. And it's a great one for the season of Epiphany, as it continues the theme of God's light to the world. Will you please open your prayer books to page 617? Our prayer book has a translation of the Book of Psalms.

And let's go through it together again, breaking at the asterisk vv-1-9. What's going on here? What is different from what Amy led us through a moment ago? The lectionary left some verses out, didn't they? And what kinds of things got left out? References to flesh-eating evil doers; encamped armies; and rising wars.

It's a shame the lectionary committee left these verses out—because these images capture not only the terrifying experiences of the psalm writer and the Jewish people—they can stand for the very fears that vex us, the precise experiences that threaten to break us. These are the fears and experiences that we are invited to raise up before God.

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Scholars call Psalm 27 a Psalm of Trust. It proclaims the trustworthiness and presence of God, amid all that life will throw at us. But it's not that simple, is it? If you look at the first 9 verses, who is the Psalmist speaking to? It's not spelled out exactly; but I'm imagining someone who is deeply anxious and fearful about what lies ahead, and she is reminding herself of how God has been with her in the past. It is a kind of anxious introspection. I think she is speaking to herself, psyching herself up, as she fights off the onslaught of fears and doubts. This is someone who knows trouble and is acquainted with grief and has made it through with the Light of God. And her goal has been this: that she may be present with God, always, and forever. Because God keeps her safe, sets her high on a rock, lifts up her head above her enemies. It is both a memory *and* a forecast.

Now, let's say together verses 10 through 13, again breaking at the asterisk. Something shifts in verse 10. What is it? The Psalmist moves from speaking to herself to speaking to God. The Psalms are full of direct speech to God. They are a model for how we can speak freely to God. While these words indicate trust— "You have been my helper," they also betray some doubt as well— "cast me not away," as if perhaps, God may not come through this time.

Let's keep going with Verse 14...To whom is the Psalmist speaking? She shifts back to speaking to herself, like a mantra, reminding herself of God's sustaining power even in the face of catastrophic rejection from those who are meant to love us most.

Now verses 15-16, breaking at the asterisk. To whom is she speaking now? She returns to the direct address: Show me your way! Lead me on a level path! Deliver me! We can imagine the urgency, the yearning in that voice... because we, too, have experienced it.

Finally, Verses 16-19, again, breaking at the asterisk. To whom is she speaking now? I think she is speaking to those gathered in worship and prayer in the synagogue, and thus by extension, she is speaking to us! She is testifying to all who will listen of her experience. God delivers! Be strong! Be patient! Keep trusting!

A psalm of trust unfolds amid fear, anxiety, and even danger. Through the invocation of this psalm, we are reminded of the light of God which makes it possible to see where God is at work in the world around us.

And so, here is a pattern of prayer for us, which I believe, in fact, mirrors how we actually do pray: a mixture of doubt and confidence, of fear and courage, of guardedness and open heartedness. We lay it all before the Lord, seek the Light that will help us to see God at work among us, move us to acclaim God's goodness, and manifest that goodness outward toward our neighbor and the wider world.

This is a great psalm to have in our heart and on our lips, even on a notecard in our pocket for those times when it seems all is lost or we feel overwhelmed by fear or anxiety or anger—personally,



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in our common life, locally, nationally. And when we you can't say it with gusto and faith on our own, we can and say it together, like we do today. We point to the light, we reflect that light, for one another, and the rest of the world.

Let's say verse 1 again, together.

Amen.