

JOURNEY
THROUGH
THE Psalms

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revised and expanded

Denise Dombkowski Hopkins



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Contents

Preface	vii
1. Praying the Psalms, Praying into Wholeness	1
2. The Synagogue, the Church, and the Psalms	16
3. Your Hallelujahs Don't Have to Be Hollow Anymore <i>Praise Psalms</i>	32
4. You Get What You Deserve, Don't You? <i>The Torah and Wisdom Psalms</i>	59
5. Complaining in Faith to God <i>Psalm Laments</i>	77
6. Life in the Meanwhile <i>The Process of Lament</i>	105
7. I'll Never Be the Same Again <i>Thanksgiving Psalms and Enthronement Psalms</i>	133
Appendix: A Service of Silence and Lamentation for Good Friday or Holy Saturday	154
Notes	162

Preface

During the twenty years I have spent teaching and preaching the Bible in seminary and in local churches, one thing has remained constant: the passion and openness that laity and clergy alike have shown for the book of Psalms, more than for almost any other part of the Bible. This book is filled with testimonies to that passion from former students at Lancaster and Wesley Theological Seminaries in the form of “communication events” that showcase creative understandings of the psalms, in quilts, music, liturgies, poetry, prayer, and paraments. These “events” remind us that the psalms draw us in not simply intellectually, but as whole persons. I am grateful for the contributions of these men and women and for their company over the years on our continuing journey through the psalms.

My special thanks go to Bill Wright, office of faculty support, for helping me in so many ways while I was working on this book; to Mary Bates-Washington, executive assistant to the President, for her patient help with my computer problems; to Carol Wilson for preparing the indices; to Mark Schaefer for his work with the musical scores; and to DL, for showing me how to walk in the Spirit.

This book is dedicated to my brother, Brian S. Dombkowski, June 7, 1955 to September 3, 1978. I miss you.

Ash Wednesday, 2001

CHAPTER ONE

Praying the Psalms, Praying into Wholeness

One of the main reasons for the powerful hold that the psalms have on us is that they offer us what Roland Murphy calls “a school of prayer,” not simply in the sense of a collection of prayers, but rather as lessons in how to pray.¹ The psalms teach us that there are many different kinds of prayer and many different ways of praying to God that articulate the entire range of human emotions: fear, praise, anger, thanksgiving, joy, despair. All the feelings that mark our struggle for faith from day to day appear in the Psalter. Psalm language grasps for us the many facets of God and our relationship to God, whom we experience as both present and absent. Psalms allow us to be honest and whole before God as we express our faith in good times and bad and every time in between. A journey through the psalms is the journey of the life of faith.

Several years ago, I attended a United Church of Christ Conference workshop on “How to Talk about Your Faith” led by the Reverend Dr. Bill McGregor. Ours was a large group of about forty laity and clergy who were a bit apprehensive about the topic, but who wanted to be more confident about sharing their faith. As part of the workshop process we paired up,

2 *Journey through the Psalms*

with 'A' asking 'B,' "Why are you a Christian?" At the end of five minutes, 'A' asked 'B' the question again. Then the procedure was reversed, with 'B' asking and 'A' answering, twice. In the plenary session, we all shared what we had learned. To a person, we had not responded to the question "Why are you a Christian?" with doctrine or creedal statements, but with our personal stories. Since most of us had not even been asked the question before, we were surprised by the form our answers took and by the feeling of empowerment rather than embarrassment that accompanied our storytelling. Furthermore, none of us produced one smooth narrative, but rather, a series of mini-stories punctuated by memories of joy and cries of pain, often accompanied by tears. We learned firsthand the truth of the Kiowah saying: "Laughter and tears are first cousins."² Realizing that we never would have guessed the burdens others were carrying, we acknowledged the importance of the listener in our sharing, especially in accepting the "negative" parts of our story. We saw that asking the question twice offered a way to stay with each other and leave room for the voicing of the pain, the questions, and the joy of each story. We trusted one another to hear, and gave one another permission to voice whatever was in our minds and hearts.

Looking back on that workshop experience, I can see that what we did that day by telling our stories was to produce our own collections of psalms, mini-Psalms that expressed the whole range of our emotions and life experiences before God. No wonder, then, that so many of us are drawn to the book of Psalms in the Bible—the psalms offer us ready vehicles for the telling of our whole story. Just as we gave each other permission in our workshop pairings to tell and hear our stories, so too does the canon of our faith, which includes the book of Psalms with its laments, thanksgivings, and praises, give us permission to take our whole range of human experience to God in prayer. A journey through the psalms from the beginning of the collection to the end mirrors the storytelling we did that day.

A psalms journey takes us on a roller-coaster ride from praise to doubt and back again with a swiftness that takes one's breath away. No matter how fast or how low the roller coaster dips, however, it never leaves the track. Even the angry psalm prayers filled with doubt and questions lead us to God. As Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore note, prayer has both a summer and a winter voice: the hallelujah of psalm 150 and the anguished cry out of the depths of Psalm 130; the voice of Christmas and Easter and Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," as well as the voice of the wilderness, the exile, the cross, and the Negro spirituals; the voice of Rachel weeping, refusing to be comforted (Jer. 31:15) and the voice of Mary, accepting and rejoicing (Lk. 1:46–55).³ Rachel and Mary are bound together in Christian

tradition, reminding us that “the danger of praise without lament is triumphalism, and the danger of lament without praise is hopelessness.”⁴

To sit down and skim the book of Psalms rapidly is to embark on the roller-coaster ride of prayer, from summer to winter prayer and back again. Yet we end the ride in praise. Some people cannot see this movement from the beginning to the end of the collection, because they focus only on their favorite psalms, ignoring those psalms that are different or unfamiliar. But a closer look shows a preponderance of praises toward the end of the Psalter. More laments are found in the first half of the Psalter, more hymns in the second half. One cannot trace this movement along a straight line, but “the shift of emphasis is noticeable. To go through the book of psalms is to be led increasingly toward the praise of God as the final word.”⁵ Psalm 1 is intentionally placed at the beginning of the Psalter to call Israel to obedience to Torah⁶ and to assure Israel about the good consequences of obedience. The Psalter concludes with Psalm 150, placed intentionally at the end of the collection to engage Israel in unconditional praise.

How do we move from obedience to praise, from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150? Not directly, for that is too simple and not at all characteristic of the life of faith. Walter Brueggemann suggests that we move from Psalm 1 to 150 “by way of the suffering voiced in the complaints and the hope sounded in the hymns.”⁷ Lived experience intervenes between obedience and praise, and it is in this between place “where Israel mostly lives...the obedience of Psalm 1 and the praise of Psalm 150 are not simply literary boundaries but the boundaries for Israel’s life and faith.”⁸ As Renita Weems puts it, “this is the spiritual journey, learning how to live in the meantime, between the last time you heard from God and the next time you hear from God.”⁹ The movement toward praise is punctuated by lurches into despair, but these are not faith relapses or aberrations. “Doubt and despair are not mere side-steps in an otherwise optimistic faith. They are in fact integral to the faith experience.”¹⁰ “Israel’s lament is never simply an emotional outburst or an exercise in self-pity. It is a cry for relief from suffering so that God may once again be praised.”¹¹

Over the years, my students in seminary and local churches have been surprised to find so many angry laments in the book of Psalms. They had never encountered them in church before or paid attention to them in their reading of the psalms. Their surprise is understandable. Unfortunately, the church has been quite selective in designing the curriculum for the “school of prayer” that is the psalms. Despite the fact that more than one third of the Psalter contains lament psalms, Christian tradition has drawn heavily only from the seven penitential laments (Pss. 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, 143), especially during the Lenten season.¹² Perhaps the church’s theological

4 Journey through the Psalms

tradition has viewed laments as a violation of “an assumed prayer etiquette.”¹³ Though not denying the need for penitential lament, Roland Murphy wonders “if we have lost the art of complaining *in faith* to God in favor of a stoic concept of what obedience or resignation to the divine will really means.”¹⁴ Theologian Martin Marty recognized this when he decided not to read lament Psalm 88 to his dying wife during one of their nightly readings of the psalms, because he thought that neither he nor she could take it. She insisted that it be read: “I need that kind most.”¹⁵

The church has inherited the lament from Judaism, which rooted its understanding of lament in the biblical covenant tradition. Darrell Fasching argues that “the covenantal understanding of faith as a dialogue in which the Jew was not only expected to trust and obey God but was also allowed to question (and even call into question) the behavior of God seems to have disappeared in Christianity. The complex dialectic of faith as *trust and questioning* came to be reduced in Christianity to a very different understanding of faith as *unquestioning trust and obedience*.”¹⁶ Questioning and persistence mark Israel’s relationship with God as expressed in Jacob’s wrestling with God at the Jabbok River (Gen. 32:22–30),¹⁷ in Job’s angry poetry (Job 3—42:6), and in Abraham’s arguing with God (Gen. 18:16–33). This *hutzpah*, as it is known in Jewish tradition, appears in a few places in the New Testament: “Ask, search, knock” (Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11:9–13); the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21–28; Mk. 7:24–30); the woman with the issue of blood (Mk. 5:24–34); the persistent widow (Lk. 18:1–8).¹⁸ Belden Lane explains the virtual absence of the *hutzpah k’lapei shamaya* (“boldness with regard to heaven”) tradition in Christianity both theologically and sociologically.¹⁹ Theologically, it is rooted in Paul’s emphasis on the patient bearing of suffering in light of the cross and the imminent resurrected world to come. God shares in the suffering through Jesus. Eschatology (doctrine of the end time) makes suffering temporary and honorable. Sociologically, the loss of daring prayer in Christianity can be traced to the church’s socioeconomic prosperity and security, which blunted the eschatological impatience for God’s reign; prayer reflects this situation.²⁰

One of the most appreciated Lenten Bible studies I have ever led focuses upon the angry lament psalms as a way of accompanying Jesus to Good Friday and the cross. As one initially skeptical parishioner told me after a Lenten lament study: “I thought God would shut me out when I told God I was just so sick of God not making things better. Instead, I feel closer to God than I ever have. Do you think that maybe by being so honest there was somehow more room in me for God? I guess being an Easter people and lamenting are not mutually exclusive. Honest praise can’t happen if you’re filled with pain.”²¹ On our way to Easter, Lent invites the use of

laments. Recognizing this, Victoria Bailey has created “A Service of Silence and Lamentation for Good Friday or Holy Saturday,” whose purpose is “to allow us to enter into the experience of apparent abandonment by God as Jesus expressed it in His cry from the cross and as some of His followers must surely have felt during the interim between His crucifixion and resurrection.” She sees this service as a way to enter into “our own sense of abandonment and despair, which many of us experience from time to time but are not always encouraged, allowed or enabled to voice.”²² See the appendix for this service. We need more liturgies like this one that name our experience and take it before God within the liturgical rhythms of the church year.

Without the angry laments, we are cut off from the opportunity to be honest and whole in our prayer before God. This recognition, however, bumps up against liturgical renewal begun in the 1960s, which “attempted to recover earlier forms of eucharistic celebration, with the result that an emphasis on thanksgiving, celebration, and victory over sin and death replaced the earlier severe emphasis on contrition and penitence.”²³ This move “has, in effect, driven the hurtful side of experience either into obscure corners of faith practice or completely out of Christian worship,” warns Brueggemann; the church’s “failure of nerve” regarding the lament is clear.²⁴ The emphasis on celebration coincided with what sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls the move from a “spirituality of dwelling” anchored in houses of worship, denominations, and neighborhoods in the 1950s to a “spirituality of seeking” in the 1960s, when people moved beyond established religious institutions, and new spiritual centers emerged throughout U.S. society in the form of support and small groups: Twelve Step, Bible study, survivor classes. The result was a kind of “spiritual consumerism.”²⁵ The emphasis was on feeling good and satisfying our interests. The problem with that emphasis is, when we do not or cannot feel good, what do we do?

The psalm lament certainly extends what the church has for too long seen to be the traditional range of prayer. That the church has restricted our praying of the psalms in worship is clear from a glance at the responsive psalm readings in the back of most hymnals. I call this the scissors-and-paste method of liturgical psalm use. When angry laments *are* used, the guts of the lament are cut out, with the psalm jumping immediately from petition to praise, skipping over the angry questions.²⁶ Check your own church’s hymnal to see whether or not the psalms have been cut and pasted in the responsive readings and which psalms have been left out altogether. What do you find? Lester Meyer²⁷ surveyed the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the *Episcopalian Book of Common Prayer*, and the *Lectionary for Mass: The Roman Missal* and found that the majority of psalms omitted from liturgical

6 *Journey through the Psalms*

use are the laments. I have found that the same is true for *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* and *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

One of my favorite exercises for helping people to discover the range of prayer available in the book of Psalms has produced the same results year after year.²⁸ I put verses from six different psalms on newsprint: Psalm 1:6, a wisdom psalm focusing on obedience; 13:1, an angry lament; 23:1, a confession of trust; 30:2, an individual thanksgiving; 51:1, a penitential lament confessing sin; and 107:1, a communal thanksgiving. I ask each participant to choose one verse that best expresses what he or she would pray if praying right now. Each person reads that verse several times prayerfully, then turns to the psalm within which that verse is found and reads the whole psalm. The person then turns to a partner and reads the whole psalm out loud. The reader shares with his or her partner why that particular psalm was chosen and what words or images in the psalm are particularly powerful. The partner then reads his or her psalm to the other. Everyone will be talking at once, but no one will notice. Hearing the psalm, read or sung, is an important part of appropriating it, though it is not the only way. Psalms may also be appropriated visually; art images can evoke the divine presence and reveal the human condition in the psalms.²⁹ Liturgical artist Patrick Ellis insists that the psalms are “the closest thing to visual art I’ve encountered in the Bible.”³⁰ For the deaf and deaf/blind communities, feeling, not hearing or seeing, is the key to psalm appropriation.³¹ Indeed, many psalm images are not visual or auditory, but felt, such as “all my bones are out of joint” (Ps. 22:14, NRSV).

In whatever way a psalm is appropriated during this psalm-praying exercise, few people, it seems, are drawn to the lament psalm on the list. Every year, without fail, the psalms most often chosen in this prayer exercise are 23, 30, and 107, which express confession of trust and thanksgiving respectively. Psalm 23 is a perennial favorite. Even Garrison Keillor notes that in Lake Wobegon on Memorial Day, schoolchildren recite Psalm 23 along with Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*; William Holladay calls Psalm 23 “an American secular icon.”³² Every funeral I have attended has included a recitation of Psalm 23; some people even know it by heart. By contrast, I can name only a handful of people who can identify their favorite lament psalm. This is in part because, as Renita Weems observes, “not enough has been written about the long dry seasons” of our spiritual journey, when we “feel as if we have hit a brick wall and our prayers have been met with silence.”³³ For Weems, lament psalms such as Psalm 42 afford a meeting with “a kindred spirit” who has felt her own abandonment by God. She testifies that “if these psalms and similar writings were absent from the Bible, my spirit might have withered away long ago.”³⁴

It is clear that many of us embrace a narrow understanding of prayer that excludes the angry laments. The definition of prayer that one brings to the book of Psalms will shape the way in which one enters into the wide-ranging prayer of the Psalter (or not). Take a minute and complete the sentence, “prayer is _____,” after reflecting on when, where, how, and what you pray. Many of my students over the years have defined prayer as listening to God in a virtual one-way conversation that makes no room for lament questions. A submissive prayer posture of head bowed and eyes closed makes it difficult to clench a fist in angry lament. This understanding of prayer as listening owes much to theologian Karl Barth,³⁵ who argued in response to the crises of the twentieth century that prayer is a matter of obedience to God, listening to God, turning toward God and away from self, and of ministering to the world through petition and intercession. Weems speaks of listening *for* God, but this listening is undergirded by honesty that allows for protests, doubts, and glimpses of God in both the noisiness and silence of ordinary life.³⁶ Others have described prayer as dialogue, honest conversation, or connecting with the Divine, with eyes open. My colleague at Wesley Bobby McClain reminds his preaching students that one couldn’t bow one’s head to pray on the steps of the Selma, Alabama, courthouse during the 1960s civil rights marches with snarling dogs and angry mobs everywhere.³⁷ One student offered this definition: “When I pray, I take off the clothes of my heart before God; I make myself vulnerable, take risks.” Prayer in this sense is a way to articulate and cope with the experiences of life before God, “a means of maintaining dialogue”³⁸ in the midst of chaos. Another student defined prayer as “spiritual breathing” that covers all aspects of our life. Patrick Miller defines prayer as “often a spontaneous outcome of life at its heights and depths.”³⁹ Does your definition of prayer embrace the whole emotional range of the psalms and of your life of faith? If not, why not?

Not only is our range of prayer challenged and broadened by the psalms, but our hymn singing is as well. Not many hymns draw their inspiration from angry lament psalms. A quick check will bear this out. Look in the back of your church’s hymnal, in the index that deals with scripture passages related to the hymns. Count the number of psalms represented in the hymnal. Are certain psalms represented more than once? Which ones? In *The United Methodist Hymnal*, for example, Psalm 23 has given rise to four hymns, and Psalms 46, 51, 104, and 150 each have given rise to two hymns. In *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, Psalm 23 is presented in seven hymns, and Psalms 46, 98, and 150 in five hymns each. Just as with responsive readings of the psalms, the laments are noticeably absent as hymns.⁴⁰ Furthermore, some hymns not based on the psalms discourage any expression of doubt

8 *Journey through the Psalms*

and questions, for example, hymn no. 326 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart,” stanza three, lines two and three: “Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear, To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh.” Another example is “Leave It There,” hymn no. 522 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*; though the hymn recognizes that the life of faith is difficult “when your enemies assail, and your heart begins to fail,” the refrain insists “if you trust and never doubt, he will surely bring you out, take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.”

If “we are what we sing,” then we are in trouble in terms of expressing the reality of the life of faith. The result of the absence of lament hymns and the restraint of existing hymns contributes to worship that Elaine Ramshaw describes as “unrelentingly positive in tone,”⁴¹ worship that cannot embrace the realities of a life of faith. This optimism is reflected in the music of many contemporary artists whose lament music is indistinguishable from music for hymns and thanksgivings; I call it la-la music, even and sweet, music that does not match the raw, emotional intensity of the angry laments. One exception is the Reverend Robin White,⁴² who has written and sung music for Psalm 13. Her music captures the anguish and movement within the lament, even for those who do not know Hebrew. How often do we hear music like this in church? Also powerful is the cantata “I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes” by Adolphus Hailstork, III, for tenor solo, chorus, and small orchestra, reflecting the black church experience. Hailstork expresses the Christian spiritual journey from initial conversion (Ps. 121, “I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes”), trials and tribulations (Ps. 13, “How Long?”), and renewal (Ps. 23, “The Lord is My Shepherd. Alleluia”).⁴³

Furthermore, though many of the songs in our hymnals claim to be based on particular psalms, a comparison between hymn and psalm often shows that the two have little in common except for a few words or phrases. What is at issue here is not the christological interpretation of the psalms (reading the psalms in the light of the Christ event), but rather, a basic reinterpretation of the theology (talk about God) and the anthropology (talk about human beings) of the psalms. Look up one or two of the psalms represented to see what kinds of emotions and thoughts about God and human beings are expressed. Do these emotions and thoughts match what the psalm has to say? Often, they do not.

Many Christians would argue that such comparisons do not matter anyway; we don’t need the psalms, because our hymnals provide prayer and song for worship! Unfortunately, we forget that the Psalter was the hymnbook of the Second Temple and of the early church, which read the psalms as scripture, recited them as prayers, and sang them as hymns. Psalms were taken up by the later church for use in liturgies and the Daily Offices.

Saints, mystics, and monks through the centuries have turned to the psalms as their devotional book. The hymnody of the reformers drew heavily from the psalms. The psalms are a part of our Christian heritage from the very beginning. Although the hymnbook is a relatively modern development, it seems to have displaced rather than supplemented the psalms in today's worship. We may encounter some psalms cut and pasted in the back of our hymnals as responsive readings; religious houses may pray psalms faithfully daily; and liturgical reforms among some denominations may have recovered the use of psalms in eucharistic liturgies. But by and large, for too many Christians the psalms are not preached from, prayed from, or sung in worship services nor studied as much as they could be. Psalms are often treated as little more than poetic appendages to our liturgies or as catchy introductions to church committee meetings. For most of us, psalms—and only certain favorites at that!—function at best as the vehicle of our private devotions and meditations; psalms we do not like or understand are ignored.

Yet at the same time, a spiritual hunger gnaws at Christians across the ecumenical spectrum.⁴⁴ As a trip to any bookstore will substantiate, new translations and paraphrases of, meditations on, and musical settings for the psalms appear with regularity. This interest testifies to the yearning for renewal of worship and prayer in our time, especially among Gen Xers (people born between 1964 and 1978). Gen Xers, unlike their Baby Boomer parents, are connected to institutions, to denominations, and to spiritual direction and other spiritual disciplines, despite media claims to the contrary. “New York publishers are tripping over each other to turn out snappy prayer books. Christians increasingly speak of going to their spiritual director, as though it were as ordinary as going to the hair dresser.”⁴⁵ That many of the new prayer books being produced have little or nothing in common with the Hebrew text of the psalms, however, ought to warn us against too readily digesting such spiritual junk food. The psalms cannot say whatever we want them to say, but a careful study of the psalms can contribute to a faithful renewal of the worship life of contemporary Christians. As one Xer argues, “churches that want to lure Xers should give up their glitzy, poppy entertainment strategies and stick with the elements of tradition. Some Xers...may like synthesizers and hymns that were written last week, but many Xers like... ‘the comfort of something older.’”⁴⁶ I would suggest the comfort and challenge of the “older” psalms.

The flood of prayer pamphlets and “a religious form of do-it-yourself techniques for helping people cope” cannot fill the “spiritual vacuum”⁴⁷ at the center of our lives. In 1994 *The Washington Post* ran a feature article on the “trend” of random kindness as part of the self-help movement in America.⁴⁸ Remember the bumper stickers proclaiming, “Practice Random

Acts of Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty”? The experts interviewed in the newspaper article felt that the “feel good” reaction to doing random acts of kindness appealed to American individualism but could not sustain the movement; what was needed was a sense of communal responsibility. It is not surprising that I never see that bumper sticker anymore.

That a spiritual vacuum still exists is caused in part, I think, by the split within much of contemporary theology between the doctrine of God (theology) and prayer.⁴⁹ A reappropriation of the psalms can contribute to the reunification of theology and prayer. Kathleen Norris recognized this possibility during her immersion in Benedictine liturgy, reciting or singing the psalms at morning, noon, and evening prayer, praying the whole Psalter every three or four weeks. “During my year among the Benedictines I found that as their prayer rolls along, daily as marriage or doing dishes, it tends to sweep away the formalities of systematic theology and church doctrine.”⁵⁰ She quotes British Benedictine Sebastian Moore: “God behaves in the Psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology.”⁵¹

Psalm prayer can serve as a criterion for the “prayability” of our doctrine of God: “Is this a God to whom we can pray in the full range of biblical prayer?”⁵² The criterion of “prayability” is absent for many in Harold Kushner’s best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.⁵³ Kushner argues that bad things that happen to us are “not really God’s fault”; we should “*be angry at the situation*” rather than at ourselves, others, or God. “Being angry at God erects a barrier between us and all the sustaining, comforting resources of religion that are there to help us at such times.”⁵⁴ In his picture of a God who is still creating and facing pockets of chaos to be overcome (based on God’s speeches from the whirlwind to Job in Job 38—41), there is no room for the psalm lament and thus for the full range of biblical prayer.

Yet many find comfort in Kushner’s theology, as I learned firsthand at a conference at Hershey Medical Center in Pennsylvania in 1983. Kushner was there to discuss his book with a panel of physicians, pastors, and seminary faculty, including me, relatively new to seminary teaching. As it happened, I was the only panelist to disagree with Kushner’s theology and to ask where the psalm laments fit in it. After the conference ended, I was accosted by a group of fifteen or so angry people who backed me up against a wall and demanded to know how I could dare to disagree with Rabbi Kushner. Didn’t I know that he was redeeming his son’s death with this book? (Kushner’s son, Aaron, died at age 14 of progeria, “rapid aging”). The irony of the situation was that I had made a conscious decision that morning when introducing myself to the five hundred or so people assembled, not to mention that this very day would have been the twenty-eighth birthday of

my only brother, Brian, who had drowned at age twenty-three. I shared with this angry group afterward that my work with the psalms, particularly with the laments, was my way of redeeming Brian's death. What Kushner had called "the comforting resources of religion" had tormented me by pushing me too soon to acceptance. The laments were my only lifeline to God and the church in my anger and confusion, and without them, I would not be speaking to them today. Their hostility melted—now they understood what I had been saying as a panelist.

That encounter has remained vivid in my memory after all these years. First, it illustrates how deep our pain can be and how much we want to be able to make sense of it, to redeem it. Second, it shows us how emotional and risky our prayers can be if we allow ourselves to let them match our experiences. Third, the confrontation reminds us that one person's experience is not normative for all of us; my pain "credentials" resonated with this group alongside Kushner's. As a counter to Kushner twenty years later, I raise Samuel Balentine's question: "If one cannot question God, then to whom does one direct the questions? If God is a God whom we cannot question, then what kind of God is this to whom we are committing ourselves?"⁵⁵ Thankfully, poets such as Ann Weems have declared that "our only hope is to march ourselves to the throne of God and in loud lament cry out the pain that lives in our souls."⁵⁶ Her laments are for "those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep."⁵⁷ Her God is prayable in the style of the biblical laments. Weems' poignant psalms written in response to her son's early death have struck a chord with many across the nation.

My experience with Rabbi Kushner convinces me that rather than move exclusively from a systematic and theoretical construct of God to prayer and experience, the community of faith needs to move also in the opposite direction. Does the experience of different people, as it is articulated in prayer, square with the picture of God that theology has sketched? If not, then what becomes of that experience? Must it be denied or negated? Can a person be whole before God in the face of such denial? Can one group of people control another group of people with the picture of God (a theology) that denies the experience of the other group? Prayer and theology go together; loss of their dialectical relationship can lead to the atrophy of both and an erosion of the community of faith. As Patrick Miller argues, theology "is not simply a matter of believing and then praying to God in the light of what one believes. That very belief is shaped by the practice of prayer. So prayer and theology exist in relation to each other in a correcting circle."⁵⁸ Psalm prayer can offer much correction for theology.

Preaching in our churches has also suffered from the clergy's unwillingness to embrace the entire psalms range as the stuff of proclamation.⁵⁹ In a

12 *Journey through the Psalms*

collection of twenty-five sermons preached by Christians, Jews, and Muslims the Sunday after the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995, only five psalms were referenced, and among the five, only one lament, Psalm 22 (in a sermon by a rabbi). Psalms 23 and 46 were cited by three different preachers. Not only did preaching in this tragedy suffer from a reticence to embrace the range of psalm prayer, but it suffered as well from our reluctance in America to think theologically about public issues and public problems in the midst of our privatistic inclinations.⁶⁰ The same pattern repeated itself more recently in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In my random sampling of area pastors, no one had preached from a lament the Sunday after 9/11; many chose the comfort of Psalm 23. A local rabbi preached from Lamentations, and several African American pastors preached from the prophets.

Erhard Gerstenberger boldly challenges Christian preachers to take up the theme of enemies and evildoers in the laments as “one of the most crucial issues of our times.” The “enemy” problem has not disappeared today but has simply been reformulated in our mechanistic, impersonal world. We must ask today who is responsible for suffering and dehumanization. Christians have kept few church services to help the individual and the community in suffering or in naming and dealing with “enemies.” Only to the extent in which worship “includes or embraces present-day reality” can our Sunday services claim to “represent the heart of a Christian congregation.”⁶¹

Along with preaching, churches need to reconsider other aspects of the worship service in light of the psalms, especially the use of banners and paraments. How often do we see paraments like those crafted by artist Susan Stevens with its anguished figure in purple on a burlap background crying out, “My God, Why?”⁶² The visual arts can powerfully communicate the range of psalm prayer.



To what kind of God do the psalmists pray? This is a question about the theology of the psalms. Make up a list of adjectives and nouns describing God as you skim the psalms: deliverer, warrior, judge, rock, protector, creator, refuge, asleep, hidden, enemy, king, gracious, compassionate, giver of Torah, relentless, absent. Unfortunately, many of us bring to our reading of the psalms an image of God shaped by our hymnals, an image that Brian Wren calls the KINGAFAP metaphor, an acronym for “King-God-Almighty-Father-Protector” who mirrors the domination of males over females in society.⁶³ By analyzing English hymnody, Wren seeks to document how “God-language in Christian worship is heavily preoccupied with power-as-control.”⁶⁴ This metaphor of an omnipotent God who protects us makes the hiddenness and absence of God in the psalms that much more uncomfortable for us and distances us from the angry laments. God is called to account and much more vulnerable in the lament psalms, as we shall see.

The image of an all-powerful God can be especially damaging for women. As Rebecca Chopp argues, modernity is divided into public/private or primary/secondary domains that are gendered.⁶⁵ The public is the domain of the man and the private the domain of the woman. Tasks and values are assigned to each domain: the public/male realm is objective, scientific, competitive, powerful; the private/female domain is the locus of all the public rejects—relationships, caring, mutuality, physicality, embodiment. Chopp argues that knowledge is lodged in the public realm and religion in the private realm, where it is devalued as full of feeling. How ironic that the church struggles within the private realm about what constitutes “acceptable feeling” in its avoidance of the laments. The language of our hymns mimics the language of the public realm, as does some psalm language (the enthronement psalms—“the LORD reigns,” for example), yet psalm language is also saturated with feeling, emotion, and physicality. As one of my students put it, the psalmists are “body-conscious people”: lips, tongue, teeth, eyes, bones, hands, face, feet, and heart are graphically functional in their responses to life; body parts are personified and express the feelings of the psalmists.⁶⁶

Our assessment of the picture of God in the psalms stands in inverse proportion to our assessment of the picture that the psalmists draw of themselves. Our penchant for seeing a loving, powerful God in the psalms dictates a contrast with sinful, weak humanity. Skim the psalms to generate a list of nouns and adjectives for the psalmists. My students have described the psalmists as either sinners and self-righteous protesters, or as afflicted, poor, and oppressed. The more transcendent the view of God, the lower the view of humanity. The audacity of *hutzpah* in the psalm laments does not sit well with those who see a loving, powerful God. One of my students who had fled the devastating civil war in Liberia describes how worship

services in Liberia usually opened with the following exchange: Pastor: “God is good”; Congregational response: “all the time”; Pastor: “all the time”; Congregation: “God is good.” The student shared how angry that made him feel as neighbors killed neighbors and people were marched out of their villages and slaughtered in death treks every day. What we needed, he said, were the angry laments, but our opening declaration silenced them. Those who sentimentalize Jürgen Moltmann’s suffering God into a passive God will not be comfortable with laments, either. Liberation, feminist, and womanist theologians speak not of a passive God, but of “a compassion that resists tragic suffering.”⁶⁷

In order to understand who we are as worshiping Christians, we must reclaim our psalms heritage. To do that is to stand today in continuity with our tradition, in touch with our roots. In this sense then, “the Psalms are something like a family album; they remind us of who we are and of things that happened to us.”⁶⁸ They tell our own stories. Because the psalms are the common heritage of all churches, they also provide a ready base for ecumenical worship. Furthermore, “communal recitation of the Psalms works against our narcissism, our tendency in America to turn everything into self-discovery.”⁶⁹ When we can’t pray, the psalms pray for us, pulling us along, “out of private prayer, into community and then into the world, into what might be termed praying the news,” not as voyeurs but as ones who take responsibility for the violence of that news.⁷⁰

In our noisy world of cell phones, videos, TV, and the Internet, in which we can be instantly in touch with anybody at any time, and in which we fool ourselves into thinking that we are in control, we stumble upon God’s absence and God’s silence, and we panic. This was Renita Weems’s experience: “I had grown so accustomed to believing in a God who spoke thunderously and in spectacular ways that I didn’t think I could survive when it came time to stumble in divine silence.”⁷¹ Barbara Brown Taylor warns that our reaction to the silence shows us that “our language is broken.”⁷² When God is silent, we cannot talk more. Preachers must show homiletical restraint and be matchmakers; they must “choose the fewest, best words that will allow them [God and people] to find one another and then to get out of the way.”⁷³ I would suggest that the psalms can help facilitate this matchmaking; they are “the fewest and best words” of our tradition.

A journey through the psalms can be a path to wholeness, healing, and rootedness. The psalms engage our whole person. They demand our aesthetic response to the beauty and power of the poetry, our theological response to the picture of God that is drawn, and our emotional response to the humanness of the psalmists. Psalms speak “both *for* us as they express our

thoughts and feelings, fears and hopes, and *to* us as we hear in them direction for the life of faith and something of God's way with us."⁷⁴ To sing the psalms, pray them, study them, and hear them preached calls us into continuity with our tradition and joins us with other Christians past and present in the struggle for faith in God.