

Psalms for our Lives*
 St. Paul's Lansing, Michigan
 Psalm 23
 The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
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Is anxiety a regular part of your daily diet?
 Are the news reports from Israel and Iran, droning into your dreams?
 Are you mad as hell, and uncertain where to vent your anger?
 Perhaps you are looking for a crumb to feed your hunger for hope?
 Does it feel as if your life is not going as you had planned?

Or--

In spite of everything that is going on in the world do you find yourself content for no particular identifiable reason?

Welcome to the world in which the psalmist lives. Welcome to the world in which we live and move and have our being. Psalm 23, the 23rd Psalm is for me emblematic of all other psalms. But it's niceness, its presumed gentleness and comfort, provides a plush faux cover for the raw, real emotions, contained in the remaining 149 other psalms. I'd like to spend a bit of time dipping into those sacred, sometimes scathing poems of prayer.

Walter Brueggemann, pretty much my favorite, Biblical theologian, writes persuasively, that our life of faith consists of being:
securely oriented,
painfully disoriented,
[and]surprisingly reoriented. (p 14 *Praying the Psalms*, 1993).

From Brueggemann's perspective, "*securely oriented*" means that we find ourselves living in a time of equilibrium, which he believes, we all yearn for, but it is not all that interesting and he says, [this state] "does not produce great prayer or powerful song." But it might mean that your teenage kids come in on time, your boss isn't making unreasonable demands and your spouse filed your taxes on time.

Brueggemann, primarily a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholar believes that the book of proverbs tends to address issues for people who find themselves securely oriented. "The psalms," he writes, "Do not emerge out of people who find themselves in equilibrium. My college cell biology professor, Mary Lee Ledbetter, would say that indeed the only time an organism is in a state of equilibrium is when it is dead.

"Painfully disoriented," are those times when we learn that our husband, or mother, is no longer breathing,

or a cancer diagnosis of stout proportions
 is left on the doormat of our lives,
 or when our children are in a place where picking them up and kissing their knee no
 longer alters the course of their lives.

This rawness of life, this endurance of events, says Brueggemann, “drives us to the
 edge of humanness” (p 15) and makes us particularly aware of the seeming void of
 God in our lives.

Brueggemann writes that this is the stuff of which the psalms were made.
 He says, “Most of the psalms can only be appropriately prayed by people who are
 living at the edges of their life, sensitive to the raw hurts, the primitive passions, and
 the naïve elations that are the bottom of life.” (p 17)

He goes on to say, that it is in these damning moments that we are so desperate that
 we will even seek out “Speech with the Holy One.” (p 17)

While, the rest of the time the psalms for most of us,
 tend to be that musical interlude in the service
 between the other scripture readings
 to which we may or may not listen.

Or if we are part of a group of faithful people
 who read them “religiously” many days
 in the course of reading the Daily office,
 then their cadence and their rhythm
 tends to lodge in our cells,
 but the depth and passion may be lost or overlooked.

It is Brueggemann’s belief and my experience that when faced with our true inability
 to control life events and pull the strings of our loved ones lives—it is then that the
 psalms are embodied, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Psalm 22 v 1).

*“Hold not your tongue, O God of my praise; for the mouth of the wicked, the mouth of
 the deceitful, is opened against me. (Psalm 109 v 1-3)*

*“O God, why have you utterly cast us off? Why is your wrath so hot against the sheep of
 your pasture?” (Psalm 74 v 1)*

In these words we see that the psalms and those who wrote the words and
 sputtered these phrases are not piously religious people, holding their tongues
 before the Lamb of God, but rather real people, in despair, consumed with anger,
 fear and loneliness. **“They are religious only in the sense that they are willing to
 speak [of] this chaos to the very face of the Holy One.” (p 19) says
 Brueggemann.**

Lastly Brueggemann speaks of us being, “*Surprisingly reoriented.*” That moment
*after we lose our job and realize we are no longer continually living in tornado of
 chaos that was our workplace, and the dust dies and we wipe the grit from our tear*

swollen eyes and realize that there is a land of more, a place of easier being, maybe a different vocation and way of being is not only possible but also so much more compelling than the previous world we'd inhabited. That time when we see and understand that our lives are not what we thought they were going to be, rather they will be something more, something new, beyond what we had envisioned: That for Brueggemann, is being surprisingly reoriented.

Moving from, *"My God, My God why have you forsaken me, verse 1 psalm 22 to "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, verse 1 of Psalm 23.*

To be sure, this newness, this re-orientation, is not automatic, it is not assured that from despair immediately follows, hope, there is between Good Friday, and Easter Sunday a long, sometimes interminably so, Holy Saturday. It is our lot sometimes to spend weeks, even months in living in that time between time. So we continue to rail and engage in holy speech.

Then at other times, *"Joy comes in the Morning. (Ps 30:1).*

And we experience those moments of newness, when dinner with an old friend is more than we hoped, when somehow in the midst of our coming and going our senses are aware of the beauty of our child's hands—the way she can pick up a pea—after successfully tossing the apple slices to the ground—when we realize that in the midst of our fears we are able to register that beauty, it is then that our lives have been re-oriented. It is then that we can offer more words to the Holy One.

"For God alone, my soul waits in silence waits; From God comes my salvation. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken," (Psalm 62 vv 1-2).

"I called in my affliction and the Lord heard me and saved me from my troubles...Taste and see that the Lord is good. (Psalm 34 v 6 & 8a).

For thousands of years these words have been uttered, words that express the reality of our lives: crass, ambivalent, angry, depressed, sad, contrite, sardonic, amused, gracious, hopeful. It is all here. *These words can echo our words—enabling us to offer all who we are, in doing so we leave ourselves porous to God, open to what has not been before. Stuck no more, our pain offered, the possibility of new life, ready to be received.*

Amen.