

Colossians 3:9-17 – Lent 1 Wednesday – Praying the Psalms – March 1, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

From ancient times, the church has placed a special importance on praying the Psalms. Maybe it sounds a little odd in our ears to think of reading the Psalms as prayers. We think of a monk sitting in some dark cave counting beads. But that is exactly what I am suggesting. The Psalms are meant to be prayed.

Now, certainly, there has always been a musicality to the Psalms. We chant them around here sometimes. And many of our hymns are just Psalms set to music. The verbal form of *psalm* means to *sing* or to *make music*.

But even though the Psalms are musical, the message is still the emphasis. The lyrics matter. In fact, you can hear that in our reading from Colossians 3 today. Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms.” The content of the Psalms teaches us. And, I would like to suggest, they teach us how to pray.

I think this is even what Luke has in mind in Acts chapter two as he talks about the basic function of the church. And this is our theme verse for the year. You will find it on our banner downstairs, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” It is my view that the *prayers* here are the Psalms.

We are talking about prayer in Lent. Last week we defined prayer primarily as speaking God’s Word back to Him. Prayer is based on the Word of God—and on the basis of His promises. And this makes the Psalms pretty unique. The Psalms occupy a distinctive place in the Holy Scriptures. They are God’s Word. And they are, at the same time, words back to God.

And this is even why we conclude a reading of the Psalm the way that we do. It isn’t, “This is the Word of the Lord.” Instead, it is “Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” These are words that conclude our prayers.

Now, this is difficult to fathom—how the Psalms can be God’s Word and prayer at the same time. And this difficulty is followed by another one. As we pray the Psalms, we usually try and personalize them. We pray them as if they are our own. But soon, we come across passages that don’t really resonate with us. There are words we would not confess. We find things that we wouldn’t pray—things that don’t fit our lives.

For example, we find Psalms that claim innocence. For example, in Psalm 26, David prays, “Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and my mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness.” It is a pretty bold confession. I am not sure I am quite so confident before the Lord.

And there are the Psalms that seek God’s wrath. For example, just two Psalms later, in Psalm 28, we hear, “Do not drag me off with the wicked, with the workers of evil, who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts. Give to them according to their work and according to the evil of their deeds; give to them according to the work of their hands; render them their due reward.” Maybe we would actually think such things, but to say them in prayer sounds a little, well, vengeful.

So, let's see if we can recover what it means to pray the Psalms—and all of them. And let's begin by recognizing that the Psalms which trouble us should cause us to suspect that someone else is praying. Remember, of course, the original authors. For example, 73 Psalms are attributed to David. 12 to Asaph, David's choirmaster. 12 to the Levitical family of Korah, also serving in David's time.

And not just David or Asaph or Korah. The one calling for justice—the one proclaiming His innocence is first and foremost Jesus Christ. Christ prayed along with the prayers of David. Or, more precisely, Christ prayed them in David. David was a shadow and type of Christ's reality.

David even confesses as much. There is a Psalm of David in 2 Samuel 23. In his last words, David confesses, “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.” And in the words that follow, David prophesies—a thousand years beforehand—the coming King of Righteousness—not just Solomon—but Jesus Christ Himself.

Thus, the Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus in the truest sense of the Word. And in this sense, it becomes the prayer book of His body, the Church—and of Christians as individuals. But they are our prayers only insofar as Christ prays within us. We pray the Psalms on the basis of Jesus Christ. It is only through Him that we have access to the Father. It is only in Him that we pray according to His will.

Christ prays the prayers of the Psalms with us before the heavenly throne. And as we pray the Psalms we are joining in the prayer of Jesus. We say our *amen* to what He is praying. And that prayer reaches God's ears. In the weeks to come, we are going to talk about prayers that God hears and the prayers that he doesn't hear. But in the Psalms—prayed in faith—Christ has become our intercessor. Here we pray with Jesus. He is at the center of the Psalms. And we can have some certainty that we are praying God's will.

Now certainly, we don't place the entire Psalter in the mouth of Christ, exactly. Psalm 32 comes to mind, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” This Psalm is all about confession of our sin, something that Christ cannot do. He is without sin.

Here the Psalmist admits that he has kept his sin secret. A mistake that is entirely too common. And in concealing his sin, it torments him. This is what unconfessed sin does. It's a cancer on our souls. And he even found that the Lord's hand was heavy upon him. It was only in confession that he found relief. We know these words from our liturgy, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

So, this Psalm isn't the prayer of Jesus precisely. But it is in Christ that we find forgiveness. So even as we note that not every Psalm is the prayer of Jesus, we can still see that these kinds of Psalms are from Jesus for us. They are intended to be the prayers of the body of Christ.

You can even hear that recommendation in the conclusion of this section of this Psalm. “Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found.” The Psalms relate to Christ even when they aren't His individual words.

Thus, we learn from the prayer of the Psalms what we should pray. Again, admittedly, the Psalms range beyond our experiences. They include things we would never actually pray ourselves. But that is the point. And not just the difficult Psalms of innocence or vengeance, but even the Psalms of praise, much like we hear in our Psalm today. These are words intended to be our prayers—our word of response to our faithful God. “His steadfast love endures forever.”

And one more point—one that fits very well with Lent. Jesus died on the cross with the words from the Psalms on His lips. Psalm 22 begins with Jesus’ cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” And as you read the rest of the Psalm, clearly it is a prophecy of the cross.

So, let’s circle back to these two difficult categories. What do we do with Psalms of vengeance? Often, these are called the imprecatory Psalms. God does punish sin. And we cannot get away from that reality. But as sinners, if we are just looking for God to punish the people we don’t like, we misunderstand the Lord’s intent. The enemies in the Psalms are God’s enemies, not necessarily our own.

But insofar as Christ is in us, we can see that Christ took vengeance on our real enemies. Not people so much, but sin, and death, and the devil. And as Christ took upon Himself the wrath of God—the vengeance of God—we see that, in this way, He can forgive His enemies.

He suffered wrath so that those who were rightly His enemies, might find have a way back to grace. Now, His enemies might not want what He offers. They may prefer to remain under His wrath. But He has made a way for all His enemies to be reconciled and at peace. And this truth should shape the reading of these Psalms. And we should even include ourselves—what we once were.

It is as Paul says in Romans 5, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”

And what do we do with the Psalms of innocence? These kinds of Psalms might be a little easier to confess. We may not feel comfortable calling ourselves innocent, righteous, and devout. And, in ourselves—in our own contradictory hearts—we dare not confess such things.

But these Psalms are not just wishful thinking. And they are not positive confessions—as if we can manifest whatever we say. But we can pray these prayers from the heart of Jesus. He was sinless and pure. He conquered every temptation—as we heard on Sunday. And as we share in Christ, we share in His innocence—we participate in His blessedness. And in this way, these Psalms even become a way of life for us. These Psalms belong to us through Christ.

With all prayer, there must always be a second Person praying. And thus prayer really isn’t merely pouring out your heart to God in need—or even in joy. Instead, in is a continuous process of learning, appropriating, and impressing God’s will in Jesus Christ on our minds and hearts. We must pray with Christ.

The more deeply we grow in the Psalms—and the more often we pray them—the more simple and rewarding our prayers will become. And it is striking, as we pray the Psalms, how often the Psalmist does pray about the things of this life. They become intimately personal and practical when we make them our prayers. And that is where I want to end today.

In each of these Wednesday Lenten sermons, I am concluding with a written prayer. And since we are talking about the Psalms today, it seems fitting that I would conclude with a Psalm. We have heard from a number of them today. And my prayer is that this particular prayer will be your prayer—will be our prayer. The Psalm I am using is Psalm 103. You can turn there in your Bibles if you want. Or in the hymnal. Psalm 103. I included it in the sermon manuscript as well, if you are following along.

This Psalm has been called a psalm of praise. It teaches us to understand all the fullness of the gifts of God. The preservation of life. The forgiveness of sins. The great unity that we have with God. And it offers thanks and praise as a word of God-centered response for His great benefits. It is a wonderful picture of what our prayers can be. And on that note, we pray.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!”

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+