

Sunday August 10, 2025
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14

Lessons and Psalms

LESSON

If you take a Bible and hold it in your hands, and then open it to the middle, you should find yourself somewhere in the book of Psalms... and if you are exactly in the middle, you will find yourself at Psalm 117. At just two verses it is the shortest Psalm in the collection, and it is followed almost immediately by the longest Psalm, number 119, which has 176 verses.

Just to give you a little background on the psalms, I read from page 722 in VU:

“The Psalms of Hebrew Scripture are the oldest worship songs of the Jewish people. According to ancient tradition, the founder of this hymnody was the shepherd-king, David, who ruled in Canaan about 1000 BCE (3000 years ago). The work that he inspired led, over the centuries, to the emergence of the book of Psalms used for worship in the Temple at the time of Jesus. Thus it became in Hebrew, and through translation into Greek, Syriac, Latin and Coptic, the hymn book of the first Christians as well.

Christians have used psalms and songs from other parts of scripture to open their gatherings for worship, to respond to the lessons from other parts of scripture, and to mark different moments when celebrating communion at the Lord's table. In services of daily prayer, over the course of a week or a month, Christian communities could also say or sing their way through the whole Psalter.

With biblical translation fostered by the Reformers of the sixteenth century, the psalms, in the local language, became a part of worship in which all those gathered could share. Protestants took up the monastic practice of reading the psalms responsively, as well as singing “metrical” translations, where psalm texts were set to music with regular metre. Such versions were the only music that Anglican, Presbyterian and other Reformed congregations used in worship, until the eighteenth century, when freer paraphrases of the

psalms and other scripture texts began to appear, from the pens of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.”

From the Scottish Psalter of 1650 let us sing Psalm 23

Psalm 23 **748 VU** “God Is My Shepherd”

LESSON

It is possible to roughly divide the psalms into two sections, laments (psalms 1-89) and praise (psalms 90-150). Scholars, however, divide the psalms into five books: Psalms 1-41 (mostly psalms of David), psalms 42-72 (temple liturgy), psalms 73-89 (mostly psalms of Korah and Asaph), psalms 90-106 (mostly untitled psalms), psalms 107-150 (most liturgical of all). Ultimately, every attempt to collect like psalms together fails, because psalms of every type are scattered throughout the book.

Psalm 51 is a prayer for cleansing and pardon, and is titled, “To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” You remember the story right? It is spring, the time of year when the kings go to war. David is safely ensconced in the palace, the second highest elevation of all the buildings in Jerusalem, eclipsed only by the temple at the pinnacle of the mountain. Uriah the Hittite, a trusted leader within David’s army, lived just downhill from the palace. One afternoon David was strolling on the rooftop terrace of the palace and he spied Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, bathing on the roof of her own home. Scripture indicates that she was purifying herself after her monthly flow. Anyway, David saw the comely lady, inquired after her, had her sent over, and he, how do I say this, the Bible would say that David knew her, or went in to her. She conceived and sent word to the king that she was pregnant. David, not wanting to get caught, summoned Uriah from the battlefield. After receiving Uriah’s report on how the battle was progressing, he urged Uriah to spend the night with his wife before returning to battle. Uriah refused. So David wrote a letter to his commander, Joab, to set Uriah at the front of the battle, and then to pull back all the men except Uriah so that Uriah would be killed by the enemy. The

deed, once done, rendered Bathsheba a widow and David took her as one of his wives. She bore David a son, Absalom. The prophet Nathan went to David and delivered God's word of contempt for what David had done. The psalm is David's response. Listen now to David's words to God.

Psalm 51 **776 VU**

What an utterly dissatisfying response. In verse 4 David says to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned." Really? Did David not also sin against Bathsheba, against Uriah, against the people of Israel whom he ruled over? David was not being honest with either himself or God.

LESSON

Many of the psalms are attributed to David, but there are also a whole series of psalms that are presumed to have been written in the latter part of the 5th century BCE during the time of religious reform under Ezra. These psalms were intended for use in Temple liturgy and are attributed to Korah and Asaph. Psalm 42 is one such psalm.

Psalm 42 **766 VU** "As the Deer Pants for the Water"

LESSON

Some of the psalms are liturgical in nature and are used as entrance hymns. When we think of a hymn, we think of something that is sung. But we could actually physically act out some of the psalms. In a moment I am going to need half a dozen volunteers, but first the setting. Jerusalem is built on the top of a mountain. The temple is built at the pinnacle of the mountain, and somewhere downhill of the temple is the wall surrounding the city. The wall was there to protect the inhabitants from both wild animals and enemies alike. In the wall there were entrances to the city, entrances that had doors or gates that could be closed at night, or during an attack – think of some old English castle, you know the kind, with a moat and drawbridge, and/or an iron gate that would be raised or lowered. An entourage approaches the gates of the city seeking entrance and they are challenged by the gatekeeper. After they gain entry, they make their way ever upward towards the Temple itself and

again seek entry into the Temple courts to worship God. Now that the setting has been explained, I'm ready for some volunteers.

Psalm 24 751 VU

LESSON

The final collection of psalms (107-150) is the most liturgical of all the psalms. Special attention is given in these psalms to Jews living outside of Palestine (so we are talking here about after the Babylonian exile, probably sometime in the 4th century BCE). As I was saying, special attention is given to the Jews living outside of Palestine who are on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Psalms 120-134 are thought to be a collection for pilgrims in general, and psalms 113-118 are for use by pilgrims headed for Jerusalem for one of the three major pilgrimage festivals: Passover (Easter), Shavuot (Weeks/Pentecost – 7 weeks and 1 day after Passover), and Sukkot (Huts, Booths, Tabernacles – harvest festival equivalent to our Thanksgiving).

Psalm 133 is one of these pilgrimage psalms. Picture yourself walking towards Jerusalem from Syria or Lebanon or farther to celebrate your faith in the land of your ancestors as we sing psalm 133.

Psalm 133 856 VU “Behold, How Pleasant”

LESSON

Much of scripture can best be described as the words of humankind addressed to humankind, especially the historical writings and wisdom literature. Other parts purport to be the words of God addressed to humankind, specifically the prophetic writings. The psalms are distinct in that they are the words of humankind addressed to God. Whether they be hymns of praise, or prayers of lamentation, supplication, thanksgiving, or confidence, or perhaps even wisdom psalms, whether they originate in awe or ecstasy, fear or pain, or even in anger and hatred, the psalms cover the full range of human emotion, emotion poured out from human hearts to God's ear.