

“Looking at Today’s World Through the Psalms”

Leader’s guide by Pastor Katrina Steingraeber

This four-week Bible study looked at what was happening in the world through the lens of the Psalms. We explored Psalms of Lament, Celebration, Renewal, and Hope. The Bible study took place after Easter in early spring where flowers were popping out of the ground and trees were budding. We lamented racial injustice, covid-19, and the climate crisis. We looked at the signs of spring as signs of celebration, renewal, and hope for a new beginning.

Goal: The goal of this four-week journey through the Psalms was to provide a space for people to come together to discuss difficult topics. A place for open and honest discussion. A place to express frustrations and fears. Folks were encouraged to take the space need for self-care when the topic was too difficult.

Discussion notes: You may want to invite people to share in the reading of biblical text, poems, or other reading incorporated into the study, so a variety of voices can be heard and shared.

If offering the study on Zoom, it may be helpful to provide instructions for folks. It may also be helpful to have printed copies of the biblical text for those who forget their bibles.

Additional Content: Feel free to bring in art and images that are moving for you. You can also include poetry, prayers, and scholarly articles and readings as starting points for conversation.

Be creative and inspired by the response of the participants.

Psalms of Lament: Week 1

Before we begin: Introduce yourself and give a one work thought of feeling you have about the Psalms.

Trigger Warning: If at any time the images used or the topics discussed are difficult, please take care of yourself as you see fit.

Begin with a Prayer: “The Serenity Prayer” or something like that would be appropriate.

The New Serenity Prayer (a possible option)

by James Martin, SJ

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, which is pretty much everyone, since I’m clearly not you, God. At least not the last time I checked.

And while you’re at it, God, please give me the courage to change what I need to change about myself, which is frankly a lot, since, once again, I’m not you, which means I’m not perfect. It’s better for me to focus on changing myself than to worry about changing other people, who, as you’ll no doubt remember me saying, I can’t change anyway.

Finally, give me the wisdom to just shut up whenever I think that I'm clearly smarter than everyone else in the room, that no one knows what they're talking about except me, or that I alone have all the answers.

Basically, God, grant me the wisdom to remember that I'm not you. Amen!"

Information to share: "The psalms are a boundary thrown up against self-deception. They do not permit us to ignore and deny the darkness, personally or publicly, for that is where new life is given, whether on the third day or by some other uncontrolled schedule at work among us." (*Spirituality of the Psalms* preface xiii)

Read - Psalm 44:24-27

Reflections and questions: "The usual biblical explanation for the destruction and exile is that Israel sinned by being unfaithful to God. Yet the psalmist insists that at least now, in exile, the people remain loyal to God." (Jewish Study Bible pg. 1316)

"The psalm calls upon God to rescue them." (Jewish Study Bible pg. 1316)

Name some historical or current traumatic events that have affected you? Can you turn away from these events? Do you carry some guilt or burden from these events?

"Whether one is conservative or liberal, those events articulated and made inescapable a darkness and disorientation that could be covered up; but their power could not be denied. These psalms give us some access to those sensitivities."

"These psalms are deeply felt meditations on threats that now move against everything precious." (*Spirituality of the Psalms*, pg. 41)

Read - Psalm 60:3-7

"Divine anger leads to divine abandonment. Punishment as a result of divine anger is a common ancient Near Eastern idea." (Jewish Study Bible pg. 1333)

"Disorientation is viewed as trouble in a relationship." (*Spirituality of the Psalms* pg. 43)

Closing with a Blessing: This can either be one that you especially enjoy or perhaps you or the participants want to write a blessing specific to that day and place.

Psalms of Celebration: Week 2

Begin and invite people into the space with a poem (example below) or another short reading:

As I read this poem, I invite you to ask yourself: "When do I feel most burdened, and when do I feel most free?"

The Peace of Wild Things by Wendell Berry (pg. 131 *Send my Roots Rain* by Kim Langley)
When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound

In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the peace of wild things
 Who do not tax their lives with forethought
 Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars
 Waiting with their light. For a time
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

All three of the Psalms are part of the Davidic Collection. David is said to have written 75 of the 150 psalms.

Psalms 27 is a trust psalm. “Trust psalms express faith and confidence in God amid great difficulties, threats, and danger.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 850)

The Women's Bible Commentary categorizes Psalm 27 as an “individual lament.” “Individual laments were sung by single voices, and like community Laments, appealed to God for deliverance from a life-threatening situation. Gunkel points out the typical characteristics of these psalms: ‘first, the wailing, almost desperate lament and the passionate prayer; then, suddenly, the certainty of deliverance in a jubilant tone.’” (Women's Bible Commentary pg. 222)

- There is an overlap of the lament psalms in psalm 27. But it ends with a strong statement of faith, “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”
- The words “wait for” can also be translated to “hope in” they come from the same Hebrew word (קָוָה)

You could look at what is or has happened in your community, state, or nation and reflect on that as you read through each Psalm.

“I learned to trust the winter months of faith, when it's difficult to remember why one ever bothered to believe.” (*Listening for God* by Renita J. Weems pg. 36)

Are you freed or burdened by the words on the Psalms?

Psalms 34:1-3 is an acrostic poem. “Acrostic poems are written so that particular letters follow a pattern sometimes spelling out words or phrases. The book of Psalms contains eight acrostic poems, in which each line or section begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 850)

When reading the text below, read from right to left which is how Hebrew is read.

Psa. 34:1 לְדָוִד בְּשִׁנוֹתָיו אֶת-טַעְמוֹ לִפְנֵי אֲבִימֶלֶךְ אֵיגְרָשְׁהוּ וַיֵּלֶךְ:
 Go and (out) drive to and Abimelech (before) face to behavior change to David To

2 אֲבָרְכָה אֶת-יְהוָה בְּכָל-עֵת תְּמִיד תְּהַלְלוּ בְּפִי:
 Mouth with praise continually times all in Lord bless

3 בֵּיהוָה תִּתְהַלֵּל נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁמְעוּ עֲנָנִים וַיִּשְׁמְחוּ:
 In the Lord will be glorified my soul hear clouds and rejoice:

(to rejoice) glad and meek/humble hear to soul (boast) praise to God

גִּדְּלוּ לַיהוָה אֱתֵי וַיְרֹמְמָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוָה: ⁴

Together name exalt and with Lord to (become great/to grow up) Magnify

The Women's Bible Commentary categorizes Psalm 34 as a "Thanksgiving Hymn of the Individual." These "were sung by individual voices, praising God for goodness to them or on their behalf, usually for deliverance from some trying situation. Gunkel describes the occasion on which these songs would have been offered: 'A person is saved out of great distress, and now with grateful heart he brings a thank offering to YHWH.'"

You could pause and listen to a Taizé piece like the one in this link.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4Svh-9ohg4>

Psalm 138 is an individual song of thanksgiving. "Individual songs of thanksgiving praise God for help given to a person during crisis. Individuals would pray for God's help and promise to praise God afterward. They would thank God in the worshiping community, where their praise could build up the faith of others." (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 850)

"Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and the awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful." -- L. R. Knost, *Two Thousand Kisses a Day*

If time allows reflect on:

One or two words to describe the Psalms we talked about today. A feeling, a word or words you hold on to, a frustration you want to name, or anything else.

Closing: (You could use this reading or another short reading of your choice.)

The Reed by Caryl Houselander

"Emptiness is the beginning of contemplation.

It is not a fruitless emptiness, a void without a meaning; on the contrary, it has a shape, a form given to it by the purpose for which it is intended.

It is the emptiness like a hollow in the reed, the narrow riftless emptiness which can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and utter the song that is in his heart.

It is the emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water or wine.

It is the emptiness like that of the bird's nest built in a round warm ring to receive the little bird."

Psalms of Renewal: Week 3

Do a quick check-in to see how everyone is doing-especially after this long and emotional week.

“For it was you who formed me in my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” Psalm 139:13

God’s Presence

“How does one seek union with God?” the seeker asked. “The harder you seek, the more distance you create between God and you,” the elder answered. “So what does one do about the distance?” the seeker persisted. “Understand that it isn’t there,” the elder answered. “Does that mean that God and I are one?” the seeker continued. “Not one, not two,” the elder answered. “But how is that possible?” the seeker cried, dismayed. “The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and the song—not one, not two,” the elder answered.

“How do I know that God is present? The question has an urgency to it. It carries within itself the foundations of morality, the purpose of life. The elder in the story make the point: God and I are not the same thing but God is the essence of everything that is. God, in other words, is everywhere.

The presence of God does not depend on an act of God’s will; it depends simply on our realization that where I am, God is.

Joan Chittister in *40 Stories to Stir the Soul*

Psalm 139: *The Inescapable God*

Creation Psalm: “Creation Psalms are hymns that praise God as creator of heaven and earth.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 849)

Read all of Psalm 139

Outline: Four Stanzas

1-6: 1st stanza is about God’s knowledge.

“God knows all about us, intimately and completely.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 1000)

7-12: 2nd stanza is about God’s presence.

“The psalm claims there is no place, time, or situation that can separate us from God.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 1000)

13-18: 3rd stanza is about God the Creator.

“To be ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ means that every human being is a unique and marvelous act of God’s creation. God knows our past and our future.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 1000)

19-24: 4th stanza (a bit of a shift)

“The psalmist begs God, who searches and knows all people, to investigate and prove that the accusations of the wicked are false.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 1001)

Question from the Lutheran Study Bible: “We are not mere accidents of nature, but loving creations of the Creator. [What difference does this make to you?](#)” (pg. 1000)

Let’s look at the questions in the beginning reading.

[How does one seek union with God? How do I know that God is present? Does it make you uncomfortable to know that God knows all the dark secrets in our hearts?](#)

“Anger is here in abundance. And anger is topped by hatred. The true believer hated powerfully and finds a community with Yahweh (the God of Israel) who also hates: (139:21-22)” (pg. 55 *Praying the Psalms* by Walter Brueggemann)

“Indeed, the speaker, like Yahweh, is never passive or apathetic. Of course it might be objected that the speaker too readily identifies his own hatred with that of God. Perhaps so. But in the moment of hatred, that is what happens to all of us. This anger is not only spiritually liberated. It is psychologically honest.” (pg. 55 *Praying the Psalms* by Walter Brueggemann)

God and Love

God’s signature is on the whole of nature. All creatures are love letters from God to us. They are outbursts of love. The whole of nature is bursting with love, set in it by God, who is love, to kindle the fire of love in us.

All things have no other reason for existing, no other meaning. They can give us no satisfaction or pleasure beyond this, to stir in us the love of God.

Nature is like God’s shadow, reflecting God’s beauty and splendor. The quiet blue lake has the splendor of God. God’s fingerprints are upon every particle of matter. In every atom is an image of the Trinity, the figure of the triune God. That is why God’s creation so fills us with enthusiasm.

My body was also made for the love of God. Every cell in my body is a hymn to my creator and a declaration of love.

As the kingfisher was made to fish and the humming bird to suck nectar from flowers, so we were made for contemplation and love of God.

Ernesto Cardenal in “*Abide in Love*”

Psalm 46: God’s Defense of God’s City and People

Trust Psalm: “Trust psalms express faith and confidence in God amid great difficulties, threats, and dangers.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 850)

Read all of Psalm 46

Outline: Three Stanzas

1-3: 1st stanza

“Many dangers and threats surround the community...the treat that comes from cosmic forces of chaos.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 898)

4-7: 2nd stanza

“Portrays the threats that human power pose to God’s people and describes the deliverance God offers in the face of cosmic threats.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 849)

8-11: 3rd stanza

“The Lord delivers the people from the earthly threats by destroying the weapons of war.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 899)

Fun Fact: Martin Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is based on this psalm.

“John Calvin describes the Psalms as “An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul.” And so they are. They tell all about us. The Psalms provide space for full linguistic freedom in which nothing is censored or precluded.” (pgs. 65-66 *Praying the Psalms* by Walter Brueggemann)

Closing: You could end with reading from Mya Angelo or with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton message on Breathing: On Facebook. Or a prayer of blessing.

Psalm of Hope and Conclusion: Week 4

You could begin with this reflection or a short prayer:

“Hi God.

I am just a mess.

It is all hopeless.

What else is new?

I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously You are not.

I know I have no control over other people’s lives, and I hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am

Wow. Can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon –say two-ish?

Thank You in advance for Your company and blessings.

You have never once let me down.”

--Anne Lamott in “*Help. Thanks. Wow.*”

Psalm 121: “Liturgies were usually composed for more than one person to perform and often for some specific purpose (request for God’s help or thank God). A priest or another leader of the people probable spoke at least part of many of these psalms.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 849)

“A trust psalm that promises protection for a journey.” (Lutheran Study Bible pg. 989)

Read Psalm 121

Both the NRSV and the Jewish Study Bible version

“So I take these psalmic words as ‘the voice of the dead,’ who may turn out to be the most living, present, and powerful ones among us (Hebrews 12:1). (Spirituality of the Psalms pg. xiii)

“The psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected. That new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back. The psalmist know that we can never go home again.” (Spirituality of the Psalms pg. 47)

Questions: How does the word keeper feel compared to the word guardian? Is there a difference?

In the Lutheran Study Bible the questions related to this Psalm are... “When have you needed God’s protection? At what time of life do you think we need God’s protection the most?” (pg. 989)

God walks with us in difficult times. God meets us where we are.
How does this resonate with you?

“In the heart of a liminal season, when something has ended and we don’t know where we are headed, people need help interpreting their past. People also need to know that they are pursuing something that matters now: worthy work, a shared common cause, or a sense of rootedness to something enduring. Thomas Merton said, ‘Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are, in their own proper time and place, in the history to which they belong and to which they must inevitably contribute.’” (*How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* by Susan Beaumont pg. 113)

Poem or another reading: (this one could be used or a reading of your choice)

Poem -- *[God speaks to each of us]* Rainer Maria Rilke (*Send my Roots Rains: A Companion on the Grief Journey* by Kim Langley)

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like a flame
And make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don’t let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country then call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Reflections and Questions: (see pg. 65 in *Send My Roots Rain*) The last line speaks to me this morning. God is giving me God's hand.

Where do we go from here? Where do you find hope?

Final thoughts and closing prayer or blessing: Any thoughts or comments on the Psalms study, today and/or other weeks?

You could allow time to debrief the whole study.