

“Prayer Practice
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/9/25

Well, my friends, welcome to Lent. In this season we are turning to the psalms as the inspiration for our worship. Why the psalms, why now? I don't know about you, but when I am overwhelmed, I find myself looking to art for meaning-making. As a language lover, I am particularly drawn to poetry: short, digestible units of well-chosen words that help me access emotions I can't quite express or give shape to my incoherent tangle of thoughts.

The psalms are some of the most enduring poetry ever written – how many other twenty-five-hundred-year-old poems have you read this week? We had to squish Psalm 139 to get it to fit on one page in the bulletin – we're trying to be more eco-conscious with our printing habits – but if you open your pew bible to page 577, you will see today's psalm lined out with proper poetic spacing. Most Hebrew poetry is written in non-rhyming couplets, with the first line expressing a thought and the following line reimagining or reinterpreting that thought.

These ancient poems, written for singing, cover a wide range of genres and express a wide variety of emotions: praise, lament, anger, cursing, thanksgiving, confession, wisdom-seeking, storytelling. The psalms give us permission to plead with God, to beg God for what we need. The psalms give us words to curse our enemies, words we are sometimes scared to say out loud but that allow us to name our true feelings. And the psalms remind us of all the reasons we are called to praise God: the goodness of God's creation, the wideness of God's mercy, God's faithfulness in times of trouble. The psalms encompass the range of human experience and give us a vocabulary for expressing all of our humanity to God in prayer.

Which brings us to the second reason to spend time with the psalms this Lent. As I mentioned earlier, the season of Lent is a time to draw near to God, which we often do by taking on spiritual disciplines. Somewhere along the line in American culture we flattened this into simply “giving something up for Lent” – not that there's anything wrong with limiting your chocolate or alcohol consumption in this season; denying yourself those things is a way of identifying with Jesus fasting in the wilderness. But the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and doing mercy do more than that – they draw us into relationship with God and with our neighbors. They are a way of making justice.

In an Ash Wednesday devotional, Chad Hyatt, pastor of Mercy Community Church in Atlanta, a faith community built especially with the unhoused in mind, put it this way: “Fasting isn't just giving something up. Fasting is protest anchored in personal sacrifice. It is a cry to God for peace, for healing, for the world to be set to rights. Doing mercy is not just alms, an offering given to care for the needs of others. Doing mercy is a way of living in relationship that seeks to honor all the ways that we are bound to one another as human beings, especially the most vulnerable in our communities. [And] prayer is stopping, if even for just a moment, in order to hold our hearts and bodies in God's presence. Maybe there are words. Maybe not. But it is the intentional holding of space to recognize God that is the basis of all authentic prayer.”

“These ancient practices,” Hyatt writes, “shape our way of living by cultivating room within our hearts for a clear-sighted love of God and neighbor (and even enemy). They can give us space to breathe again. They can soothe our anxious thoughts and quiet our fears by helping us to see that as sin-sick and chaos-wracked as our world seems to be, it is also unfailingly awash in the grace of God—if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear.” Lenten disciplines can reorient us, reground us, and renew us in God's love.

With this in mind, we take up the Lenten discipline of connecting to God in prayer by exploring the Psalter, the church's prayer book. And we begin with Psalm 139, one of the most intimate psalms, and perhaps the epitome of holding space to recognize God.

At the January meeting of our Presbytery, I met Peter Pedemonti, the co-director of the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia. Peter and his colleagues draw together people from a spectrum of faith traditions to advocate for the rights of immigrants and to accompany them to the court cases that determine their ongoing status. Peter was part of a panel talking about the shifting landscape of immigration in the US and how churches can continue to provide welcome and support despite policy changes. His colleague from Catholic Charities was near tears as she described the end of the refugee resettlement program and her heartache for all the families who were expecting to be able to come to the US this year. As you can imagine, the overall tone of the panel was somber, and the panelists, though experts, had more questions than answers.

Afterward I ended up at a lunch table with Peter, and I asked him, “what’s helping you through the chaos right now?” selfishly asking to hear something I might apply in my own life. He said, “I’ve been praying a lot... just the sweetness of being near to Jesus. The sweetness of that connection is balm for my soul.” I’ve thought about that a lot over the last few weeks. As Presbyterians I don’t know how often we put down whatever we’re working on to simply draw near to God for pure comfort, for the sweetness of it.

But Psalm 139 reminds us that God is always present, always near to us, whether or not we pause to respond to that nearness with our own drawing near. The psalmist opens by describing all the places God is: with him from dawn till dusk, in his mind before he speaks, in front of, behind, above, below, even in Sheol, the place of the dead. Imagine it, even in the place of the dead, God is there. Even the darkness, a place we often identify as the opposite of God’s light, even the darkness is not dark to God. God is there, and God can find us there. There is nowhere a human being can go where God cannot be found. God draws near to us through it all. God holds tight to us through it all.

From this sense of the totality of God’s presence, the psalmist turns inward, to consider God’s creation of his own person. God saw him in his mother’s womb, he says – another place of darkness that is visible to God. As a sculptor can see what will be made of the stone when it is still an unworked block, God can see what the human will become when he is still a mass of cells hidden away deep in his mother’s body.

And when the psalmist recognizes that God has created him personally, intricately weaving him together in the dark of the womb, he gives up trying to imagine just how many thoughts God must have, to be able to make not only the psalmist, but every *thing* in the universe. Our poet suddenly sees that God is both more powerful than we could ever comprehend and nearer to us than breath; both everywhere there is to go and intimately concerned with us. When God sees us, God knows us perfectly; when we see God, we are left with wonder at our own finitude. And God is there at the end, as at the beginning. We join the psalmist in saying: wow.

I wonder if Jesus muttered Psalm 139 to himself as he was wandering alone in the wilderness, battling hunger and the temptations of Satan. I wonder if Jesus remembered these words and thought, God is even here, in the wilderness. God formed me in my mother’s womb. God is behind and before; God’s hand is upon me. Even the darkness is not dark to you. Even the place of the dead is a place where God is found.

And I wonder if, as Jesus was being tempted by the devil, he also identified with the sudden anger of the psalmist, this sharp turn in the last third of the prayer, asking God to kill the wicked. If you felt like that part came out of nowhere, you’re not alone: in Bible Study on Wednesday the group developed a theory that this was a different psalm, tacked on later in a genre mashup.

But perhaps we can think of the last few verses as the psalmist coming to a moment of realization. Our poet has recognized God’s transcendence, God’s presence, God’s intimate care of everything God has made – and suddenly people who hate God’s ways make the poet angry. People who cannot see the goodness of God, who

insist on destruction and malice, who perpetuate evil – these people are not only God’s enemies, they have also become the psalmist’s enemies. He wishes God would rid the world of them.

It’s like a flame of righteousness has been lit underneath our writer – having undertaken his journey of wonder, he sees the world differently now. And he wants the world to be more like the world God intends, a world where each person lives out their belovedness in harmony with one another and with God.

Just as we see the psalmist’s promise of God’s nearness as a comfort, we can see his anger as a comfort. When we’re full of rage at injustice, we’re not the only ones. This psalm gives us permission to be angry about people and things that go against God’s ways. This psalm gives us words to take our frustration to God, to express the full range of our emotions. Not just to draw near to God for sweetness, but to draw near to God to say: God, would you please do something about the evil in the world? I am sick of it!

But crucially, the psalm leaves the retribution to God: oh, that *you* would kill the wicked, O God. The psalmist is not asking God for permission to go out with his own sword in his hand to kill anyone he, in his humanity, considers God’s enemy. And as quickly as our poet turns to anger, he also turns to introspection: search *me*, O God, and know *my* heart; see if there is any wicked way in *me*.

During Lent, as we join Christ in his wilderness wandering, we follow the pattern of Psalm 139. We contemplate the holy mysteries of God, marveling at the ways that God’s character weaves together transcendence and nearness, justice and mercy, omnipotence and intimacy. We praise God, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And at the same time, our recognition of God’s goodness turns us to the pursuit of righteousness. We commit ourselves to working together with God and one another for a more just world, a world where every living thing is treated as the miraculous creation of God that it is. And lest our pursuit of righteousness harden into self-righteousness, we also join the psalmist in turning our gaze inward, examining our own lives to see if there is any wicked way in us. We name our sins before God and one another, practicing penitence together in this holy season.

Some Lents we kind of have to drag ourselves into the wilderness with Christ, with hymns in minor keys and sermons tackling the toughest teachings of our Savior. And some Lents we are already in the wilderness, either individually or collectively. In the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic first scrambled our lives, I remember people referring to the liturgical season as “the Lentiest Lent I ever Lented.” I imagine we’re in for another one of those very Lenty Lents.

So I invite you to consider taking on a Lenten discipline, a daily practice that can reorient you, reground you, and renew you in God’s love. Maybe it’s fasting from something that harms God’s creation, human or otherwise, as a way of crying out to God for the world to be set to rights. Maybe it’s doing mercy in a way that binds us together with the vulnerable. Maybe it’s prayer – from the psalms or otherwise – that helps us draw near to God and inspires us to love our neighbor. Whatever you choose, may you find constant reminders that the world is unfailingly awash in the grace of God, who never leaves us alone.