

Necessary songs: The case for singing the entire Psalter

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When I asked my dad what songs he sang in church during the war, he explained that with his native Netherlands under Nazi occupation, worshipers couldn't sing anything that smacked of nationalism—nothing that would undermine the powerful oppressors. Corrie ten Boom, famed author of *The Hiding Place*, wrote about her brother's imprisonment for intoning the national anthem on the organ after a church service. But in my father's conservative Calvinist congregation, this was not an issue. They would not think of singing the national anthem in the liturgy. They would not even sing hymns. They stuck to psalms sung to the Genevan tunes that had been handed down by John Calvin. The Nazis saw the church's Psalter as innocuous. Little did they know.

My father recounted, "In the morning we might sing strains of Psalm 68 . . . 'Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him.'" The lofty melody made the text soar. God comes in procession and leads the captives to freedom. This psalm, and many like it, ennobled the church to assert its voice, to nerve a people who were resisting the forces of evil. "Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation."

After musing a bit my father added, "At night we sometimes sang a different sort of psalm." He recalled particularly the congregation's vesper singing of Psalm 79. This is no triumph song. The text drips with fear, doubt, anger and even wishes for revenge. My dad then recited in Dutch strophes of Psalm 79 that he knows by memory. "O God, the nations have come into your inheritance . . . they have murdered your people . . . How long, O Lord? . . . save those doomed to die . . .

repay the people who are doing this to us . . .” After thinking about these nighttime cries and curses, my father smiled sadly and sighed. “We probably should not have sung these psalms. We were angry. It wasn’t very Christian.”

Today you will rarely hear a triumphant Psalm 68 sung in many churches, much less a lamenting Psalm 79. My parents immigrated to the United States, and in time they were swept up into a North American church scene fixated on a cult of joy and happiness. They were shamed into shelving the psalms that had given voice to their deepest sorrows, fears and anger.

The modern church’s halfhearted reception of the Psalter is not a new phenomenon. Isaac Watts was open in his criticism of those who advocated singing the entire Psalter in Christian worship. It was not that he disliked psalms; he set much of the Psalter in metrical verse. But his love of the Psalter was conditional. In a preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs in Three Books*, Watts decried the psalm-singing practices of the church:

Hence it comes to pass, that when spiritual Affections are excited within us, and our Souls are rais’d a little above this Earth in the Beginning of a Psalm, we are check’d on a sudden in our Ascent toward Heaven by some Expressions that are more suited to the Days of *Carnal Ordinances*, and fit only to be sung in the *Worldly Sanctuary*.

Watts then explains why he paraphrases many psalms:

Yet you will always find in this Paraphrase dark Expressions enlighten’d, and the Levitical Ceremonies and Hebrew Forms of Speech changed into the Worship of the Gospel, and explain’d in the language of our Time and Nation; and what would not bear such an Alteration is omitted and laid aside. After this Manner should I rejoice to see a good Part of the Book of Psalms fitted for the use of our Churches, and *David* converted into a Christian.

Though we may balk at Watts’s liturgical and theological approach to the psalms, an approach that borders on xenophobia, we nonetheless love to sing from his Psalter: Psalm 23 (“My Shepherd Will Supply My Need”), Psalm 72 (“Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun”), Psalm 90 (“Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”) and Psalm 98 (“Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come”). At least in our singing habits, we live quite comfortably with David’s conversion at the pen of Isaac Watts and others who followed his example.

What about Watts's practice of laying aside hopeless psalms? Watts would not include Psalm 79. Such psalms were beyond the pale of Christianity, a lesson my father learned later in life. Though we may wag our fingers at Watts, the modern North American church has followed his lead. In fact, we've taken censorship further. Unless a church adheres to the use of the lectionary, it's likely that we pray or sing only a small portion of the Psalter in worship. Even churches that adhere to lectionary practice use a lectionary Psalter that's significantly less inclusive than the one produced by Watts. We continue to gravitate toward those psalms that prop up our sense of completeness, well-being, gratification and happiness.

What is lost when we abridge the Psalter? In short, we lose the full voice of corporate prayer, and by extension we compromise both the spiritual health of the community and the pastoral care of individuals.

In the early 1990s I followed the movement of a group of liturgical theologians who purposed to bring the practice of lament back into corporate worship. One of the ways they hoped to do this was through singing the full breadth of the Psalter. Although this was a well-grounded initiative, it failed. When push came to shove, congregants felt ill at ease singing songs of pain or defiance. My father, they would say, had good reason to sing Psalm 79. But in our current situation of relative peace and affluence, the church is not "feeling it" when it comes to lament. This is a fair assessment. How can we pray the prayer of the oppressed when we're not oppressed? In the end it is a matter of integrity.

But herein lies the problem. Where did we get the idea that we should "feel" that a psalm is *ours*? Why must our voice be primary? What if we reframed and re-presented these psalms in such a way that suggests, even demands, that we hear the voices of others? Then, and perhaps only then, can we pray these psalms with integrity.

I belong to two communities that have put the Psalter at the heart of worship. A decade or so ago the chapel staff at Princeton Theological Seminary set out to provide manuals and models for corporate prayer to aid student worship leaders. Communal prayer life was languishing in language that was overly self-reflective, ungrounded or just plain flat. Perhaps, as a seminary in the Reformed tradition, we could reclaim the Psalter as model for prayer and praise. We decided to try this. For a full semester we included a psalm in every worship service. It could be read responsively. It could be sung as a hymn, chanted, preached or spoken as the prayer

or a blessing. But it would be present. We have never looked back. Our daily prayer services are shaped by the Psalter.

Likewise, the church I attend has picked up the Psalter as a guide for weekly services. Very often this will be the lectionary psalm, but more and more we are exploring the psalms as the primer for our praise and prayer in all parts of the liturgy. Recently our Sunday morning sermon focused on the gospel reading from Luke 17. Our preacher elected to go “off-lectionary,” and rather than hearing the appointed Psalm 66 we experienced the devastating prayer of Psalm 88. This is a prayer of darkness, the poster-child psalm for hopelessness. The preacher read the paraphrase from *The Message*, which includes these words:

God, you're my last chance of the day . . .
I'm camped on the edge of hell.
You've dropped me into a bottomless pit,
sunk me in a pitch-black abyss . . .
For as long as I remember I've been hurting;
I've taken the worst you can hand out, and I've had it.
You made lover and neighbor alike dump me;
the only friend I have left is Darkness.

The reading was framed by the congregation singing the Taizé chant, “Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away . . .,” and then the choir continued to sing softly under the psalm reading. This led directly into the reading of the gospel lection. It was utterly clear that the psalm was not about us. It was about the plight of the lepers in the narrative. It was their voices that we heard.

That afternoon my family had our neighbors over for coffee. They had been in church that morning, and our conversation turned to Psalm 88. They found its inclusion in the liturgy to be profoundly moving. They commented on the incredibly beautiful choral singing and the profound interpretive reading. “Why haven’t we heard this psalm in church before?”

The singing and the reading were simple—nothing complex. But the experience was deeply resonant with my friends because they are living in the aftermath of an unfathomable family loss. Psalm 88 was liturgically set up so that we might hear the voices of ten lepers. But the pastors of my church also understood that there are people in the church who would hear their own voices. My friends experienced Psalm

88 as beautiful and moving because, to their surprise, their lonely prayer of hopelessness was uttered aloud in the community. And even as their despair was voiced, the congregation gave expression to a hope my friends could not yet voice: “Within our darkest night, God kindles the fire that never dies away . . .”

Later that week a Ph.D. student led the seminary’s daily worship service. This student is from Latin America and is researching the theology of Ignacio Ellacuría, a Jesuit priest who used his position in the church and academy to denounce massacres and disappearances at the hands of the Salvadoran government. Later, Ellacuría himself was murdered by government forces—militants who had received training and tactical supplies from the United States. The student wanted to lead the seminary in prayer for the communities in Central America that have gone through incredible torture because of their stand with the poor and disenfranchised. Knowing that we needed to have a psalm enacted in worship, he asked me to help him find a scriptural prayer that would grab us by the cheeks and wake us up to the realities beyond the walls of our churches. So we went on a hunt. What we found astounded both of us.

Psalm 94 is yet another unlikely candidate for worship. In our pew psalters we found a paraphrase of the psalm by John Bell. It is set to a melody by Salvadoran composer Guillermo Cuéllar titled “Vos sos el destazado.” Our student sucked in his breath when I asked him to translate the title. After a pause, he replied that it was something like, “You who are being butchered.” In worship, members of our congregation were asked to open their psalters and follow along. A worship leader explained that while such a psalm may seem to be over the top in its depiction of violence, many in our world know that such violence is a reality. “Listen to their voices of lament as our cantor sings.”

*O great God and Lord of the earth,
rouse yourself and demonstrate justice;
give the arrogant what they deserve,
silence all malevolent boasting.
See how some you love are broken,
for they know the weight of oppression;
even widows and orphans are murdered,
and poor strangers are innocent victims.*

*Should the wrong change places with right
and the courts play host to corruption;
should the innocent fear for their lives
while the guilty smile at their scheming;
still the Lord will be your refuge,
be your strength and courage and tower.
Though your foot should verge on slipping,
God will cherish, keep and protect you.*

The service concluded with the singing of a Brazilian hymn, “*Pelas dores desta mundo / For the Troubles and the Sufferings of the World.*”

Again, I am hard-pressed to point to a community I know that could sing Psalm 94 out of its own experiences. Yet with pastoral framing and preparation, our community was enabled through this psalm to hear the voices of another part of the body of Christ, one that is otherwise silenced in our liturgies. And though I have no testimony of the conversations that may have followed the service, I have no doubt that there were people in worship who heard their own voices in the psalm. Perhaps they also heard the voices of those just down the street who are plagued by systemic violence and corruption.

Some may think that their congregation won't be able to hear voices beyond their own in the liturgical enactment of the lament psalms. I would point to the one lament that does find its way into every church: Psalm 22. And why? Because we hear in this psalm the voice of Christ. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ has hallowed this lament for all time. And by extension, Christ hallows our lament. While some on Good Friday will hear only Christ's voice, many will be deeply touched by the psalm because it expresses their own sense of forsakenness. If we may hear the voice of Christ as head in the Psalter, we may also hear the voice of the *body of Christ* in the Psalter. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

All the things of which the Psalter speaks, which individuals can never fully comprehend and call their own, live only in the whole Christ. That is why the prayer of the Psalms belongs in the community in a special way. Even if a verse or a psalm is not my own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the community; and it is quite certainly the prayer of the truly human Jesus Christ and his body on earth.

In closing, I offer a disclaimer. It may seem that I have taken swipes at Watts and the lectionary and at anyone who might limit the breadth of the Psalter. But even as I claim that the full Psalter is a necessary model for the full breadth of prayer, I urge those who use it to handle it with care. Watts would not have us sing the vengeful words of Psalm 137. The lectionary includes the beautiful words of Psalm 139, but navigates around the spiteful verses. These abridged versions of the psalms are a gift to the church. They have helped point communities to portions that are more commonly digestible. They have helped us to avert pastoral catastrophes. My claim is that in spite of these realities, the abridged Psalter is inadequate as a model for the full life of prayer.

The psalm regimen of both my church and my seminary is just that—a regimen, a regular stretching of prayer muscles. Communities don't get to this point overnight. My health insurance company has a vested interest in my health. In fact, it has built in some incentives to get me to exercise regularly. But it adds a caution: don't engage in strenuous exercise without first consulting your doctor. For the confirmed couch potato, jogging even a few miles can prove injurious. The same may be said of a community's regimen of prayer. Do we need the entire Psalter as a model for prayer? Yes, I believe we do. Does every community need every single psalm and right away? No. For congregations and communities that have not exercised these prayer muscles, that have not raised their heart rate in a long time, this may be dangerous. The full life of prayer needs to be entered into with pastoral discernment.

The psalms may be dangerous. But we will fail to hear Christ's voice, both as head and body, if we do not practice the prayers of the Psalter. Not to hear Christ's voice—this is perilous indeed.