

At the 10:30 am service on January 31, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 23 (KJV) and Psalm 23 (*Psalms/Now*).

“The Psalms and Psalm 23”

It may seem strange for a Christian church to read just the Psalms in worship. I have always had a Gospel or New Testament reading in worship to emphasize our life in Christ. Trappist monk Thomas Merton, a trustworthy authority, gives me a green light to use the Psalms as a sole text in this setting.

By the way, I was made conscious this week at a lecture in Berkeley of the importance of inclusive language in worship but I also quote people as they write, like Merton.

In his brief book, *Praying the Psalms*, he writes, “The Church loves to sing over and over again the songs of the old psalmists because in them she is singing of her knowledge of God, of her union with Him. But God has given Himself to us in Christ. The Psalms are full of the Incarnate Word. Not only is David (the purported author of the Psalms) a ‘type’ of Christ, but the whole Psalter has always been regarded by the Church, in her liturgy, as though it were a summary and compendium of all that God has revealed.

“In other words the Psalms contain in themselves all the Old and New Testaments, the whole Mystery of Christ. In singing the Psalms...the Church is therefore singing the wedding hymn of her union with God in Christ.”

Dick asked me a couple of weeks ago if we were continuing this year with our plan to learn and sing a new Psalm every month. I was thinking of picking them up in February and thought of having a Psalm Sunday to kick it off. Instead, it has fallen to this fifth Sunday in January. For today’s worship service, I thought it would be great to have a Psalm for every musical piece and I thank Dick for jumping onboard. For my part I have chosen three settings of Psalm 23 for the hymns. Our hymnal contains six versions of Psalm 23 and many other Psalms.

This sermon will add to what has already been said about the Psalms and conclude with a word on Psalm 23.

In last week’s sermon I mentioned that situations like the disaster in Haiti challenge our understanding of God and God’s role in creation. Why would so much destruction and pain take place in God’s creation? It’s an eternal mystery. Having spun the concept of God around last week I was happy to see Merton’s words.

He writes: “...when one becomes conscious of who God really is, and when one realizes that He who is Almighty, and infinitely Holy, has ‘done great things to us,’ the only possible reaction is the cry of half-articulate exultation that bursts from the depths of our being in amazement at the tremendous, inexplicable goodness of God to human beings. The Psalms are all made up of such cries – cries of wonder, exultation, anguish or joy...

“The Psalms are not abstract treatises on the divine nature,” he writes. “In them we learn to know God not by analyzing various concepts of His divinity, but by praising and loving

Him.” Through years of meditation on the Psalms Merton knows them intimately and therefore can comment as he does on God’s nature in them.

However, it’s also important to realize that God emerges in the Psalms primarily from the existential experiences of human beings.

Presbyterian scholar Walter Brueggemann says as much in his book with the same title as Merton’s, *Praying the Psalms*. He says every human being is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. Orientation is equilibrium when all is going fine but, by and large, that’s not the case in our lives.

He writes: “The Psalms mostly do not emerge out of situations of equilibrium. Rather, people are driven to such poignant prayer and song as are found in the Psalter precisely by experiences of dislocation and relocation. It is experiences of being overwhelmed, nearly destroyed, and surprisingly given life which empower us to pray and sing.”

The Psalms speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. Smooth speech and conduct is a cover-up much of the time, writes Brueggemann, whereas the speech of the Psalms is often abrasive and dangerous. It announces that our *common* experience is not one of well being and equilibrium, but a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation.

Olive Kitteridge in the book by Elizabeth Strout of the name *Olive Kitteridge* finds an ally in Brueggemann when she describes her husband Henry as irritating “with his steadfast way of remaining naïve, as though life were just what a Sears catalogue told you it was: everyone standing around smiling.” (p.68)

Brueggemann says that when we cover up the difficulties of life – our own, that of family or neighbor (and our neighbors in Haiti) we miss the point of the Psalms; we miss what the Psalms provide and give us; we miss important opportunities of having the Psalms minister to us in our times of need. The Psalms minister to us precisely when we honestly take to God our stresses, struggles, pain and difficulties.

Listen to the energy and honesty of these words from Psalm 55 which I chose at random when writing this sermon:

⁴My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
⁵Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
⁶And I say, ‘O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
⁷truly, I would flee far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness;
⁸I would hurry to find a shelter for myself
from the raging wind and tempest.’

God is alive in the Psalms precisely because the speaker or singer of the Psalm is honestly alive and the same happens to us when we pray and sing in the spirit of the Psalms. Try reading the Psalms in one sitting, all 150 chapters. It's quite an experience. Or read a Psalm a day until you are through with them. You'll be glad you did. It will change your life.

And now, a brief look at Psalm 23. This is the only chapter in the Bible that I read from the King James or Authorized Version. I love the poetry and so did Shakespeare.

Suellen tells me that she memorized Psalm 23 in the second grade and received a book mark for her efforts. I asked her how it spoke to her at the time. She said it was scary – the part of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. It was also assuring and beautiful for a country girl. It reminded her of the creek in the woods. I remember the Psalm as enormously comforting and I couldn't get enough of it. "The Lord is my shepherd." I loved that!

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

I love the word "Yea" in the Line: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

The Psalmist feels the presence of attacking enemies and he is literally walking through the valley of the shadow of death. How many of us have felt this at some point in our life. The enemy can be a colleague at work who is so damaging that your job is threatened. You are walking in the valley of the shadow of the possible loss or death of your job. In the *Psalms/Now* version the enemy is depression. One can take this chapter in many ways.

Psalm 23 is a song of trust. In verses 1 through 4 God or Yahweh is the good shepherd and in verses 5 and 6 Yahweh is the divine host. Shepherd was the universal image of king in the ancient world, emphasizing leadership and providence for his subjects. One has the wonderful image of a shepherd comforting, leading, restoring and guiding one in one's deepest darkness. We get through tough times with the Shepherd. We trust also that the Shepherd will help us to sit at table with our enemies and create mutual peace. In all this our lives are filled with goodness and mercy and we dwell in God's house or in God's country forever (for the Psalmist, God's house could be the temple or the land).

The Psalmist encourages us to see the Shepherd in our national leader, our king, so to speak, or more broadly and appropriately in our national leaders. Their roles are the same as those expressed in Psalm 23. The divine Shepherd is a model of great leadership. It is no surprise that one of the names for Jesus was "shepherd." He showed the way of the divine Shepherd and is also a model for Christians in leadership roles

As a whole the Psalms and Psalm 23 are models for everyone. When we are filled with terror, anguish, fear and horror, when we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death or contemplating an enemy, to name a few disorienting experiences, we know that we can turn to the words of fellow seekers in the Psalms and find comfort, healing, strength and power to carry on and most of all we will find God in fresh and new ways.

God bless you in your search and discovery. God bless you in your prayers and singing of the Psalms. God bless your life. Amen.