

Poetic Imagination
The Many Moods of the Psalms
May 3, 2017
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

INTRO + FAVORITE PSALM

Well, I wanted to talk about lament tonight. That's where my ideas were circling, and that's what I said almost immediately over lunch when Rabbi Cohn first asked what part in this series I might like to play. I suppose it's a strange thing to immediately want to take on the voice of lament—naming darkness and anger and grief and not running away from those things but just sitting for a long while and holding them out in front of you and God and everyone else. I don't know about you, but for me, there's a real comfort in reading ancient words from folks who have felt what we feel and put words to it.

But as I started to plot out what I might say tonight, I began to recognize that the truth-telling to which I am drawn is not just about lament but about what Joseph Campbell says "can be known but not told." In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell writes, "Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth--penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told."

I am drawn to poetry. I use a fair amount of poetry in my sermons and in the worship services I help create. As a younger person, I didn't really understand the language of poetry. I was particularly bored by the rhyming, Hallmark stuff and wrongheadedly dismissed poetry as cutesy or obtuse. I'm not sure who changed my mind, but surely it was either Mary Oliver or Wendell Berry or maybe my college sweetheart-turned-husband writing poetry for the university's literary magazine.

Poetry changes the way we listen and hear, and that's part of what we are hoping to do when we gather in this space together. We need to listen together and actually hear together. About 15 years ago, my friend Caroline Humphreys (once a member of this congregation) gave me a copy of *Praying the Psalms* by Nan Merrill with the inscription, "This is a profound interpretation of the Psalms. It has assisted me in my journey toward wholeness." Familiar words made fresh and new can change the way we hear them and invite us even farther along on the journey toward wholeness—

mind, yours, and ours together. I hope that is the kind of listening and hearing we are doing in these weeks together. I will incorporate some of Merrill's retelling of the Psalms tonight, beginning with a favorite.

We've already read Psalm 139, "You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up." I thought I might pick that one. I find that each time I read Psalm 23, particularly as we remember and celebrate the life of a loved one or our choir sings John Rutter's arrangement, the familiarity of the shepherd image and the confidence of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever always gives me chills.

But as one who intimately knows anxiety and also pastors in particularly anxious times, I choose to begin tonight with Psalm 46, as adapted by Nan Merrill.

The Beloved is our refuge and our strength,
a loving Presence in times of trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though
the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the
heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble
with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams
make glad the Holy City,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
The Beloved is in the midst of it,
it shall not be moved;
Our loving Creator is an
ever-present help.
The nations may be at war,
countries left in ruins,
yet is the Voice of the Almighty
heard,
melting hearts of stone.
The Beloved is with us,
the infinite Heart of Love.

Come, behold the works of the Beloved,
how love does reign even in

humanity's desolation.
For the Beloved makes wars to cease,
breaking through the barriers of fear,
shattering the greedy and oppressors,
refining hearts of iron!

"Be still and know that I am Love.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!"
The One who knows all hearts
is with us;
The Beloved is our refuge and our strength.

POETS + PSALMS

As we continue tonight, let's move forward with that notion of listening for what can be known but not told, and hearing in such a way that we are moving toward personal and collective wholeness. I want to hold up a couple of books as my companions and guiding inspiration to this study of the Psalms. First is David Impastato's *Upholding Mystery*, a wonderful anthology of contemporary poetry grouped around themes like Grace, Injustice, Presence, and Love. The second is a well to which I personally go almost daily. Last year, radio host, podcaster, and brilliant conversationalist Krista Tippett released the book *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. In it she references dozens of interviews and conversations from her show *On Being*, and many of them are conversations with poets. In fact, OnBeing.org/poetry now houses archives of these poets reading their work. If you're not familiar with her: start with podcasts of past shows, get a copy of this book, and spend a rainy day in front of the Poetry page of her web site.

Let's look first to poet Maria Howe (*Becoming Wise*, pp. 43-45)

I didn't know one could be a poet and live. As a child I would read the old Harvard Classics. We had them in our living room. I would pore through these dusty books and try to find language that was adequate to experience, or try to find language that could somehow hold the unsayable. And some of the Mass did that. Some of the parables do that, you know. I love the parables and the stories of Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and all those great old stories. They've struck me as poems. They hold so much mystery and complexity. A story is all there, but we know that the story, the real story, is inarticulate. And I love that. I love the spaces in between what happens.

Krista Tippett then asks, "I wonder how you experienced and thought about what it is about poetry that we can't do with other kinds of language, and what need it is salving in us?" To which Howe replies:

Well, poetry holds what can't be said. It can't be paraphrased. It can't be translated. The great poetry I love holds the mystery of being alive. It holds a kind of basket of words that feels inevitable. There's great, great, great prose, ...But poetry has a kind of trancelike quality. It has the quality of a spell...this is what we all need to walk around with, a handful of counter spells. And poetry, when you think of its roots, is that.

"Making magic with words," Tippett adds.

"Prayer" by Marie Howe

Every day I want to speak with you. And every day something more important calls for my attention—the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage I need to buy for the trip.

Even now I can hardly sit here among the falling piles of paper and clothing, the garbage trucks outside already screeching and banging.

The mystics say you are as close as my own breath.

Why do I flee from you?

My days and nights pour through me like complaints and become a story I forgot to tell.

Help me. Even as I write these words I am planning to rise from the chair as soon as I finish this sentence.

Psalm 139.7-10

Where could I go from your Spirit?

Or how could I flee from
your Presence?

If I ascend into heaven, You are there!

If I make my bed in darkness,
You are there!

If I soar on the wings of the morning
or dwell in the deepest parts
of the sea,

Even there your hand will lead me,
and your Love will embrace me.

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Walter Brueggemann spoke of the expansive power of poetry. In this conversation, he said:

Well, lamentation is a big piece of my research and my passion. The Book of Lamentations is a collection of poems that grieve the loss of Jerusalem that's been destroyed. But the Book of Psalms, at least one third of the Book of Psalms, are songs or prayers of sadness and grief and upset, so that very much of the Old Testament experience of faith is having stuff taken away from us. What's so interesting is that, in the institutional church with the lectionary and the liturgies, the whole business of lamentations has been screened out.

"Because we don't know what to do with those depressing passages," Tippett adds.

"And we don't want to," continues Brueggemann. "And because we have neglected the lament pieces, we are ill equipped for the loss that we are facing in our society. So we keep pretending and denying that that's not happening to us."

The task [of prophetic poetry] is reframing so that we can reexperience the social realities that are right in front of us, from a different angle."¹

As I re-read these words earlier today while also reading the cries of friends responding to the Alton Brown verdict in Baton Rouge, I thought of the complexities of race, racism, privilege, white supremacy, power and its enshrined structures. Where do we begin? How do we repair and undo? What does honest dialogue look like? How might really good listening and hearing draw us, individually and collectively, toward wholeness?

Hear a word of lament from our brother, Wendell Berry.

"The Morning's News" Wendell Berry (Impastato, pp. 87-88)

To moralize the state, they drag out a man,
and bind his hands, and darken his eyes
with a black rag to be free of the light in them,
and tie him to a post, and kill him.
And I am sickened by the complicity in my race.
To kill in hot savagery like a beast
is understandable. It is forgivable and curable.
But to kill by design, deliberately, without wrath,
that is the sullen labor that perfects Hell.

¹ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, pp.54-56

The serpent is gentle, compared to man.
It is man, the inventor of cold violence,
death as waste, who has made himself lonely
among the creatures, and set himself aside,
so that he cannot work in the sun with hope,
or sit at peace in the shade of any tree.
The morning's news drives sleep out of the head
at night. Uselessness and horror hold the eyes
open to the dark. Weary, we lie awake
in the agony of the old giving birth to the new
without assurance that the new will be better.
I look at my son, whose eyes are like a young god's,
they are so open to the world.
I look at my sloping fields now turning
green with the young grass of April. What must I do
to go free? I think I must put on
a deathlier knowledge, and prepare to die
rather than enter into the design of man's hate.
I will purge my mind of the airy claims
of church and state. I will serve the earth
and not pretend my life could better serve.
Another morning comes with its strange cure.
The earth is news. Though the river floods
and the spring is cold, my heart goes on,
faithful to a mystery in a cloud,
and the summer's garden continues its descent
through me, toward the ground.

Psalm 7.3-5, 9-17 (NRSV)

O Lord my God, if I have done this,
if there is wrong in my hands,
if I have repaid my ally with harm
or plundered my foe without cause,
then let the enemy pursue and overtake me,
trample my life to the ground,
and lay my soul in the dust.

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end,
but establish the righteous,
you who test the minds and hearts,

O righteous God.

God is my shield,
 who saves the upright in heart.
God is a righteous judge,
 and a God who has indignation every day.

If one does not repent, God will whet his sword;
 he has bent and strung his bow;
he has prepared his deadly weapons,
 making his arrows fiery shafts.

See how they conceive evil,
 and are pregnant with mischief,
 and bring forth lies.
They make a pit, digging it out,
 and fall into the hole that they have made.
Their mischief returns upon their own heads,
 and on their own heads their violence descends.

I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness,
 and sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High.

Of the next poem, David Impastato writes, "human lamentation [is] a necessary dissonance in a tapestry of cosmic beauty woven and imagined by...God." p. 92

"The Task" Denise Levertov (pp. 92-93)

As if God were an old man
always upstairs, sitting about
in sleeveless undershirt, asleep,
arms folded, stomach rumbling,
his breath from open mouth
strident, presaging death...

No, God's in the wilderness next door
—that huge tundra room, no walls and a sky roof—
busy at the loom. Among the berry bushes,
rain or shine, that loud clacking and whirring,
irregular but continuous;
God is absorbed in work, and hears

completely modern and yet who have this strong spiritual hunger in them. I would like to say something helpful to those people.”²

“Every Riven Thing” Christian Wiman

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he’s made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why
God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he’s made,
means a storm of peace.
Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where
God goes belonging. To every riven thing he’s made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see
God goes belonging to every riven thing. He’s made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,
God goes belonging to every riven thing he’s made.

Psalm 136.4-9

To You, who spoke and the Word
came forth,
Your Love sustains us;
To You, who by understanding
created the heavens,
Your Love sustains us;
To You, who spread out the earth
upon the waters,
Your Love sustains us;
To You, who set the planets upon
their course,

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/christian-wiman>

Your Love sustains us;
And the sun to rule over the day,
Your Love sustains us;
The moon and stars to rule over
the night,
Your Love sustains us;

A PSALM FROM NEW ORLEANS

On tables in the front and back of the sanctuary, you have paper and pen to write a phrase or a sentence or even a paragraph. You do not have to sign your name to it, but I want to give you an opportunity before you leave tonight to try your hand at poetry. What do you know that cannot be told? Praise, lament, good, ugly, beautiful, angry, all of it. Then I will gather whatever is on the table and pull it together as a psalm to share next week when we gather for our final week of this series at Trinity Episcopal Church.

A BENEDICTION (JOHN O'DONOHUE) [*currach* is a type of Irish boat]

“Beannacht / Blessing³
On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.
And when your eyes
freeze behind
the grey window
and the ghost of loss
gets in to you,
may a flock of colours,
indigo, red, green,
and azure blue
come to awaken in you
a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays

³ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

in the currach of thought
and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you,
may there come across the waters
a path of yellow moonlight
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.
And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life."