

ACCORDING
to Your
MERCY

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*Praying with the Psalms
from Ash Wednesday to Easter*



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According to Your Mercy: Praying with the Psalms from Ash Wednesday to Easter

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*Answer me, O LORD, for thy steadfast love is good,
according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me.*

Psalm 69:16

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Introduction

WE PRAY THE PSALMS ALMOST EVERY DAY IN MY community: morning, midday, and evening. In four weeks' time we sing through the entire Psalter, and then we start again. You might expect that after years of such rhythmic repetition, the psalms would lose their freshness and certainly their capacity to surprise. But our experience, and the experience of generations before us, tells us quite the opposite. Since the time of ancient Israel and long before Christians adopted the Psalter as their own prayer book, the psalms have been an inexhaustible source of inspiration, a limitless cache of words, phrases, and images for truth-filled worship. Why? Because, before all else, the psalms are *prayers*, and there is no sell-by date on the heart's language of prayer.

I have written elsewhere that the language of the psalms is the language of the kingdom of God. In many respects for us it is a foreign language, or at least an unfamiliar one. We aren't used to addressing God quite so directly, so vulnerably, so candidly. As poetry, this language requires us to stretch our imaginations, step outside of ourselves, and listen carefully to the psalmist's heart. In such listening, we often hear the prayerful beat of our own heart and find ourselves saying, "I know exactly what the psalmist means here."

In Hebrew, this poetry is intensely compact, capable of bearing multiple meanings in a single line. Its structure is well-ordered and highly intentional, factors that sometimes are not evident when rendered in English. Nevertheless, even if we do not

grasp the meaning, we can tell where the words are taking us. Sometimes, the prayer poems take us to lofty heights of adoration and gladness—*O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!* (Ps. 98:1). At other times, deep into the dark recesses of the human heart—*May [my enemy's] children be fatherless, and his wife a widow!* (109:9). And sometimes the words fairly crack with hope—*Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?* (139:7)—or with ache—*Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!* (130:1). At all times, however, the psalms give us a vocabulary for bringing our true selves before God. They school us in the art of prayerful candor, for the psalms say what is true—about ourselves and about God.

Sometime in the fourth century, a certain deacon fell ill and decided to spend some of his convalescence studying the psalms. He wrote a letter to his bishop and friend, Athanasius of Alexandria, asking for guidance and insight. He received back more than he had bargained for, as he had tapped into his bishop's deep love of the Psalter. Athanasius answered: The psalms are like a mirror in which any reader can see reflected all the varied emotions and thoughts of his or her own heart. Better yet, they are like a lavish garden from which may be cut a fruitful prayer for any and every condition of life. "For," he wrote, "I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter."¹ No wonder, more than a thousand years later, the great church reformer John Calvin liked to call the book of Psalms "the anatomy of all the parts of the human soul."²

At the Community of Jesus, after we gather for Morning Prayer—Lauds (from the Latin for “praise”)—we spend fifteen minutes in private prayer and reading before gathering again to celebrate Eucharist. The reflections collected in this book were written originally as a daily guide for that time of silent prayer. Often, the psalm was taken from that particular morning’s liturgy, allowing us a bit more time to gaze into the “mirror” of the psalmist’s prayer and to make it our own.

This book contains forty-seven such reflections, one for each of the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter. For the most part, at least until Palm Sunday, they are not organized in any particular order. They are simply a collection of prayers that reflect various twists and turns on the Lenten journey. As a season of preparation and penitence, Lent lends itself well to such meandering for, when all is said and done, we know where we will end up.

Like Athanasius, many of the church fathers preached and wrote about the psalms, and a quotation from one of their works is also offered each day, as another way to “look into” the psalm. And, because the purpose of both the psalm and the comments is to lead us to prayer, I offer a prayer of my own, written during those *lectio* times between Lauds and Eucharist. Better still, of course, would be for the reader (the *pray*-er) to compose her or his own.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote of his delight at hearing the psalms chanted in church. But, he cautioned, listening is not the same as praying. You must learn to use the words in your conversation with God—if not to express your own thoughts and emotions, then to express the praise and the pain of others for whom we pray. By providing him with true language, wrote

Augustine, these prayers set his faith on fire and roused in him a voice with which to proclaim the glory of God. The prayers of the psalms taught him the prayer of his own heart. *According to Your Mercy* is offered as one classroom among many in the school of prayer that we call the Psalter.



REFLECTIONS

Ash Wednesday

PSALM 121

*My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

v. 2

THE COLLECTION OF PSALMS FROM 120 THROUGH 134, each of which is entitled "A Song of Ascents," is thought to have formed a small prayer book for pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the annual Jewish festivals in the temple. Psalm 121 could be the words of a pilgrim making the sometimes dangerous journey through the Judean wilderness on his "way up" to the Holy City. The author is in the company of fellow pilgrims and, as the day ends and the night's darkness creeps into the valley, the troop of travelers assigns watchmen to climb the surrounding hillsides and stand guard over the encampment. Predatory bands of thieves in that region know the timetable of seasonal meetings at the temple. The pilgrims' only hope for protection is the watchful eyes and warning voices of their guardian keepers.

Perhaps the hills reminded the poet of the story of Elisha and his angelic defenders. The Syrian army had come by stealth at night and surrounded him. *Don't be afraid*, said Elisha to his

trembling servant, *for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.* Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw: "Behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (2 Kgs. 6:17). The psalmist also saw help in the hills.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whispers the pilgrim as he prepares to enter his tent for the night. He sees the appointed watchmen, but, he asks himself, *Is that where my help truly comes from? No,* he quickly replies, as if to the stars in the sky. *There is Another whom I cannot see, but I know that he is there, keeping watch. He has been with us all day, and he will never leave us through the night. Those who would do us harm are not the only ones who know our goings and comings. The Lord himself looks over us and he will be our help. The hills are filled with his presence, for he stands ever-alert beside each of our watchmen. Even if the travels of the day weary them to unwilling sleep, he who made heaven and earth will never slumber. His sleepless eyes will never be closed to us. His unblinking gaze will never wander from us. Knowing, then, that it is the Lord who keeps us, I will lie down now, and sleep in peace* (see Ps. 4:8).

FROM THE FATHERS

"May the Lord protect your coming in and your going out." Now look at the "coming out" of the furnace and the "going in" to it: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" (James 1:2). There you are—it is easy enough to go in; coming out is the big thing. But do not worry: "God is faithful"—because you have gone in, you are naturally thinking about getting out—"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way out"

(1 Cor. 10:13). What is the way out? "That you may be able to endure." You have gone in, you have fallen in; you have endured, you have come out.

Augustine

*Today, I begin walking with you to Jerusalem, Lord,
to a place of death . . . and of life.
Along the way—here in the wilderness,
also a place of death . . . and of life—
I will go out with you,
and I will come in with you.
If you will only keep me.*



Thursday before Lent I

PSALM 99

*Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy!*

v. 9

WHILE MANY PSALMS OF PRAISE EMPHASIZE THE call for “all the earth” to worship the Lord, Psalm 99 focuses upon the particular people who are called by his name. While including “all the peoples” (Ps. 99:2) as the subjects of God’s eternal reign, the psalmist quickly narrows his focus to those, including himself, who address the Lord as *our* God (verses 5, 8, 9). These are the people who would be most familiar with the language he uses and the references he makes:

- the cherubim: the golden figures hovering over the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:18)
- Zion: the chosen dwelling place of the Most High (Ps. 132:13)
- Jacob: the twelve tribes, therefore the entire family of the covenant
- God’s footstool: the temple and particularly the ark (1 Chr. 28:2)

- Moses, Aaron, and Samuel: representing the sacred triad of the covenant: the law, the priesthood, and the prophets
- the cloudy pillar: God's guiding presence as he led the children of Israel through the wilderness
- God's holy hill: Jerusalem, the city of God

There is a concentration of meaning in these short verses that makes an unmistakable impression—*all* peoples are called upon to praise the Lord, but above all the people whom God calls his own, the people who have experienced firsthand his power and mercy. These are the people whom God delivered from oppression and slavery; who followed God's guiding hand through the wilderness; who heard God's voice through his appointed prophets and priests; who knew both the forgiving and the disciplining love of God. No other people to that point had been treated by God with such attention or such favor (see Ps. 147:20).

Three times the psalmist says God is holy; this is the summary declaration of the entire psalm (Ps. 99:3, 5, 9). The psalms tell us again and again that praise has everything to do with God and nothing to do with us, except insofar as we are chosen by God and loved by God. Praise is *always* appropriate because God is *always* holy, *always* Lord, *always* God.

FROM THE FATHERS

[Do not think that] when this life comes to an end, that is the end for us of God's praises. Not at all; we shall praise him then much more, when we are living without end. If we praise him during the exile we are passing through, how, do you think, shall we praise him at the home we are never to leave? . . . Living the blessed

life in which God is to be perceived without any uncertainty, to be loved without any weariness, to be praised without end, why, yes indeed, that will be what our being alive consists of—seeing, loving, praising God.

Augustine

*I am among those you have called, Lord,
those you have saved, those you have forgiven,
—and, yes, sometimes reprimanded—
those you have always loved.
I am one of "your people." (This is a marvel to me.)
I am among those who will praise you today . . .
those who will always praise you.*

