



*“THE BIBLE: POETRY (THE WRITINGS)”

Biblical Text: Psalm 121

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If you asked a hundred people which part of the Old Testament they like best, most would answer, ***“The Psalms.”** Many Christians can repeat the Twenty-Third Psalm.

I love the Psalms. First of all, they are magnificent poetry. *(You heard it here first. You can be a “manly” man, or a “womanly” woman for that matter, and love poetry.)*

Second, I love the Psalms because they give voice to the highest and lowest moments of our souls. They speak to honest feelings of anguish, despair, hope, joy, and the ecstasy of feeling the presence of God. They speak for me, where my own words fail.

*The Psalms were immensely important to the worship and spiritual life of the Hebrew people. They were their hymns as well as their prayers. Most of all they were meant to be sung. We often read them responsively, as a spoken text.

But they were meant to be sung. Check them out sometime. They are full of *musical notations, including 71 occurrences of the word, “*Selah*,” which no one really knows what means! And the Hebrews, like Methodists, were a singing people. Richard Heitzenrater says, **“Charles Wesley always said he could sing people into heaven faster than his brother John could preach them in!”*¹ * Every worship service at Old Mission still includes hymns or worship songs that come from the Psalms.

The Psalms are in the third section of the Old Testament, known as “The Writings.”

*The first week, we looked at the Law, the first five books of the Bible. Last week - the Prophets (*former, latter, major, minor.*) Today, the ***Writings.**

And that section of the Bible includes **Psalms**. They aren’t Law, nor do they belong to the Prophets. All the books of “*The Writings*” are a different kind of sacred literature. It is sort of a “mash up” of several kinds of writings that speak to our lives.

Job is best described as an essay wrestling with “*the problem of evil.*” The **Song of Songs** is a romantic love poem about a lover and the beloved. Despite our puritan ancestors trying to over-spiritualize it, that’s what it is. **Lamentations** is, well, a lamentation. **Chronicles** is history, as are **Ruth**, **Esther**, **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**.

The books of **Proverbs** and **Ecclesiastes**, which contain various teachings about life and the human condition, are part of what is called the *Wisdom Tradition* of Israel.

¹ “*A Tale of Two Brothers*,” an article by Richard P. Heitzenrater. Christian History Magazine, Copyright © 2011. All rights reserved.

And the Hebrew people referred to this diverse group as *Ketuvim *The Writings*. You'll find this week's daily readings full of blessings. *

The majority of the Psalms date to the "Golden Age" of the Israelites, the United Kingdom, long before Great Britain claimed that name. *Most were written between 1100 and 831 BCE, during the reign of Saul, David and Solomon. But they have endured as a spiritual resource for the people of God, and they still speak today.

The Psalms give us a language for our emotions, our feelings, in the context of worship. I recently listened to a fascinating half hour conversation (*thank you Karen Eisele*) between *Bono, U2's Irish rocker and Eugene Peterson, the author of "*The Message*" Bible, whose finest work may be his translation of the Psalms. Check out my sermon online this week for a link to the interview. <http://bit.ly/bonopsalms>

Anyway, Bono said * "*The Psalmist has this raw, brutal honesty... ..about the explosive joy he is feeling, and the deep sorrow or confusion as well. And I often wonder, 'Why can't Church music be more like that?'*"² ("40" was his answer.)

The Psalms are amazing. Half them (75) are Psalms of *David –the ones we know best. Like the 23rd Psalm: "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" Or the 51st: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.*" Or my personal favorite, the 139th: *"*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxious thoughts. *See if there be any wicked way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting.*" (Ps. 139:23-24)

Twelve (12) were written by **Asaph**, David's worship leader, whom we know very little about. Two were authored by ***Solomon**. He is better known as the traditional author of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the love poem called the Song of Songs, which goes like this: *"*Beloved, your hair looks like like a flock of goats, and your teeth are like sheep all in row...*" (Song of Solomon 4:1-2) **I tried it out on Ann and she didn't think it was very romantic!** But back in the day, I assure you, it was pretty racy stuff!

One Psalm (*the 90th*) was written by *Moses. The rest by others or anonymous, except eleven (11) which were written by the **Sons of Korah*, who deserve special mention, because we **do** know something about their story.

The lives of the Sons of Korah are summed up in this verse from the Book of Numbers: *"*But the sons of Korah did not die*" (Numbers 26:11). Theirs was the ultimate redemption story, because of the mercy of God. Their father died in disgrace after trying and failing to overthrow Moses. But his sons were not punished for their father's sins. God restored them from disgrace and disdain, and despair, and made something brand-new out of their lives, and gave them a song to sing!

² Video interview by the studios of Fuller Theological Seminary and David Taylor, Brehm Texas, and Fourth Line Films. Copyright ©2016. The full video may be seen at <http://bit.ly/bonopsalms>

Who knew there was a Gospel Story tucked away in the Book of Psalms?

And the psalms of the Sons of Korah are some of the most powerful in the Bible!

**“As the deer longs for water, so my soul longs for you, O God.”* (Ps. 42:1) - **“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!”* (Ps. 84:1) - Psalm 46 begins with:

**“God is our refuge and strength, a present help in times of trouble.”* (Ps. 46.1) And it ends with **“Be still and know that I am God.”* (Ps 46:10). What powerful worship.³

And of course that is the Good News, the Gospel –

Whatever the news of the day is... ..usually bad or worse...

Whatever lies get told on the campaign trail or national debate...

Whatever dears we may abide, and hide in the secret places of our hearts...

Whatever tragedy or loss of life to those who do not seem to care...

Whatever the latest outbreak of racism or violence...

God is still God.

Whatever challenges we face at work may be...

Whatever our personal challenges in our families, finances, health...

God is still God.

Here near the end of the Book of Psalms, and near the end of my message is the good news for us today. **So open your Bibles.*

And let’s draw strength from Psalm 121 – every word a promise.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

*⁸ The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in both now and forevermore.*⁴

I wonder if maybe, just maybe, you needed to hear them today...

And I wonder if I can pray for you today?

³ Some of my insight into the *Sons of Korah* is from Dr. Carla Waterman’s research - artist in residence and theologian, Wheaton College.

⁴ Psalm 121, New Revised Standard Version, Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.