

Praying the Psalms

Janet Schaeffler, OP

In her book *Undercurrents* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), Martha Manning says, “It’s incredible to me that we never learned the psalms as children. All that time and energy memorizing the catechism when the real thing was right here. It’s like memorizing *TV Guide* rather than watching the show.”

A few years ago when I was serving on a task force for the US Bishops, one of the bishops mentioned that he met once a month with a small group of ministers in his area to reflect upon the Sunday readings. When this group first began meeting, he was startled because the others kept talking about the four Sunday readings. As Catholics, we tend to talk about the three readings. One of the things he learned from them, he said, was the deep importance of the Responsorial Psalm.

Do we have a gift that we are unaware of? That we are ignoring? That we are not utilizing to its full potential?

Saint Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century said:

A psalm is
a cry of happiness,
the echo of gladness.

It soothes the temper,
lightens the burden of sorrow.
It is a source of security by night,
a lesson of wisdom by day.

It is
a shield when we are afraid,
a celebration of holiness,
a vision of serenity,
a promise of peace and harmony.
Day begins to the music of a psalm.
Day closes to the echo of a psalm.

More and more today we are being challenged to reclaim this great heritage in our tradition: the Book of Psalms. More and more of today’s spiritual leaders and writers tell us of their importance:

In *The Gift of Peace* (Loyola Press, 1997), Cardinal Bernardin says, “I have found the Psalms to be very special because they relate in a very direct, human way the joys and sorrows of life, the virtues, the sins. They convey the message that good ultimately wins out. And as you see the people who are mentioned in the Psalms struggling to be united with Lord, it gives you a certain amount of encouragement, knowing that even thousands of years ago this same thing was happening.”

Kathleen Norris, the popular author of *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *Cloister Walk*, and *Amazing Grace*, said in an interview in the Winter 1999 issue of *Leadership* (465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188), “At some point, I learned that the daily praying of the Psalms went back to the Jews, even beyond the 1700 years of Christian monasticism. One day, standing in western North Dakota, it hit me: My God, we are connecting here. Reading the Psalms, we were connecting with the tap root of Christianity. That was immensely appealing to me and prompted me to immerse myself in the Christian faith even more.”

As we strive to grow in prayer, let us not forget the Psalms. Listed here are various ideas to make these words of Scripture come alive for ourselves, our families – and for those of us in ministry, those with whom we minister -- today’s young people and adults. Find ways to use them often so that this tradition of praise, thanks, sorrow and supplication undergirds and deepens our prayer life as individuals and as a community.

Some resources that would be helpful for all, especially catechists, who want to deepen their appreciation of the Psalms are:

The Psalter (Liturgy Training Publications)

Psalms for All Seasons by John F. Craghan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press)

The Psalms: Prayers of Many Moods (Complete Book Psalms with Spiritual Commentary) by Ronald Quillo (Paulist Press)

The Spirituality of the Psalms by Carroll Stuhlmueller and completed by fellow scholars (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002)

Psalms I and *Psalms II* from Little Rock Scripture Study (Collegeville: Liturgical Press)

Some activities for families, for faith formation groups of all ages, to reflect and delve into their rich meaning:

- Print the word P - S - A - L - M - S down the left side of a piece of paper. Invite the children (or adults, or our family) to think of words or phrases for each letter that describe the 23rd book of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms. Ideas might include P: poetry, prayers; S: songs, stories; A: adoration; L: laments, liturgies; M: meditations; S: sin, supplications. Creating an “acrostic” (a type of poem in which the letters of a word are used as stems for others words which describe the theme) is an appropriate way to start a study of the Psalms. Many of the Psalms (a Greek word which means “hymns” or “songs”) were actually acrostics (9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145) with lines and phrases beginning with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
- Explain that Psalms are prayers of deep feeling in which the person joyfully calls out thanks and praise to God or cries out for some kind of help. The cry or call is often followed by a detailed explanation or list of ideas based on the opening theme. The prayer then ends with a summary statement which often is opposite in mood from the opening, e.g. moving from a call for help to a statement of trust in God. Invite everyone to write their own psalm prayer.

- Read Psalm 149: 1-3. Prepare a dance to a Christian song. It could be upbeat and celebratory or slower and more reverent.
- The Psalms include many references to the name of God: God’s name is exalted, blessed, magnified, glorified, praised, etc. Look through the Book of Psalms and notice how many ways we are told to honor God. Read carefully the following passages: Ps 8:1; Ps 9:10a; Ps 34:3; Ps 72:19; Ps 135:1 and Ps 145: 1-3, 21. Have each person select the verse that best expresses the awe and wonder of God for them. You might invite them to create a “stained glass window” using the verse they have selected.
- Take advantage of a beautiful day. Go outdoors and read the first verse of Psalm 8. Invite everyone to pray about the greatness of God that they see.
- Explain to the participants that the rosary was the people’s psalmbook. In an age when many people didn’t read and/or have access to the Bible, the 150 Hail Mary’s – broken into sets of 50 – substituted for the 150 psalms.
- Pray Psalm 141 ... using incense.
- Pray prayers of blessing, using Psalms 34, 67, 96, 103, 104, or 145.
- Invite each person to cover a cereal box with colorful paper and decorations. Throughout your year’s exploration/prayer with the psalms, have each write their favorite lines from the psalms on the box. It can then be placed on their family dinner (or breakfast) table.
- There are several music videos which provide a rendition of some psalms for prayer and reflection. Two of them are: *Quiet Reflections* by John Michael Talbot (Santa Fe Communications and Sparrow Home Video, 9255 Deering Avenue, Chatsworth, CA 91311) and *Holy Darkness: Prayers of Consolation* (OCP Publications 1-800-548-8749).
- Sing “Be still and Know” (Psalm 46:11) to the tune of “Amazing Grace”:
 Be still and know that I am God.
 Be still and know that I am God.
 Be still and know that I am God.
 Be still, be still, be still.
 Sing the song again adding sign language. If no one knows sign language, use these simple motions. Put a finger to your lips for “be still,” point to your head for “and know,” and point to the sky for “I am God.”

The renowned Old Testament scholar, Carroll Stuhlmueller (*The Spirituality of the Psalms*, The Liturgical Press, 2002), said, “In many ways the psalms are at the heart of the Bible...The psalms have continued to maintain a prominent position in the lives of believers today. They offer a harmony to life and a rhythm that keep us peacefully in tune with the intense fervor of life (page 1).” Stuhlmueller operates out of the reality that “contemporary believing communities are inheritors of the faith and traditions of the biblical people” and that the “unfathomable riches of the psalms...continue to enlighten people today (page 8).”

Some more activities for families and faith formation sessions:

- Invite the participants to choose their favorite Psalm and then search for slides to depict each line. Use with background music for a prayerful reflection.
- Choose a person currently in the news. What kind of psalm might this person pray? Find one in the Book of Psalms. Write a modern-day psalm that might come from her/his lips.
- Interview three adults from the parish, asking them: what is your favorite Psalm? Why?
- Pray a Psalm and then invite each person to design a symbol that captures the meaning/feeling of the Psalm. Use clay, paint, color, etc.
- Introduce everyone to Taize Prayer which incorporates many psalms for reflection and singing. See *Songs and Prayers from Taize* and *Prayer for Each Day* (Chicago: GIA Publications).
- Create a chart/poster which illustrates various human emotions. Find a Psalm to pray when you're feeling each way.
- Have each person choose a favorite line from a Psalm to be their mantra. (A mantra is a word or phrase which you repeat often, letting it run through your mind as you breathe, work, and play.)
- Have the children make a set of dinner placemats for their families. Put a different passage from the Psalms on each one.
- Find and pray with modern-day psalms. For instance: *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim* by Edward Hays (Kansas: Forest of Peace Books, Inc.) and *Prayers before an Awesome God: The Psalms for Teenagers* by David Haas (Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's Press).
- Pray the line from Psalm 46:11: "Be still and know that I am God." Each time you repeat the line, accentuate/stress a different word.
- End your time together by making God the object of your blessing prayers. Some psalms you can use are: Ps 34:2; 96, 103, 104 and 145.
- Look through your parish hymnal, finding the hymns your parish uses most often. Which ones are based on Psalms?
- Use *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (Washington: US Catholic Conference) for various prayer ideas with psalms, e.g.: prayer in difficult times, prayers of praise, prayer before studying Scripture, etc.
- Put the words of your favorite Psalm to music – a well-known melody or create your own.

- Search for psalms that would reflect the emotions and feelings of the various liturgical seasons.
- Invite the youth to take a camcorder and to video visuals to accompany the praying of a psalm.
- Choose and memorize a Psalm about God's protection, e.g. Psalm 121.
- Make and decorate a Prayer Box. Inside put 150 slips of paper, each with a number from 1 through 150. Pull out a different slip each day (or each week); find and pray that Psalm.
- Introduce everyone to the Hallel Psalms, Ps 113 - 118 (psalms of thanksgiving). These Psalms are recited during the Jewish celebration of the feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). The *Cambridge Companion to the Bible* (UK: Cambridge University Press) also mentions that Psalms 146 - 150 are referred to as the Hallelujah Psalms (psalms of praise). Look at these psalms: what is the first sentence of each chapter? What is the last sentence of each? What are some of the things the writer is praising God for in these psalms? Invite each person to write his/her own "Praise the Lord" prayer.

The root of the Hebrew word for psalms means praise. The Psalms are a remarkable collection of prayer poems in praise of God. They reflect the continuum of the human experience, from one person's relationship with God to the relationship of an entire community with God. They contain thoughts of anguish, praise, doubt, sorrow, joy, desperation, peace, thanksgiving, compassion, and longing. The words are powerful and sincere and able to be spoken by all of us.

- As you invite everyone to think about listening to God's voice in prayer, remind them of Psalm 29 and Psalm 85:9.
- Find Psalms that might express how your participants might feel about themselves, life, and God. Make a list of the psalms and the emotions they express. For example, Psalm 6 deals with troubled times; Psalm 7, injustice; Psalm 8, excitement about God; Psalm 13, depression; or Psalm 23, security. Copy the list for each person. Invite each to search the Bible for the Psalm that best describes their feelings and thoughts at this time. If they can't find a psalm on the list that fits their feeling, they can find another Psalm or write their own.
- Use the Psalm response from the past Sunday's liturgy as your theme/Scripture word for the week. Post it in a prominent place. Sing it. Pray it. Discuss what it means in today's world.
- Connect a piece of children's literature with one of the psalms. For instance, *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown tells the beautiful story of a mother rabbit who pursues her little bunny who keeps threatening to run away. In a very believable way, it reminds us of the constant, pursuing presence of our loving God. Likewise, Psalm 139 describes God's presence with us no matter where we may go.
- The Hebrew Scriptures include numerous accounts of God's hand leading or guiding people. Many of the most inspirational reminders of God's hand are in the Book of Psalms: Ps 22; 23; 46; 71:4; 79:8-11; 106; 139:23-24; 142:5, 10; 144:7-8; 145:14. After reading these passages,

look through books of Christian symbols to find symbols for “the hand of God.” Choose the one that that best represents God’s presence. Invite everyone to design their own poster with their favorite passage and symbol.

- Use musical settings of the Psalms for prayer. See *Lectionary Psalms* by Michel Guimont, *New Lectionary Psalms: Grail/Gelineau*, and *Psalms for the Church Year* by David Haas; all are available from Chicago: GIA Publications.
- Invite everyone to rewrite the Psalms in modern-day language. One child’s version of Psalm 23:
God is my world. With God I don’t need anything else.
God helps me to be calm. God keeps me out of trouble.
God makes me live.
Even though it’s dark around me, God makes me unafraid.
Bad things don’t scare me because God is with me.
God’s hands keep everything all right.
God has my life mapped out.
God makes me brave in front of people who hate me.
God blesses me. My joy explodes.
- Teach children how to pray a Psalm with gestures. Invite the children to make up their own gestures for their favorite psalm.
- The most important prayer we pray is that of thanksgiving to our gracious God. Throughout the year invite the participants to compile a booklet of thanksgiving prayers. Include lines from the Psalms: 9:2; 30:5; 34; 52:11; 57:10; 66; 67; 69:31; 75:2; 86:12; 92:2; 95:2; 97:12; 105:1; 106:1; 107:1; 108:8, 15, 21, 31; 108:4; 111:1; 118:1, 29; 118:21; 124; 136:1; 138:1-2; 139:14; 147:7; 150:6.
- Invite everyone to write their own prayer according to the form and structure of the Psalms. Have them choose a Psalm they especially like. Encourage them to write their prayer, with the same number of verses, patterns, and structure.