



First United Church of Oak Park

Prayers Set to Poetry

Psalm 52

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The Psalms are prayers set to poetry. Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, to read the Psalms is to read something honest and vulnerable. At one moment the Psalms breathe deep and meditate. At another they can burn spitting hot with rage or gasp in sorrow and weeping.

I can with wholehearted fervor pray this prayer, Psalm 52. It begins with an angry condemnation of some earthly enemy. I have often found myself in that place. Perhaps it is prompted by the actions of a public figure doing things that shock the conscience. Or perhaps it is much closer to home, a slight from someone I know who has hurt me in the small, personal ways that can linger in the memory for years. Whether near or far, public figure or private nemesis, I could pray this prayer of angry condemnation and really mean it. There are times when I could pray this prayer like I was sharpening a butcher knife. You love evil better than good, a lie more than speaking justice, disaster your tongue devises, like a well-honed razor doing deceit! It's a bit uncomfortable. Isn't the Bible supposed to be, you know, lofty and enlightened? Yet here we read something that sounds like someone stewing in anger.

Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, to read the Psalms is to read something honest and vulnerable. But the Psalms aren't merely prayers; the Psalms are prayers set to poetry. And it is in the poetry of the Psalms that I need to look to find good news; it is in the poetry that this Psalm's deepest and most life-giving places are to be found.

First, understand, the poetry of the Psalms is nothing like English poetry. In English poetry there is rhyme — end rhyme, triple rhyme, slant rhyme. There is meter — iambic, trochaic, dactyl. There is formal structure — sonnet, villanelle, limerick. That's what makes something a poem — meter, rhyme, formal structure.

None of these things are present in the poetry of the Psalms. There's no rhyme, there's no strict number of syllables; they can be either eight verses or 150

verses. English poetry is meant to delight the ear; Hebrew poetry is meant to delight the mind by an interplay of ideas and images.

Each line of a Psalm is divided into two halves. The first half of a line introduces an idea; the second half intensifies it. Your tongue devises disaster — like a well-honed razor doing deceit. Or the first half introduces an image, and the second half transforms it suddenly. You set a table before me — in the presence of my enemies. An idea, then a deepening or transformation of that idea.

And what's true of any individual line is often true of entire Psalms. The beginning of a Psalm might be totally different in tone and message than the ending — a Psalm begins with confession and ends in confidence in God's love. Or a Psalm begins in lamentation in the face of disaster and ends with praise for what God has done. Psalms are structured around the movement of images, the deepening or transformation of ideas. That's what makes poetry poetry in Hebrew.

Here in Psalm 52, we have a classic example of Hebrew poetry. It begins with angry condemnation of enemies, each line building beautifully upon itself: You love evil better than good, a lie more than speaking justice! God will surely smash you forever, sweep you up and tear you from the tent, uproot you from the land of the living. But though it begins in condemnation, it does not end there. Just as words are running out for the Psalm, there is this:

But I am like a lush olive tree, planted in the courtyard of the temple of God. I trust in God's kindness, forevermore. I shall acclaim you forever, for you have acted.

The beginning and end of the Psalm are held in tension like poles of a magnet. God moves from being the one who uproots to being the one who plants the beloved firmly like a tree. The enemy moves from one who looms large and dominates thought and imagination, to one who becomes an afterthought, a minor nuisance that cannot possibly thwart the plans that God has made. The poetry of this Psalm is a movement from conflict to peace, from fearful anger to assurance. And it hinges on the faithfulness of God, who has not changed, who does not change.

Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, to read the Psalms is to read something honest and vulnerable.

I can pray this Psalm when I am furious with someone who I count as an enemy, and I hope I would pray it. Because though it begins with meeting my hunger to

decry wickedness, it ends with fulfilling a much deeper hunger, to know that I belong to God and that nothing my enemy might do can change that.

Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, you can pray the Psalms, and in them find honesty and vulnerability.

The Psalms are ancient prayers waiting for you to walk in and breathe to life again. You just have to pray them and really mean them, and the Psalms will lead your spirit to deep places of peace. Yes, of course, you can be angry at the world, angry at your enemies, angry at your loved ones. The Psalms will meet you there — and God will meet you in the Psalms, and pick you up and plant you in the courtyard of the temple of God, there to sink your roots deep into the dark rich soil of prayer. God is not, for the most part, in the plucking up and uprooting business. You have sunk your roots down into the foundation of the Holy Place; God could not destroy you without destroying a part of herself. The Psalms are prayers: let them be your prayers. In honesty and vulnerability of prayer, our spirits can be gently guided along paths of peace. Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift.