

Title: The Message of the Psalms
Text: Psalm 30
Date: November 12, 2017

The Psalms are a wonderful resource for us to process the movement of the Spirit in our lives. Rather than formulating doctrine, they are an invitation to explore what resonates in our own hearts. Today my intent is first to introduce you to a framework for understanding the Psalms in general. Then I hope to take this a step further, and reflect on how that framework relates to our own spiritual journey.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann creates a helpful way of conceiving of the various Psalms. He argues that the language of the Psalms can be placed in one of three categories that relate to our human experience.

First we have **“Psalms of Orientation.”** These psalms reflect seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessings, where we express the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God. An example of a Psalm reflecting this “happy place” might be found in Psalm 145:

**Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
God’s greatness is unsearchable.
⁵On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. (Psalm 145: 3, 5)**

There is then a movement from this place of stability to **“Psalms of Disorientation.”** In our human experience there are also seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These seasons may evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. An example of this might be found in Psalm 13:

**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death. (Psalm 13: 1 – 3)**

From this vantage point we are then led into the **“Psalms of New Orientation”** where we are surprised by new possibilities in life, and joy breaks through despair. Where there has only been darkness, there is now light. These psalms speak boldly about a new gift from God – a fresh intrusion that makes all things new. We can find this being expressed in Psalm 66:

**Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of God’s praise be heard,
⁹who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
¹⁰For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹¹You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
¹²you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. (Psalm 66: 8 – 12)**

What is really interesting is that sometimes you can find all three orientations in one psalm. We find this in Psalm 30:

Orientation

**"As for me, I said in my prosperity,
'I shall never be moved.'
By thy favor, O Lord,
You had established me as a strong mountain."** Psalm 30: 6 – 7a

Disorientation

**'You hid your face;
I was dismayed.
⁸To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
⁹"What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
¹⁰Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!"** Psalm 30: 7b – 10

New Orientation

**You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.** Psalm 30:11-12

There you have it. All three movements in one Psalm! How nice it would be if we could all figure things out so quickly! Of course it doesn't usually happen so effortlessly, but I thought it could help to be mindful of these broad categories:

**Orientation
Disorientation
New Orientation**

Psalm 96 is another extraordinary example of a psalm of a **New Orientation** - a song of ecstasy and praise.

"O sing to the LORD a new song." (v. 1) There is an excitement here that can hardly be contained. While so many religions have a tribal mentality at their heart, there is a distinctly universal message embedded in the words of the psalm:

**³Declare God's glory among the nations,
God's marvelous works among all the peoples.
⁴For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
... revered above all gods.**

This proclamation of the universality of God's presence *invites* encounters with those of other faiths.

There is also an ecological sensibility woven into the psalm. So rather than thinking of this psalm in a pristine Protestant setting, you could easily imagine this psalm spoken in a Native American context.

¹¹ **Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;**
¹² **let the field exult, and everything in it.**
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ **before the LORD."**

We are woven into nature, and not separate from it.

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I would like to pull our perspective back a bit, and look at all this through the perspective of our own lives.

My childhood was full of songs of **Psalms of Orientation**. I knew my parents loved me, I knew God loved me, I knew I lived in the best country in the world, I knew I had the best religion in world, I knew I was the best gender, and (though I am not sure I could have verbalized it) I had a sense that I was part of the best race in the world. I felt secure. I felt charmed. I could have written some rather glowing psalms of praise!

Then comes the life material that leads to **Psalms of Disorientation**.

- Perhaps you go to college and are exposed to many new ideas that make you question your faith.
- Perhaps a relationship that you presumed would make your life complete blows up in your face.
- Perhaps a business venture turns into a disaster.
- Or perhaps you innocently go to church one Sunday and 26 people around you are killed by a deranged gunman.
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If we are honest with ourselves, I bet there is not an adult in this room who could not write a poignant **Psalm of Disorientation**. We are thrown off balance because we were sure that things were not supposed to work out that way.

So here is my question for you: Using Brueggemann's model, how are you doing with regards to writing **Psalms of a New Orientation**? Have you written any lately?

I believe this is worth thinking about, because I sense many people are actually writing **Psalms of Anti-Orientation**. Your Psalms are framed around what you don't believe anymore, or what notions you have outgrown. So without being naïve or Pollyannaish, have you come to a point in your faith where you are able to write **Psalms of a New Orientation** that are life-giving and hints at a joy that can hardly be contained? To be clear, not everyone gets to that point. Many of us are stuck rehearsing things we no longer believe.

True to the Shepherdstown tradition, I am not here today to tell you what your **New Orientation** should be... as if I could. I cannot *pressure you* into "singing a new song." Attempts at such pressure – from within, or from without – would be futile. Such a radical new perspective cannot be manufactured or dictated.

Dr. David Benner writes: **“Genuine transformation is a change process that is not under our control. Unlike growth, transformation is impeded by effort. It is, however, facilitated by consent. If change is to come in the deep places of our self it must come from some point beyond our self. Attempts to make transformation into a self-improvement project simply strengthens the false self.”** (from *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*) Do you hear that? Transformation is a change process that is *not* under our control. But when transformation *does* happen, we want to sing a new song!

Unfortunately, most religion is more tribal than transformational. Most of us prefer to keep the change process under our control, and limited to the small tinkering associated with our self-improvement projects. If we are genuinely open to the unfolding of self that is involved in transformation, we will generally encounter resistance in most of the places where we normally expect support. Families, community, and even church.

Thomas Merton writes: **“There is a time... for life in the social womb, for warmth in the collective myth [for singing old songs – Psalms of Orientation]. But there is also a time to be born, to be liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice.”** In other words there is a time for singing new songs – for writing **Psalms of New Orientation**.

Genuine transformation involves a re-organization of personality that involves a relatively permanent expansion of consciousness and identity and results in a changed way of being in the world. This expresses itself in more authenticity and vitality, increased wholeness and integration, larger horizons, and a bigger sense of meaning and purpose to life. It is transformed people that have new orientations, and that sing new songs.

As I said, you can't *make* transformation happen, but you can set the stage for it by being open to risk – open to letting go of the old songs. David Steindl-Rast writes, **“What part does risk taking play on the road to mastery? Risk taking is essential on that road. The aliveness of aliveness is trust. The religious word is faith, but that means courageous trust, trust in life, cosmic courage. But that courage implies taking risks.”**

A **New Orientation** doesn't imply withdrawing from the world with an inane grin on your face. Indeed, you might feel such an inherent connection with the world that you can no longer sit idly by. Any outspoken prophet is essentially singing a new song. You can no longer be complacent with the old ways once you have a **New Orientation**.

Let me close with another quote from Thomas Merton: **“There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes our lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves.”**

May you discover a new, life-affirming song to sing!

Amen.

Psalm 30

"As for me, I said in my prosperity,
 'I shall never be moved.'
By thy favor, O Lord,
You had established me as a strong mountain."
 'You hid your face;
 I was dismayed.
⁸To you, O LORD, I cried,
 and to the LORD I made supplication:
⁹"What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
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