

The Book of Psalms is a book of poetry, which was used as the “prayer” of “service” book in the ancient Israelite Temple. Composed of 150 poems, Rev. Eugene Peterson writes that, they form are a “prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.” They can teach us how to pray. Psalm 139 is a prayer of orientation and reorientation – a reflection upon the omniscience of Yahweh first revealed in the mysterious encounter of Moses with the burning bush. It’s a meditation upon the relationship that we can have – or can flee – with an all-knowing God.

Noted Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests (in his book *Praying the Psalms*) that as human beings we regularly find ourselves in one of three places:

1. a place of orientation, in which everything makes sense in our lives;
2. a place of disorientation, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit; and
3. a place of new orientation, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God.

Using these three “places,” Brueggemann suggests that life has a rhythm as we move from one place to the next. He believes that that psalms match those places and the surprisingly painful and joyful moves we make. In short, there are psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Recognizing that different psalms match these three places in our lives can help us identify psalms that fit our personal lives and which may provide us with the language we need to pray and live from a place of faith, whether we are in the pit, or in a “welcome place.”

The Psalm is radically affirming, portraying God as infinitely close, gentle, attentive, guiding, loving. Yet there is also a shadow side to the Psalm. We see it at the conclusion of the poem, beginning in 19 in which the poet sings of a desire to join in opposition of those who are adversaries of the ways of God. And the poet also asks to know, to be seen by God, to discover if there are dark, dishonest, divided ways within him or herself. Is it possible that the psalmist is at times an adversary of God?

Look at the four questions posed in the psalm. What are they getting at? How are they shaping the praise of the poem? See verses 7 and 21.

The psalm alternates between assertions of who and how God is, questions of causality (such as If I.... then you....); and also entreaties of God to do or be something in particular.... “Search me...” “See if within me there is...” Where do you see these changes in tone? What do they tell you? How do you identify with them today...or maybe in the past?

The close relationship between the psalmist and God is not only emphasized in the language of “I” and “thou” in Psalm 139, but also in the repetition of the verbal root yada’ (to know), which occurs seven times (1, 2, 4, 6, 14, and twice in 23). Yada’ is a rich word in biblical Hebrew, covering a ...

SCRIPTURES FOR

SUNDAY 8.6.2017

Psalm 139

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

¹ O Lord (YHWH), **you** have searched *me* and known *me*.

² **You** know when *I* sit down and when *I* rise up;
you discern *my* thoughts from far away.

³ **You** search out *my* path and *my* lying down,
and are acquainted with all *my* ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on *my* tongue,
O Lord, **you** know it completely.

⁵ **You** hem *me* in, behind and before,
and lay **your** hand upon *me*.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for *me*;
it is so high that *I* cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can *I* go from **your** spirit?
Or where can *I* flee from **your** presence?

⁸ If *I* ascend to heaven, **you** are there;
if *I* make my bed in Sheol, **you** are there.

⁹ If *I* take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there **your hand** shall lead *me*,
and **your right hand** shall hold *me* fast.

¹¹ If *I* say, “Surely the darkness shall cover *me*,
and the light around me become night,”

¹² even the darkness is not dark to **you**;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to **you**.

¹³ For it was **you** who formed *my* inward parts;
you knit me together in *my* mother’s womb.

¹⁴ I praise **you**, for *I* am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are **your** works;
that *I* know very well.

whole range of meanings - from simple recognition to intimate sexual relationship. In Genesis 4, we read that Adam "knew (yada') his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain" (Genesis 4:1). Elsewhere, God tells the people they will "know that I am the LORD" (Ezekiel 6:7, 13). Job adds, in 5:27, "See, we have searched this out; it is true. Hear, and know it for yourself." Some form of this word occurs sixty times in the Psalter, emphasizing that the concept of "knowledge" is a critical element of meaningful relationship. We are to know God, just as God knows us. As the psalmist says, "It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (13).

The second half of our lection, verses 13-18, offers a variety of interesting, even problematic, translation options. In verse 14, "fearfully" is derived from the verbal root yara'. Unfortunately, in today's culture, the idea of fear is usually connected with the basic human instincts to run, defend, or retaliate. Yet yara' encompasses a larger meaning of awe, reverent respect, and honor. It appears in the Hebrew Bible as a synonym for "love" ('ahab, Deuteronomy 10:12); "cling to" (dabaq, Deuteronomy 10:20); and "serve" ('abad, Deuteronomy 6:13; Joshua 24:14). At its root, the word denotes obedience to the divine will. Thus, a better translation of the word in verse 4 might be "reverently."

Also in verse 14, "wonderfully" comes from the verbal root pala', which means to be different, striking, remarkable - outside of the power of human comprehension. The word is used repeatedly in the Psalter to describe the acts of God on behalf of humanity (cf. Psalms 9:2; 40:5), particularly God's actions in the history of the ancient Israelites (cf. Psalms 78:4; 105:5).

The reference in Verse 15 to being shaped in "the lowest parts of the earth" echoes the creation story in Genesis 2, where we read, "then the LORD God formed the human ('adam) from the dust of the ground ('adamah)" (Gen 2:7).

The word translated as "unformed substance" in verse 16a is the Hebrew word gomli, which is found only here within the Bible. In Babylonian Aramaic, the word is used to designate a formless mass or an incomplete vessel. The Syriac word galma means "uncultivated soil." To translate the word as "embryo," as some translations do, is over-specific and misleading. And while verse 16 cannot be used to solve questions such as "When does life begin?", the whole of Psalm 139 affirms the sacredness of life.

¹⁵ *My* frame was not hidden from **you**,

when *I* was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ **Your eyes** beheld *my* unformed substance.

In **your** book were written

all the days that were formed for *me*,

when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷ How weighty to *me* are **your** thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ *I* try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with **you**.

¹⁹ **O THAT you WOULD** kill the wicked, O God,

and that the bloodthirsty would depart from *me* —

²⁰ those who speak of **you** maliciously,

and lift themselves up against **you** for evil!

²¹ *Do I not hate* those who hate **you**, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against **you**?

²² *I* hate them with perfect hatred;

I count them my enemies.

²³ Search *me*, O God, and know *my* heart;

test *me* and know *my* thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in *me*,

and lead *me* in the way everlasting.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

***What strikes or shimmers for you in this passage?**

***When have you heard this psalm before? What do you think the Psalm is saying?**

***How do you react to the idea of God as omniscient or all-knowing? Does that invoke fear or relief; anxiety or trust; in you? Why?**

* **What does psalm 139 say to you about your own difficulties, and the hard times you go through?**

***How does this psalm feed your soul?**

***In Luke 10, the young student asks Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life, to live the life God wants for me?" How do you answer that question in light of the truths in this psalm?**