

Preaching the Psalms

Psalms 39

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Some religious traditions reject the notion of preaching the psalms, arguing that the psalms are intended to serve other liturgical functions. I am not sure of the rationale that governed those who composed the Revised Common Lectionary – or any past or current version of the lectionary – but whatever their reasons, they implicitly agree with the traditions that do not preach from the psalms, leaving Psalm 39 out of the three year rotation of Psalter lections. Even a quick reading of this psalm can lead to cries of thanksgiving for traditions that do not preach the psalms and for prudent lectionary composers who have pulled this psalm from lectionary homiletical consideration. Beware, though, whenever well-intended stewards of Scripture “safeguard” believers from not-so-safe biblical texts.

Not numbered among the “treasured psalms,” Psalm 39 offers no poetic gems such as those found in Psalms 23, 100, 127, and 150. This difficult and enigmatic psalm is filled with words from one who fails at his initial resolution: “I will keep a muzzle on my mouth” (v. 1). Not only does the Psalmist not maintain silence, but he utters severe and contemptible accusations against God. Much of this anguished prayer does not point to divine deliverance from a troubled present, but instead to the psalmist’s conviction about the transience of this troubled life and the annoying presence of God. The last words of Psalm 39 are perhaps the most provocative and disturbing in all the Psalter, asking not for God’s presence, but imploring God’s absence: “Turn your gaze from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more” (v. 13).¹

In a culture of denial and a society infatuated with comfort and within churches too often seduced by wishful thinking, what is the preacher to do with such a prickly psalm? One solution is to make it less prickly, as Amos Hakham accomplishes in his commentary on Psalm 39:

Psalm 39 is the prayer of a sick person who is suffering from serious afflictions – pains, high fever, and dumbness. Not only is the psalmist afflicted with disease, but he is faced by wicked enemies who stand before him and reproach him. The psalmist thought at first to bear his suffering in silence, fearing that if he spoke, he might say unworthy things. But in the end he was forced to break his silence because his fever overcame him. His suffering brought him to consider the brevity of man’s life, and he concluded that all of man and all human efforts are but vanity. This led him to the feeling that he had no other hope but God, and so he turned to God in prayer, pleading with Him to pardon his sins and allow him to recover from his illness. In this prayer, he alludes once again to his complaints about his pains and his dumbness, about the wicked who reproach him, and about the vanity of man’s life and endeavors. The psalmist insistently pleads with God to hear his prayer: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and hearken to my cry. Do not remain silent to my tears.” In contrast to what we find in many other

Psalms, here the psalmist does not express the feeling that his prayer has been accepted, nor does he end his prayer on a hopeful note. Instead, he concludes in the spirit of his complaints about the vanity of life: "Before I go and am no more."²

Hakham's reading is a good argument for *not* preaching this psalm. He is quick to interpret causes for the psalmist's troublesome words and to take the rough edge off these razor sharp verses. Hakham suggests that the psalmist must have had serious extenuating personal circumstances, — "serious afflictions — pains, high fever, and dumbness — or else he would never have spoken such provocative words."

In *Praying the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann acknowledges the dis-ease brought about by reading lament psalms like Psalm 39 and suggests a more fruitful hermeneutic:

In hearing these Psalms, our natural, fearful yearning is to tone down the hyperbole, to deny it for ourselves and protect others from it because it is too harsh and, in any case, is an overstatement. . . . Our tendency to such protectiveness is evident in the way churches ignore or "edit" these "unacceptable" Psalms. . . . Our retreat from the poignant language of such a Psalm is in fact a denial of the disorientation and a yearning to hold on to the old orientation that is in reality dead. Thus an evangelical understanding of reality affirms that the old is passing away, that God is bringing in a newness. (2 Cor. 5:17)³

Few psalms capture more candidly the deep, underlying spiritual angst alive in our land today than Psalm 39. What if preachers were to reach beyond the lectionary, resist softening the ragged edges of Psalm 39, and decide instead to wrestle with it, like Jacob at Jabbok, until they received a blessing? What if preachers were to wrestle honestly with this psalm just as the psalmist wrestles with life's transience, his own suffering, his sin, and with a hovering and hardly pacifying God?

Preachers might not reach the same theological conclusions as does the psalmist, but no preacher will be unfamiliar with comparable laments: "Pastor, why did God take my sister?" "Pastor, why did God punish me for my sin when other people sin far more and yet prosper?" "Pastor, when will God stop being so angry with me and stop punishing me?" Some preachers may see this as an occasion even to preach against the text or at least to call into question its simple cause and effect understanding of sin and divine punishment. In conversation with Psalm 39, the preacher may recall the encounter between Jesus and his disciples in John 9 when the disciples want to know whose sin, the man's or his parents', is responsible for the man's blindness. To such simplistic cause and effect theology, Jesus responds, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (John 9:3).

A theme that dominates Psalm 39 is sounded in verse 12, "For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears." To those who view life from the perspective of settled entitlement, Psalm 39 begs to differ, sounding the chorus of the old folk tune, "I am a poor wayfaring stranger." Recalling the wilderness wanderings, the psalmist views human life from the perspective of sojourning in an alien land. What would it mean for the preacher to contrast this image from the psalmist with Jesus' parable of

the rich fool in Luke? What would it mean for our consumptive and hoarding habits if we treated each day not as a divine entitlement, but as a gift, recognizing that our days – no matter how great the miracles of medicine – are numbered? What would it mean if we lived less like those unconstrained in our exploitation of land, sea, and air, and more like their “passing” guests? James Luther Mays reminds us that “in Hebrews 11:13 and I Peter 2:11 the metaphor (resident aliens and sojourners) is used for Christians, and in the contexts the difference made by the hope of resurrection to eternal life transforms the prospects of those who know that they . . . are no more than passing guests and sojourners in this world.”⁴

The one who prays to God in Psalm 39 is not seeking a return to “the good life,” but is asking God not to make life any harder than God has already done. The psalmist expresses similar laments to those found in Job and Ecclesiastes when he uses the Hebrew word *hebel*.

This noun suggests a vapor or puff of wind, something fleeting and insubstantial. Life is short and even futile, laments the psalmist, and his life is on the edge of *hebel*. And yet, as Clint McCann captures so poignantly, the psalmist lifts her voice to YHWH:

The psalmist does not give up on God or relinquish the conviction of God’s governance of the world; rather, like Job and Ecclesiastes, the psalmist articulates hope in God on a new basis. The inability to keep silent and the honest articulation of the transience and futility of human life suggest that God’s governance of the world cannot be reduced to a simple moral calculus, a mechanistic system of reward and punishment. In this sense, the psalmist’s speech is fundamentally a protest, as was Job’s speech, not so much against God as against a too simple understanding of God”⁵

What would it mean for preachers to embrace the tension and ambiguity about God and the finitude of life that live within themselves and their preaching communities, while also, as does the psalmist in verse 7, to express hope in God? What would it mean to honor those unspoken doubts, laments, and accusations against God that often go unspoken in polite religious company and realize what the psalmist discovered, that sometimes faith must be spoken into existence: “I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue” (vv. 3-4)? Psalm 39 gives voice to the cries of many believers who are wrapped in pain, praying for answers, yearning to hope, and who too often hear only a theologically sanitized version of Scripture that asks believers to minimize or deny their pain and convert hope into a religious version of wishful thinking.

Psalm 39 does not offer up a host of cherished memory verses, but it will push preachers to confront their own theology, to push beyond the safe confines of the lectionary, to sit with a troublesome voice from Scripture that bristles the comfortable believer, and to address some of life’s most basic questions that often live in and yet go unexpressed in every pew. In the long season of Pentecost, in the longest season of ordinary days, Psalm 39 awaits preachers who are not only willing to reach beyond the lectionary, but to preach where others never dare to go.

Notes

- 1 Job offers a similar sentiment in 7:19 when he rails against God, “Will you not take your eyes off of me long enough for me to swallow my spittle?”
- 2 Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary, Volume I* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003), 387.
- 3 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: Saint Mary’s Press, 1997), 31.
- 4 James Luther Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 167.
- 5 J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IV* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 839.