

Four Ways to Preach a Psalm

Thomas G. Long

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

“God behaves in the psalms in ways he is not allowed to behave in systemic theology.”

Sebastian Moore, O.S.B.

“I think it is safe to say,” Flannery O’Connor famously remarked, “that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.”¹ Perhaps...but while many in the South of my childhood may have been haunted by the Nazarene and carried by their guilt and evangelical apprehensions to the foot of the cross, I spent much of my youthful religious imagination in a different place, brooding beside the rivers of ancient Babylon and wondering how I could possibly “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.”

The reason was the church of my upbringing, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. We were a small clan of Scots-Irish Calvinists scattered sparsely across the old cotton belt. A tiny minority among the larger Presbyterian groups, we had been whittled down by theological controversy, regional splits, and advancing methods of birth control into a gaggle of fewer than 50,000 souls by the 1950s. In those days, we were the Orthodox Jews of the Reformed family, small but fiercely proud and shaped by a covenantal faith as hard as tempered steel. We eschewed fancy lifestyles, read the defiantly Protestant *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* to our children as bedtime stories, recited the catechism, and kept a strict Sabbath, at least until television, Ed Sullivan, Walt Disney, and the NFL eroded our resolve.

One of the great practices of that tradition and consequently one of its great gifts to me was the insistent singing of metrical psalms in worship. Long after most Presbyterians had abandoned exclusively psalmody and were cheerfully belting out “Sweet Hour of Prayer” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” we ARPs were still strumming the Lyre of David. Our pastors taught us that hymns were new-fangled human inventions, the “words of men” and the product of vain imagining in contrast to God’s own song-book in the canonical psalter. Hymn-singing was absolutely forbidden in the ARP Church until deep into the 1940s, and to this day in some congregations, not a single impure hymn stanza passes their lips.

So dedicated to the psalms were we that some of our congregations stocked not one but two different musical psalm books in the pew racks. There was the more formal Sabbath morning book, *The Psalter*, which had a lineage stretching back to Calvin’s Genevan Psalter of 1552. And there was the *Bible Songs*, a more amped-up, full-throated Sabbath-evening and Wednesday-night book in which the stately metrical psalms were made to dance improbably to the rollicking Southern tunes of the nineteenth century revivals. The Baptists across the street would sing “There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins” to the bouncy come-to-Jesus tune “Cleansing Fountain,” and we would sing the very same melody, but with the words of Psalm 62, “My soul in silence waits for God; He has my savior proved.”

While the Baptists were walking in Galilee where Jesus walked and heading to Jerusalem to plunge themselves into Calvary’s cleansing fountain and while the

Methodists down the street were soaring with Wesley's "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" and singing their way with warmed hearts down the Pilgrim Pathway toward Aldersgate, my people, oddly, were weeping on the banks of the canals in Babylon, a place where Jesus had never gone. Of all the psalter tunes we could have favored, the lovely "To the Hills I Lift Mine Eyes" or the reassuring "Under His Wings" or the confident "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah," we somehow chose the melancholy Psalm 137 as our anthem of choice: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion..." The preferred musical setting, sung frequently by choirs all across the church on special occasions and sometimes on ordinary Sabbaths just for the sweet sorrow of singing it, was a doleful arrangement inherited from the 1887 *Psalter* of the United Presbyterian Church in North America (the northern cousins of the ARPs), and over time it became the unifying song of the denomination.²

Thinking back, I find it curious now that choirs composed of schoolteachers and homemakers and druggists and State Farm agents in places like Rock Hill, Columbia, and Charlotte would sing their hearts out about Babylonian captivity. Why were they moved nearly to tears by the memory of an event they had never experienced, drawn to a time that for them never was when "them that carried us away captive required of us a song, saying, 'Sing us, sing us, one of the songs of Zion?'" Not one of the singers had known a day of real exile, not a minute of torment by an actual captor. These were, after all, mostly white Southerners, some of them the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaveholders, descendants of people who were themselves the captors and tormentors. But there they were, weeping under the bending willows along the Euphrates.

But in some ways, it makes sense. These were people who had never been carried away to Babylon, but they were people in exile nonetheless. Like most Southerners of their generation, they possessed a high quotient of melancholy over the lostness of things ("If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..."), and they lacked the cheerful self-assurance of their Baptist friends or the buoyancy of the Methodists to overcome it, to give them any confidence that their way of faith and life would finally prevail. Like all true minorities, they were keenly aware that they lived "in a strange land" and that they were in constant danger of being overcome by the prevailing culture. If the children of the Judeans in Babylon stopped speaking Hebrew, the children of the ARPs had started saying "Sunday" instead of "Sabbath" and had left their Shorter Catechisms unmemorized. Somewhere in their hearts, these sweet, sad singers knew that one day it would all be gone, that their own children would leave the strict fold or at best would stare at screens in user-friendly mega-churches somewhere shouting "Shine, Jesus, Shine" and would, at family reunions say in bemusement, "Grandma, what were those funny songs you used to sing? Sing us one of the songs of Zion." No wonder they wept under the willows.

We see here some of the strength and power of the psalms. Those choirs sang psalm 137 because they had heard it sung many times before, and they had come to love the sound and emotion of it. Sometimes, I am sure, the contralto would sing her part obliviously, moving by habit through her lines, but the shaping force of the psalm was there nonetheless, hovering in the subterranean depths, evoking the pain of remembering a ruined Jerusalem, a ruined way of life, and a faith mocked by captors. The psalm provided a fabric of meaning at many levels at once, a vocabulary that both evoked distress and yearning and was held in trust for the faithful in a time

that would surely come.

But what about preaching the psalms? Perhaps it is the sheer power of song that dissuades us from doing much preaching on psalm texts. Even in a time when psalm singing, responsorial and metrical, is being recovered in many congregations, in most congregations the psalms rarely appear as the lections for sermons. Some have said that the sermons are vessels too flat to contain the emotional and poetic range of the psalms. In Donald Gowan's *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit*, sections on all the literary forms of the Old Testament are included except for the psalms. "We ought to use [the psalms], certainly," Gowan says, "but in their appropriate place: we ought to pray them and sing them rather than preach them."³

I understand the point, while not conceding it, that sermons lack the emotional and metaphoric range of music and of psalmic poetry. But even if I did concede the point, I would still argue for a steady diet of preaching on the psalms as a way of keeping their poetic power laced more firmly into the larger theological fabric of the faith. I think my forebears who sang so soulfully of willows and Babylonian captivity and longing for Jerusalem could have stood a few more sturdy sermons on Psalm 137 as a way of firming up the theological steadfastness at the core of the psalm and keeping the choral expression of it from slipping, as it sometimes did, into bathos and nostalgia.

Others have suggested that psalms are inadequate for sermon texts because the psalms are words addressed *to* God rather than words *from* God to humanity. But actually, the full collection of biblical psalms contains multiple genres: divine address, teaching and ethical instruction, wisdom sayings, prayer, soliloquies, and more. Plus, even for those psalms that are prayers, the pulpit does not shy away from other prayer texts, such as Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane or the Magnificat. The dichotomy "to God vs. from God" actually is too narrow to contain the multiple communicational directions of texts throughout the biblical canon.

Four Ways into the Psalms

How should we preach the psalms? Since the psalms, as poetry, are such multi-layered texts, they offer the preacher a variety of entry points in the process of discovering and creating a sermon. There are surely many ways to gain access to the psalms as preaching texts. Here are but four:

1) Follow the structure—Ever since the groundbreaking form critical work of Hermann Gunkel,⁴ we have known that the Book of Psalms consists of a variety of sub-genres: praise psalms, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, personal and communal laments, and so on. This fact is mildly interesting and occasionally instructive to the preacher, but not often of great value on either score. What *is* of import for the preacher interpreter, however, is that each of these sub-genres was identified not primarily in terms of content but rather in terms of form. That is to say, the psalms reveal their diversity in large part through how they are structured and even more so in how these varied structures guide readers through a sequential process. In short, what is fascinating to observe is how a psalm *moves* as an act of communication. Take as an example Psalm 77, in some ways a rather typical personal lament psalm:

1 I cry aloud to God,
 aloud to God, that he may hear me.
 2 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
 in the night my hand is stretched out without
 wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.
 3 I think of God, and I moan;
 I meditate, and my spirit faints. Selah
 4 You keep my eyelids from closing;
 I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
 5 I consider the days of old,
 and remember the years of long ago.
 6 I commune with my heart in the night;
 I meditate and search my spirit:
 7 “Will the Lord spurn forever,
 and never again be favorable?
 8 Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
 Are his promises at an end for all time?
 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” Selah
 10 And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has
 changed.”
 11 I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
 I will remember your wonders of old.
 12 I will meditate on all your work,
 and muse on your mighty deeds.
 13 Your way, O God, is holy.
 What god is so great as our God?
 14 You are the God who works wonders;
 you have displayed your might among the peoples.
 15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
 the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah
 16 When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you,
 they were afraid; the very deep trembled.
 17 The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered;
 your arrows flashed on every side.
 18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
 your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook.
 19 Your way was through the sea,
 your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.
 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

I noted that this psalm is only “in some ways” representative of the personal lament form. In fact, it both fulfills and subverts that form. Normally, we would expect the personal lament to move through this pattern:

- a. Lament: the psalmist cries out to God in distress, grief, and complaint.
- b. Petition: the psalmist begs God for help.

- c. Pivot: Help and Praise: God's help comes (often implied), and the psalmist transitions from lament to praise. (This is the turning point of the psalm.)
- d. Vow: the psalmist makes a vow (e.g., to praise God forever, to tell transgressors of God's way, etc.)

Note, though, that Psalm 77 contains all the right pieces, but not in the right order nor expressed in the customary way. When we compare the form we get in this psalm with the form we expect in the sub-genre, we observe the following noteworthy differences:

- a. The lament takes a long time to build, lasting for ten verses.
- b. The petition is muted or perhaps even non-existent. This psalmist has seemingly given up on ever receiving a hearing from God, much less any divine help.
- c. Curiously, in this psalm, the vow (vs. 11 – “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord”), not the intervention of divine help and the praise, serves as the pivot.
- d. The closing section of the psalm is not vow, but praise. In other words, in this personal lament, the praise and vow sections have been reversed.
- e. Before the pivot, the psalmist employs “I” language. After the pivot, the psalmist employs “you” language.

Putting all of this together, what can we say about the communicational sequence of this psalm? First, the psalm allows the reader/hearer to give full vent to rage and grief. Not only does it last a long time, but it is hardly tinged with the hope that God will intervene. This is a deeply wounded cry of lament in which all hope of God's help has been consumed in the fire of suffering.

In his provocative book *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur W. Frank describes how serious illness (and by implication, any major life threat) creates “narrative wreckage,” a disruption of a person's ability to carry on via the narrative that had previously been governing life's unfolding. A person who had been living every day according to a certain narrative understanding of one's role, plot, interrelation with other people, and so on now must re-write the story to incorporate this significant disruption of the plot.⁵ Frank calls this need to re-write the narrative a seeking of a “restitution plot.” “The plot of the restitution,” he writes, has the basic storyline: “Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again.”⁶

One problem in constructing these restitution plots, Frank says, is that we are influenced by the “insidious model” of television commercials for over-the-counter medicines. These commercials are sixty-second, overly optimistic restitution plots. First, someone is shown with an illness, and some vital activity, work or play or family interaction, is in jeopardy. Then, the remedy is introduced often by a neighbor, friend, or co-worker: “Have you tried this?” Finally, the sufferer employs the remedy, and swiftly all is well, as evidenced by the ill person, so recently in abject misery, now seen tossing the grandchildren into the air, dancing the rumba, or bicycling up Pike's Peak, grinning all the way.⁷

These fast-moving restitution narratives, argues Frank, create impatience in our

own stories of healing and restitution. He tells about visiting one evening with a cancer support group. This group's ritual, he reports, was to go around the circle, and each cancer patient would name what kind of cancer he or she had and when (most of the members of this group being in remission). Then a bit of personal news would be added, and the person would end by saying, in an enthusiastic voice, "I'm fine!" On this particular evening, however, one member of the group was not fine. She was currently in treatment for an active cancer, and as she named the cancer she had, she dissolved into tears. Frank says,

The group response was for the person sitting next to her, the next speaker, to interrupt with her own introduction. She did this very briefly, moving to a particular emphasis on "I'm fine!" No one commented on the interruption or returned to acknowledge the distress of the person in treatment. Thus the group expressed its preference for restitution stories and its discomfort at hearing illness told in other narratives.⁸

Psalms 77 is a "restitution narrative," but one that resists the quick move to restitution, one that honors the long, almost unbearably sad experience of unmitigated suffering.

Second, what turns the tide in this psalm is not the sudden appearance of divine healing, but the willful vow of the psalmist to bring into active memory the past mighty acts of God. The psalmist is not visited by an angel or comforted in his distress. He doesn't "feel" like making this vow; it is not a decision of the emotions but one of the will. If God feels distant, uncaring, powerless, and even absent, then the psalmist wills to memory a time when God *was* present, powerful, and redemptive. In fact, he wills to remember the Exodus.

Third, it is in this act of willful remembering that everything turns for the psalmist. Before the vow, there is bitterness, anger, and despair. The psalmist's language is self-referential and self-pitying. After the vow, there is praise and awe, and the language is outwardly directed toward God.

What happened in the vow to turn the tide? In the willful act of remembering God's saving action in the Exodus, the psalmist sees something about God's salvation he had missed before: "Your way was through the sea...your hand was unseen...you came through Moses and Aaron." In other words, when all hell broke loose on Israel as it faced extinction by the Egyptian army, God intervened. But God did not take them out of the troubled sea, but *through* it. And when God's saving power was most at work, God's hand was least visible. And God's agents of redemption were the very human servants, Moses and Aaron. In this psalm, the turning point comes not when the absent God finally hears the lament and acts, but when the grieving sufferer recognizes, through an act of willful memory, that God has been redemptively present in his suffering all along.

2) *Focus on the main image or images* – Sometimes psalms are arranged around powerful master images and gain their force upon readers and hearers through those images, for example, Psalm 23, with the compelling image of the shepherd or Psalm 137, which we discussed above, with the central image of the exile on the bank of an alien river weeping for lost Jerusalem. Here the preacher can track the life of the image

as it gathers centrifugal force, pulling the other aspects of the psalm into itself.
Consider the central contrasting images of tree and chaff in Psalm 1:

1 Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
3 They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
4 The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
6 for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Everything in this psalm rotates around the central axis formed by the contrast between the tree, firmly planted by water and flourishing, and the chaff, blown aimlessly by the wind. The righteous (that is, those who are rooted in the way of life offered by God in the Torah) are like the tree, while the wicked, who have no root, are like the wind-driven chaff. Thus, the psalm's contrasting metaphors pit rootedness, stillness, and stability versus purposeless movement. The righteous cannot be moved, while the wicked can be blown around willy nilly.

We should keep in mind that this is a matter of biblical wisdom, which means that the image is contextual, not universally applicable. Sometimes immovability is not righteousness but simply stubbornness and cussedness, and sometimes movement and action are not the result of rootlessness but of the freeing wind of the Spirit. But not here. The righteous in this context are people who do *not* act. They don't follow bad advice or skip aimlessly down foolish pathways or live out a skeptical lifestyle. They sit still and meditate (literally "murmur") the scripture day and night. Sometimes this is true and sometimes it is not, and it is the challenge of wisdom literature to readers to be wise themselves and to determine when and where the text speaks truth. Here stillness and immovability are virtues created by a deep immersion in Torah.

The fact that this is a wisdom psalm also guides us in understanding the theological import of the psalm. Instead of seeing it as warning about the impending judgment of God (Caution! Be rooted in scripture or God will send a windstorm to blow you away!), it is far more likely that this psalm, as is so often the case with biblical wisdom, is simply observing how things are in the world. Stephen Mitchell's loose translation of Psalm 1 picks up this wisdom theme:

Blessed are the man and the woman
who have grown beyond their greed
and have put an end to their hatred
and no longer nourish illusions.

But they delight in the way things are
and keep their hearts open, day and night.
They are like trees planted near flowing rivers,
which bear fruit when they are ready.
Their leaves will not fall or wither.
Everything they do will succeed.⁹

Biblical scholar Patrick Miller hits the same wisdom note when he says,

[I]n this psalm one senses that it is almost in the nature of things that the wicked way goes under. ...[T]his psalm suggests to us – *and bids us open our eyes to look for evidence* – that in a more proximate sense wickedness often does itself in and leads to its own destruction in a world that is shaped and governed by God’s moral order.¹⁰

“Bids us open our eyes to look for evidence” – that, of course, is the task of preaching.

In Judith Guest’s novel *Ordinary People*, Calvin Jarrett is a 41-year-old tax attorney facing a mid-life crisis. He has a career and a family, but his life seems to him to be a muddled, rootless mess. He fears that other people see him as a bumbler, a joke, a dope. He feels that every person he meets is a silent accuser, pointing a finger at him and saying, “Who the hell are you really?” Without an internal compass or external confidence in himself, he indeed wonders who he really is, straining to listen whenever a man of his age begins to say in his earshot, “Now, I’m the kind of man who...” hoping to glean some word of wisdom about himself. “*I’m the kind of man who* – he has heard this phrase a thousand times, at parties, in bars, in the course of normal conversation, *I’m the kind of man who* – instinctively he listens; tries to apply any familiar terms to himself, but without success.”¹¹ Calvin constantly muses over the losses and failures of his life: the loss of his mother when he was eleven, leaving him orphaned; the loss of a trusted mentor because of his own poor choices; the other bad decisions that led to the hiring of an incompetent secretary; and on and on. Finally Calvin admits, “I’m the kind of man who...hasn’t the least idea what kind of man I am.”¹² Like the chaff the wind drives away.

3) *Experience the mood of the psalm* – In his classic textbook on poetry, *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine observed that poetry “is language whose individual lines, either because of their own brilliance or because they focus so powerfully what has gone before, have a higher voltage than most language.”¹³ The psalms, as poetry, are no exception, and many have observed that the psalms overflow with electrically charged emotion – rage, ecstasy, fear, joy, and more. Sometimes the psalm text will yield a sermon when the preacher zeros in on the emotional expression. Take, as an example, Psalm 150:

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

3 Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

To say that this is a psalm about praise is to say that Niagara Falls is about water or that an LSU home football game is about noise or that Mardi Gras on Bourbon Street in New Orleans is a neighborhood block party. Psalm 150 is about praise raised to the n^{th} degree. To focus on the mood of praise in this psalm quickly reveals its several expressions, and without too much effort the preacher can imagine the psalm as the crescendo of a “call and response” moment in worship, thus...

Call: Praise the Lord!

Response: *Where?*

Call: Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!

Response: *Why?*

Call: Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Response: *How?*

Call: Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Response: *Who?*

Call: Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Response: *Praise the Lord!*

The sheer exuberance of this psalm discloses that this is no mere Thanksgiving service, no tricked-out Saturday afternoon “Prayer and Praise” event at which a gathering of dungareed worshipers rises with lattes in hand to shout over a guitar and trap set “awesome, magnificent, dominion, holiness” for seven minutes at projected images of wildflowers and dimpled babies. This psalm is an eschatological breakthrough, an anticipation of those rare moments of ecstatic experience in which the superabundance of God’s glory overflows and floods the hearts of worshipers who are “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” As Rilke asks in one of his poems, “But all the violence and horror in the world – how can you accept it?” And then the poet responds simply, “I praise.” This is the kind of moment and mood William Sloane Coffin described in an Easter sermon some years ago:

There is an Easter sunrise service that takes place on the edge of the Grand Canyon. As the scripture line is read, “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone (Matt 28: 2), a giant boulder is heaved over the rim. As it goes crashing down the side of the Grand Canyon into the Colorado River far below, a two-thousand voice choir bursts into the Hallelujah

chorus. Too dramatic? Not, if despite all appearances, we live in an Easter world.¹⁴

4) *Listen for the theological testimony of the psalm* – The philosopher and occasional theologian Paul Ricoeur argued that the meaning of texts, biblical and otherwise, was finally not to be found behind them in their historical contexts or beneath them in their a-chronic structures or even inside them in their vocabulary and syntax, as important as all these aspects of the texts might be to the interpreter, but instead in the world projected in front of the text.¹⁵ Texts are products of a world, and they broker that world to readers.

Psalms say many things in many voices; they confess, complain, testify, counsel, lament, and petition. But beyond what they say in explicit words, they imply a world formed and inhabited by God. The preacher can move from the specifics of the text to the vision implied by the text of the character of God and the way of life implied by this God. Take, for example, Psalm 51. I will cite only a portion:

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Here, in front of the text, we encounter the God who sees the secrets of our hearts, who desires truth in the inward being, who wants to teach us wisdom in the deepest

recesses of our lives.

Many years ago, William H. Poteat of Duke University wrote,

In hundreds of American campuses there are buildings upon which have been engraved, snatched wholly from their profounder context, the words, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” Upon seeing them, my natural rejoinder is: “The Hell it does.” In the context of compulsive modern optimism these words lose all sense of paradox.¹⁶

Our age, Poteat says, lives by the motto of Francis Bacon: “Knowledge is power. ... Everywhere in our imagination there rises up from its depths the belief that man is *saved*, not damned by knowledge and by standing in the truth.”¹⁷ But, as Poteat goes on to say, many of our great mythic narratives, for example, Adam and Eve, Oedipus Rex, and Faust, teach a counter lesson. These all describe human experience in which discovering and knowing the truth does not set us free but causes humanity to lose innocence and to suffer anxiety and even condemnation. Only in the context of the redemptive grace of God does the truth set us free.

This theological claim is at the heart of Psalm 51. The psalmist has come hard up against the reality that “my sin is ever before me” and that God “desires truth in the inward being.” This truth would be unbearable were it not for God’s willingness to “purge me with hyssop” and to “create in me a clean heart.”

I will never forget an experience I had many years ago when, in response to some medical problem, I spent a brief time in a hospital emergency room. Waiting in a curtained cubicle for the physician to come and treat me, I could easily overhear a tragic drama taking place in the next cubicle. A young man had been riding with his girlfriend on his motorcycle. He had lost control of the bike, and the result was that he was injured, but his girlfriend was killed. The young man was sobbing loudly as the nurses bound his wounds. At one point his mother arrived to comfort him, and, as much as I have tried, I do not think I will ever be able to blot out from my memory the awful sound of his keening as he wailed to his mother, “I killed her, Mama, I killed her!”

The psalmist would know of his agony: “I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.” You shall know the truth, and the truth shall tear you apart. I can only hope that somehow and in some way, the young man in the next cubicle could also know the psalmist’s other truth and pray the psalmist’s prayer, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”

Our old ministers in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church were right in their own way: the psalms are indeed God’s very own songs. If we who preach will venture into their depths and proclaim their truths, perhaps our congregations, sitting mournfully under the willows on the banks of Babylon’s rivers, sorrowfully remembering a lost Zion, can be emboldened in heart to lift their voices and to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.”

Notes

1 Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 44.

2 A recording of “By the Rivers of Babylon,” sung by a rural Associate Reformed Presbyterian choir,

can be heard here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzrmuqqiOus>

3 Donald Gowan, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 146.

4 Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

5 Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53-54.

6 *Ibid.*, 77.

7 *Ibid.*, 79.

8 *Ibid.*, 78.

9 Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 3.

10 Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 85.

11 Judith Guest, *Ordinary People* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1976), 48.

12 *Ibid.*, 51.

13 Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 9.

14 William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 172.

15 See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87.

16 William H. Poteat, "Anxiety, Courage, and Truth," *Duke Divinity School Review*, 31/3 (Autumn 1966), 205.

17 *Ibid.*