Poetry (Day 1, Evening Session)

Psalm 94:May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents. Or 140: Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! Or to be really clear, 136: O that you would kill the wicked.

What do these violent poems have to do with contemporary worship? Or justice in our world today? Their adjurations might seem uncivil and leave us asking aren’t we beyond that kind of behavior? I would propose no, they have a unique contribution to both worship and justice in this exact form, using these exact words, as rousing reviving poetry.

The poetry of the psalms makes a unique contribution to worship because it allows us to be intimate with God in a particular way. Their words expose how well God knows us. They expose our anger and our vulnerabilities and allow us to be honest about things we can’t necessarily express in words of our own. But voice the fury and give it to God to deal with.

The poetry of the psalms makes a unique contribution to justice because it performs moral correction on us as we perform it. We voice the fury but we don’t take the action, we leave it with God.

And memorized psalms can bring us gifts from the Lord at the moment we least expect them, the moments we need God the most but are unable to evoke solutions of our own.

How does poetry do this? As the words come out of our mouth, we are yoked to moral principles and concerns that come from beyond us. We are pulled along by God’s yoke, plowing a furrow of truth we couldn’t navigate alone but also that we can’t escape.

Tonight I am going to talk about what I think is the psalms most powerful characteristic: Ambush.

The Psalms use poetry to draw us in and surprise us before our rational left brain kicks in. They use words and phrases we recognize emotionally and that eventually pull us into a world under the tight lash of principles that come from beyond us, they are God’s principles of justice. They trigger our neurons and release our hormones before our conscious mind can reason our way out of the “places” they take us to. The Psalms shock us because they are red of tooth and claw. But they also are familiar. We find familiar scenes and feelings in the psalms. Familiar urges to act on our angers. They are in essence a form of ambushing our internal unconscious systems.

We are ambushed by poetry. The poetry of the Psalter actually calls on us when we think we are calling on it. Let’s look at how the poetry splits us open, makes us vulnerable, and while applying the needed balm to save us- sometimes stings.

Let’s take a look at the techniques of poetry-such a dangerous art that poets are often arrested first in a revolution- and how it draws us in and takes us to familiar places, sometimes against our conscious will.

I define poetry as: “the editing of reality to evoke a response that makes the truth difficult to deny.” Let me give you some examples from personal experience:

When I was on a business trip trying by *sheer force of will* to make things happen in my life and on a big project that I was managing I was ambushed by a poem. It may have been written by Rilke and goes like this:

“And suddenly I found myself all alone, with my body that can’t love me, and my will that can’t save me.”

This line still brings me to tears. I had no idea until this made me sob that I had been attempting to do everything all alone. But this single line did more than just remind me that God and others had to be a part of what I was doing or it was of no use. The line became my confession to God in the instant I read it.

I recalled Psalm 127: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

I was called ambushed just when I thought I was using poetry for my own comfort and pleasure and called on to confess.

After my confession true comfort came in the middle of Psalm 127: “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, for he gives sleep to his beloved.”

My husband John and I had a similar experience with a project my daughter and son-in-law have taken on as their lifetime work, related to the attempted genocide of the people of Darfur.

The International Criminal Court has convicted the leader of Sudan, the UN has made resolutions, several US presidents have said “not on my watch.” I spent countless hours trying to figure out a way to get just one Darfur refugee girl to school in Uganda. But for ten years no progress at all has been made in remedying these people’s situation. In fact it has deteriorated.

Eventually we decided to pray the Psalms for the Darfuri refugees. Of course not every psalm fits their circumstances. Some speak of sin when the genocide does not arise from the sins of the Darfuri.

Instead, we were again confessing, acknowledging our sin as one of the nations who let this situation persist.

Reading the Psalms for the Darfuri has not just reminded us of how history is in God’s hands. We are petitioning the only actor that can do something. And we read Psalms of praise that the Darfuri are in God’s hands.

We have now been through the entire Psalter more than once and are again praying the psalms at dinnertime for a new concern: the wider church in the world- which we see is suffering from persecution, martyrdom, diminishment, irrelevance, complacency, lack of evangelism all of which are contributing to a slow agonizing decline, particularly in the West. The church it seems must be put in God’s hands or face annihilation.

From these other experiences, I’m now confident the psalms will subject us to the lessons we need to hear and begin to hopefully reform us for the church. What will happen for the church when we apply the world of the psalms? Will it become, as one person on twitter recently put it: “when I look in the doors, I wonder what could possibly bring all these diverse people together? How could they possibly love one another?” I hope they ask.

But *how* does the poetry of Psalter “call” on us?

I use the word “call” partly because the Hebrew word for “read” denotes reading out loud; it is the word that means “call.” Each Psalm evokes a particular “emotional atmosphere.” This setting is provocative and terrifyingly familiar. We are among bones shaking with terror in Psalm 6, trembling mountains and roaring seas in Psalm 46, a devouring fire and mighty tempest in Psalm 50, we are about to drown with deep waters up to our neck in Psalm 69.

We enter these places and it is *there* that God speaks to us. The divine voice in Psalm 46 says, “10Be still and know that I am God!”… and after this command we hear that “the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

The psalm uses key motifs and phrases that lead us to not just intellectually but emotionally make a turn, a turn the psalm itself is in control of.

The **words, motifs, and phrases** are triggers for emotions and evoke entire landscapes and meanings. “A voice crying in the wilderness” calls to mind more than an eagle on the cliffs of the Rockies or a bleating sheep in the Sahara. It evokes the desert crossed by the Hebrews when they escaped from Pharaoh. It evokes the entire story of John and Jesus, both ministries leading to death as their words fell on deaf ears in this lost world. Our modern poets such as T. S Eliot and Leonard Cohen have recognized this ability of words and demonstrated it to the rest of us of it through poems such as the Wasteland and songs like Halleluiah- which have moved entire generations without anyone, even the poet, being able to articulate the exact story they tell.

This of poetry is different than what we find in the overarching narratives about Israel’s journey to the land of milk and honey, or the detailed purity laws of Leviticus, or even the prophecies of Ezra and Nehemiah. We react to them in our gut before we understand what they are saying. They turn us around, ask us to repent, maybe without us ever understanding the rationale behind the words.

It is also **a world where God has searched us and knows us**. This makes us even more **vulnerable**. Once we enter the composer’s world we have lost control. As Dylan Thomas said: “The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it.”

The refugees in Darfur had no idea they had any human rights. Once they found out they were excited but also frustrated and angry and knew they were powerless. We are unsavable by our own will, the psalms remind us and they remind God of this fact.

What will happen for the church when we apply the world of the psalms? Will it become a church that, as one person on twitter recently put it: “when I look in the doors, I wonder what could possibly bring all these diverse people together? How could they possibly love one another?” I hope so. Then we can shout halleluiah and know why. In the mean time we must shout halleluiah sometimes without feeling it….at first.

Which brings us to the role of psalms in worship. The Psalms remind us and they save us.

But Psalms do more than just report “what is” or “what happened” or “what should be” In the singing of a psalm, the psalm literally achieves its purpose: Yahweh is crowned your ruler (Psalm 99), God is petitioned (Psalm 22), the LORD is challenged to act (Psalm 31), you find your place in history (Ps 78, 115), your heart is centered on gratitude for the LORD (Psalm 103).

The poetry of the Psalms is thus performative - it does the thing it is intending, immediately. The Psalms rely on somewhat different methods than court cases or morality tales. Morality tales and courts act on us from outside. They are the longer slower route.

With their absence of connective prepositions and explanations, Psalms confound our left rational brain and spark our right brain into recalling on a heart level the universal truths and promises that God has made us. They are fast in an emergency. If we don’t “feel like” saying Halleluiah we will be called on by the psalms to remember, immediately. To remember that God knit us together in the womb, that God knows us, that there are no secrets from God, and God still loves us.

O Lord, you have searched me and know me…Even before a word is on my tongue. (Ps 139).

There is danger in depending on our own will to prepare our own personally tailored prayer. Like a person can’t drive themselves to the hospital when injured, when we don’t “feel like” worshiping, we can’t think of why we are grateful or that we are loved beyond all measure, we need to be reminded. And we need to be driven there, fast. We may be in such a state of trauma or crisis that our own words are no good to us.

This is why “remember” is a command. And if the psalms are part of our worship, or we have committed them to memory, the Holy Spirit can use their poetry to evoke us, to remind us, to reach us, to encourage us. To enable us to worship even if we don’t have the resources to craft the words or evoke feelings for ourselves.

The Psalter as an entire book where we can enter the world of poetic justice, find our own conviction, confess, experience God’s nature, see the fate of the evil and of the righteous and in the end – singing the last song 150 - come out praising the Lord. A reading of the Psalter takes us through the entire cycle of life, both individual life and community life. Poetic justice at Psalm 1 is bracketed at Psalm 150 with praise and thanksgiving without skipping the full range of real-life punches in between. Using the entire Psalter we are bold in the way of the Lord. God allows all this wandering in the desert, but only for so long.

Pick one question and share about it with those around you:

1. Can you remember a time when a phrase or word- maybe from a poem or song or Psalm- caught you off guard?
2. Is there a psalm you have memorized or would like to memorize?
3. Share if you have relied on a Psalm in any particular situation- at the hospital, in an accident, or during a time of fear or danger.
4. Does your church pray the Psalms regularly in the worship service? How does this affect you?
5. Is there a situation in the greater world you would like to commit to praying the Psalms about?

The Psalms Concern for Justice (Day 2, Morning Session 1)

Last evening you may have heard me talk about how we go to the psalms expecting comfort and come away with something quite different. An awakening of sorts. What we find there is fangs, fangs that grip us, chew us up, then spit us out. The psalms are red of tooth and claw. How can they be related to justice, we ask.

First **a quick review about** poetry and worship. The poetry of the Psalms ambushes us with words. I define poetry as: “the editing of reality to evoke a response that makes the truth difficult to deny.” The editing of reality to evoke a response that makes the truth difficult to deny. They create an emotional atmosphere that we recognize to be our state.

We cry out in Psalm 94:May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents. Or 140: Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! Or to be really clear, 136: O that you would kill the wicked.

The poetry of the psalms allows us to be intimate with God in a particular way by revealing honestly where we are in our anger and despair but also allow God the opportunity to remind us of Israel’s history, of the divine promises, and of infinite love. The Lord will save me (Psalm 55).

The poetry of the Psalms is performative - it does the thing it is intending, immediately. We crown God lord (Psalm 99), God is petitioned (Psalm 22), the LORD is challenged to act (Psalm 31), we find our place in history (Ps 78, 115), your heart is centered on gratitude for the LORD (Psalm 103). This is how the poetry of the Psalter actually “calls” on us when we think we are calling on it.

This is what the psalms do to and for us. But what does this “emotional atmosphere” **have to do with justice**?

*The poetry of the psalms makes a unique contribution to justice because it performs moral correction on us as we perform it.*

How can the Psalms and their “emotional atmosphere” do this?

In them we are given freedom of speech, of blessing and cursing, of intimate relationship- the chance to speak freely and honestly to God. Freedom to lay out our claims. But not the freedom to distort true justice into what we want it to be, not endorsement to take the actions that result in red of tooth and claw, but a reclamation God’s reality.

The **world of the Psalms is an ethical place**, a place of truth. It defines the unfairness, instability, and despair of the world we live in.

The Psalms have a particularly unambiguous view of justice - what we refer to as “poetic justice.” It starts with the first line of Psalm 1; “1Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread.” It’s nice and clear isn’t it. But what comes next, “or sit in the seat of scoffers,” hits us Bam!, right between the eyes. I may not be the righteous one here.

The psalm goes on to reassure us that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” By that point in the poem I am humbled and driven to repent – I *want* to move towards the path of the righteous.

**Psalm 1 is the very definition of** **poetic justice** - you get what you deserve - and it sets the tone for the Psalter. Besides an “emotional” atmosphere, psalms also have an atmosphere of “poetic justice.” When you sing a psalm you are reinforcing the world of poetic justice, because you hear it, and other people hear it, and God hears it.

During the singing of a psalm, **God’s justice thrives.** Evildoers may seem to flourish but are doomed. It’s acknowledged that suffering really is going on too long but the righteous eventually flourish in God’s courts. The Lord’s righteousness and steadfast love endure forever. The wise are happy in their fear of the Lord. The foundations of the world are safely in God’s hands. The true sovereign and judge is the Lord, who will always maintain the cause of the poor, the needy, aliens, orphans, widows. All creation praises the Lord. Zion is built-up and restored to glory and Israel is God’s faithful servant. God keeps promises and we are always met with grace and mercy.

**This world informs us of our God given rights**. If we take this seriously we look around and say, Hey! This is not what is happening, not what I’m experiencing. I want what I hear and see in the Psalms. They evoke what it would be like to have a real “home”, the environment, the atmosphere, the place I want to live in. We desire what they promise and this is what provokes us emotionally, makes us vulnerable. Once we take poetic justice seriously as the truth, we see what kind of world are we living in. You can almost hear a teenager voice crying: “But that’s not fair!” at our world.

It is also **a world where God has searched us and knows us**. This makes us even more **vulnerable**. Once we enter the composer’s world we have lost control. As Dylan Thomas said: “The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it.”

The refugees in Darfur that my daughter works with and that John and I pray the psalms for regularly had no idea they had any human rights. Once they found out they were excited but also frustrated and angry and knew they were powerless. We are unsavable by our own will, the psalms remind us and they remind God of what we need, of what we are asking for.

Our own recognition or rejection of what we are singing is either a response or a reaction to the composer but we are no longer in charge of what is going on. The Psalm carries us into its own conclusion. How? Poetry splits us open or “yokes” us with the truth. It reverses roles and changes the course of redress.

A student in Fuller Seminary chapel last March described taking a walk in the evening. After a block or so, his danger radar went up. He sensed the police cruiser he had passed was stalking him. He was caught “walking while black”.

What he called his “prayer pilot light” stoked up to high. The officers stopped him. They yelled for any within earshot to hear, “Stop resisting the police!” Twisting his wrist behind his back they brought him to the ground. As he was hassled by them, he yelled out that he lived in that neighborhood and was a pastor. But no neighbors gathered round. What happened then?

**A psalm came to his rescue**, a psalm he knew by heart. As the Rabbis say: a psalm was written on his heart and could fall in because that heart was breaking. It was Psalm 27: “The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” It goes on: “Now my head is lifted up, above my enemies all around me,” and it pleads “Don’t give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence…Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD.”

Its very **atmosphere** of strength and light, of lack of fear and of patience, brought him relief. But it did more than that. He was able to find the forgiveness he needed to pass on to the officer who hurt his shoulder.

He said; “I forgive you but you will have to go to your own priest for penitence.” He was taken to the hospital, unafraid and able to say he responded, not reacted, to the injustice that was dealt him.

A person cannot know when a crisis might manifest and may need some rote recitation of the kind the psalms provide as a touchstone in order to prevent total psycho-spiritual annihilation before addressing the crisis.

Poetry repeated over and over, even at the risk of becoming over-familiar in worship or rote in the words, even if we are sometimes numb to the meaning of the phrases at the time, can later serve well when we can’t summon words or comfort by our own will. Psalms seem to know when to call on us.

**A story or a later court appearance** might not have served him in the same way the psalm did.

Someone in a situation such as the student-pastor stopped by the police might later be angry. If I was his wife I certainly would have been upset and wanting to seek redress.

Often we come to the Psalter in resentment and anger or even rage. Sometimes when we go to the Psalms it is to be reassured that poetic justice works; or to rightly express frustration at persecution or sickness, to just cry out in despair: help, help, help. There are at least 60 prayers in the psalms that ask for relief from enemies or sickness. They crack us open with their emotional atmosphere and what do we find? God-given emotional demands. Do the Psalms mean to encourage the red of fang and claw they depict?

Read Psalm 55 aloud together, take a few moments to read it again alone, then explore the questions below and share answers to some of them with your group:

1. What words or phrases create an “emotional atmosphere”?
2. What emotions is the psalmist expressing? What is the God-given emotional demand the psalmist is claiming?
3. What do you think would be justice in this situation?
4. Have you experienced something like this before, how did you react?
5. Have you used a psalm in a situation like this before?
6. How is the Psalm “performative”?
7. What does it help us to remember?
8. How did reading this Psalm affect you today?

Reformation of the Perpetrator (Day 2, Morning Session 2)

In Psalm 94 we sing, “1O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!” and we mean it. “Rise up and judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve!” Perhaps we can all think of someone we want that to apply to. But we also don’t want it to be us who are “repaid for their iniquity.” So exactly how do psalms help us validate and actualize these unruly emotions without our becoming the perpetrator?

The most extreme example of this is expression of emotion is Psalm 137, which ends, “Daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

The use of **parallelism** in Biblical poetry ambushes us in here: “Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!” This sounds perfectly reasonable. But be careful when you read a line of Biblical poetry that sounds perfectly reasonable because in the next line usually creates the sting, the sharpness, the “goad”. The next line is coupled with the first reasonable line in order to shock or redefine or question or prick the conscience of the listener. “Happy shall be they who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

The **strangeness of juxtaposition**, another tool of poets, creates even more horror about the righteous position we have taken- “happy” and “bashed children” just do not belong in the same sentence. The follow-on from the first perfectly reasonable and seeming innocent statement is totally devastating and reveals to us the conclusion of the emotional tact we have taken…No one wants to be the country that lobbed the bomb that killed the baby, but when we are, the rationale usually starts with “but they” and leads to the first line we see above… the bad guy usually starts out as someone who just wants to seek justice for those they love.

See how God knows us. The poem has split us open with shock and the truth of what we are really thinking, it has made us vulnerable, exposed our raw emotions. **We are deep into the poem before we know what role we are playing,** unlike the process in a court of law where we come prepared to make our case. The Psalm sneaks up on us. Once we have entered, it makes its case with a bully-tinged atmosphere, yet it remains unyielding in its ethic of poetic justice - “they” deserve it!

We can see in the baby-bashing Psalm 137 what horror can result from the powerless despair of the defeated. We have to face what turns us into perpetrators. But we don’t see ourselves in that role. We don’t want to be in that role. So what to do with that vicious anger, with our righteousness?

The Psalm has provided the outlet. By merely reading the Psalm we have given our anger expression and validation, and turned it over to the only one who can take action. It gives us the means to real justice. **It prevents us from committing the crime by convicting us and turning us back to God as the prosecutor and the judge and the executor of justice.** God knows us and God saves us before we can commit the crime.

When we meet our enemies we can threaten them: Have I got a Psalm for you.

Psalm 55 is a great example. It ends with, “But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit; the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you.”

In the psalms we learn from the inside out that there is no healing without healing the perpetrator because the perpetrator is both us and them. We can trust that a psalm can call on us in our hour greatest need, before we get on the wrong side of justice.

**Perhaps this is the Psalms greatest contribution to justice: identifying all of us as perpetrators and God as judge and prosecutor.**

But also they provide the healing balm: the poetry of the Psalms **resets out moral compass by being performative, immediately.** The Psalms do more than report “what is” or “what happened” or “what should be” Again in the singing of a psalm, the psalm literally achieves its purpose: Yahweh is crowned your ruler (Psalm 99), God is petitioned (Psalm 22), the LORD is challenged to act (Psalm 31), you find your place in history (Ps 78, 115), your heart is centered on gratitude for the LORD (Psalm 103). They are a fast fix of salvation.

The Psalms rely on somewhat different methods than court cases or morality tales. Morality tales and courts act on us from outside. We are looking in at the scene, which is set up to convince us or convict us, but there is the possibility of a step between their action and our response or reaction, even if it is only a split second. Because of their performative nature and emotional atmosphere, psalms are intimate and able to **sneak up on us as we sing** - formative words about our situation and beliefs are already out of our mouths before we can react. They ambush us. We are yoked by words to God’s ethical truths which shape us instantly from “inside.” This also applies to the case where the psalm “calls” on us – embedded in our memory it waits to be activated by the Spirit when needed to save us in moments of weakness.

**We are thus not the same person as we were before we sang the psalm.** Using what we know of neuroscience, a psalm not just expresses but can create the mode of practice in the psalm. Human formation is a process that involves the transformation of day-to-day patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. Formative practices such as singing the psalms change our brain neurons and create the capacity to embrace a new world view.

The psalms also move us to see new sets of questions that we might not think of otherwise. Am I a perpetrator? Yes. But they also reassure us that love reigns in God’s court. In a sense we are shutting up and letting God’s words speak. God tells us through the Psalms that which we can’t think of and blesses us with what we have no right to claim.

Promises are made to us, covenants sealed. If the composer could sleep under extreme duress, can I sleep too? Yes! Psalm 4 reassures us: “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” Faith and trust are not dependent on outside circumstances but continue for the singer in the face of desperation. As we sing these same expressions of faith and trust, they calm us. God speaks to us when we cannot find the words. God sings us a divine lullaby.

In the Psalter as an entire book we can enter the world of poetic justice, find our own conviction, confess, experience God’s nature, see the fate of the evil and of the righteous and in the end – singing the last song 150 - come out praising the Lord. A reading of the Psalter takes us through the entire cycle of life, both individual life and community life. Poetic justice at Psalm 1 is bracketed at Psalm 150 with praise and thanksgiving without skipping the full range of real-life punches in between. Using the entire Psalter we are bold in the way of the Lord. God allows all this wandering in the desert, but only for so long.

Look at Psalm 55 again

1. Can you see where parallelism and strangeness in coupled lines helped intensify, redefine or enhance the first line?
2. How can poetry help us step into another’s shoes? Has this happened to you before?
3. How does the psalmists situation change from beginning to end? But has the psalmist’s emotional or spiritual situation changed?