

Today we start a 6-week series on the Psalms. The Book of Psalms contains 150 poems. They are poems that encompass all the ups and downs and emotions in the life of faith. A little less than half are attributed to David.

There are a variety of ways to categorize the Psalms. The book appears to be divided into 5 sections, or 5 books within the book. This is based on beginning and ending phrases for the sections. It's a good way to think about the Psalms if you want to read through them start to finish. I can make some recommendations for an introduction to that approach if you want to do that.

Another traditional way to divide the Psalms is by type – there are lament Psalms, praise Psalms, royal Psalms, processional Psalms, coronation Psalms, penitential Psalms, and so on. The types span the human condition.

The narrative lectionary creators who put this Psalms series together used a different approach. It's one put forth by theologian Walter Brueggeman. Walter Brueggeman was in many eyes, including mine, one of the best biblical scholars of our time.

He proposed a pattern of the Psalms as types that characterize three movements in the life of faith. He called them orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

I personally have found that extremely helpful, not only in reading the Psalms, but in actually using them as I've gone through the different phases in my life.

Orientation is our early introduction to life and to the life of faith. For those of us fortunate enough to grow up in a reasonably functional family, it's the phase where you feel safe and loved. You begin making sense of life and of faith.

For people my age, the early life of faith was learning the Bible stories on those little lesson sheets with pictures they gave out every week at Sunday school. Sometimes it was stories told with flannel boards.

It was all the little songs – Jesus Loves Me, Jesus Loves the Little Children, The B-I-B-L-E Yes that's the book for me.

Things made sense. There wasn't a lot to rock my world when I was 5.

But almost nobody can stay there. When you start learning more about the world, not everything makes sense anymore. In my faith life, even when I was still a kid, the tumult of the 60's and 70's had an impact.

A youth group leader who just returned from Vietnam made real the images on the screen from my nightly dose of Walter Cronkite.

A VBS teacher taught us Pete Seeger's song Little Boxes. I don't recall much conversation about what the song actually said, but it was clearly a song with an edge that the little Sunday school songs left out.

Most of us go through some disorientation as we grow up. Some never get out of that and give up on faith. But a lot of us who are still here found our way back to some sort of reorientation.

But even after reorientation, many of us have also had something happen that caused profound disorientation once again...nothing made sense anymore.

The unexpected and premature death of a loved one. The loss of a job or a natural disaster that causes you to lose everything. A serious illness.

At the end of 2017 our son became ill visiting in Chicago and spent most of the next three months either in a Chicago hospital or Nebraska Medicine in Omaha. Then he spent 6 months with us, recovering. During that time both of my parents were failing, and my mom ended up dying.

It was a time of pretty intense disorientation – a time of never feeling like I had things in hand and never being sure what God was doing, if anything.

Those kind of disorienting experiences seem to be almost required to get a truly resilient reorientation faith. A reorientation when maybe everything doesn't completely make sense again, but you learn to live with faith in the uncertainty and the questions.

This Psalm series takes us through that cycle. We'll start with a couple of orientation Psalms. They are typically praise Psalms. Then we'll move into a series of lament Psalms – Psalms for when the wheels have come off our lives.

We sometimes think the cheerful praise Psalms are what we need to hear when we're down. I don't think most people find that to be true. If you've ever listened to a sad song on repeat when you're really down, you understand how the lament Psalms work.

And then we'll end with a couple of reorientation Psalms – typically psalms of thanksgiving for God's help in trouble.

One more note on the Psalms. They are poetry. They rely heavily on images and metaphors. They are meant to make us feel something or see things differently than our logical brains might.

In essence, the Psalms are a way of expressing God's word that resonates with something that lies deeper than what our consciousness can grasp.

Psalms 1 and 2 are an introduction to the book of Psalms.

Psalms 1 does a couple of things. First of all, it is an example of a Psalm of orientation. Things make sense. There are two pathways and there's a clear cause and effect. On the first one, you are meditating on God's word – for the first readers of the Psalms, that would be God's Torah, or teachings from the first 5 books of the Bible. You study them, let them shape you.

On that path, things go well. On the path of the wicked, they don't. It makes sense. It's orienting.

Except...we've all experienced times when this didn't seem to be how things go. If this were the only type of Psalm written, we would probably be inclined to ignore them.

But the image of the tree moves us beyond a more superficial reading. Nebraska's state tree is the Cottonwood. Although there are kinds of cottonwoods that can grow where it's dry, the classic cottonwood does best along river banks or near underground water sources.

I always think of them when I read this Psalm. They sink their roots down into that water. And they grow. They can grow to be gigantic, and can live for a hundred years.

Out here on the plains they weather a hundred years of howling winds, blizzards, hailstorms, and temperatures from well below zero to 100 degrees. They are incredibly resilient.

That's the image we get here. With our roots sunk deeply into this nourishing water that is God's word, we too can withstand those times of disorientation. We can be resilient.

That is incredibly important. Because without something to make us resilient – without those deep roots – we can wither in the face of those terrible disorienting times. But with them, we can endure.

And when we can endure, we can receive the gift of reorientation. We can receive the new life to which God brings us after disorientation. It's like a little death and resurrection and it can take us to a deeper level of faith and a more joyful and connected life. We can bear fruit...and for us, the fruit we bear is that of love, peace, joy, mercy...all those fruits of the Spirit promised in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

You should have received a guide to reading the Psalms when you came in – anyone need one? We'll spend the next six weeks in the Psalms. But during that time, I would invite you to be like that tree alongside a river – sink your roots into the Psalms themselves – this poetic Torah. The Psalms aren't meant to be read quickly or for information.

Go slow, read a Psalm more than once. If you're a journaler, write down what bubbles up.

Think about where you are now in your own journey of faith – orientation, disorientation, or reorientation. Read some of the Psalms in that phase. Notice what effect it has.

In a time that seems uncertain and unsettling, the Psalms are a reminder that God stands with us in the times of great joy and the times of great sorrow...the times when everything is going our way and life makes sense...and the times when it seems the world has gone crazy and everything's against us.

And wherever we are in our own lives, drinking in this word offers the strength that can help us keep our feet on the path of God's way.