

Orientation– Psalm 113

Last week we started 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, although probably not even all of those were actually written by him.

There are a variety of ways to categorize the Psalms. The book appears to be divided into 5 sections – and were perhaps organized that way to reflect the five books of Torah. It's a helpful way to organize the Psalms if you want to read through them start to finish.

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 somewhat 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, especially Old Testament scholars.

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.

Psalm 1 from last week gave us the image of a tree sinking its roots deep into God's word. That's what I hope we can do over the next few weeks. 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.

You should have received a guide to reading the Psalms when you came in. We'll spend the next several weeks in worship looking at a sampling of 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. Reflect on where in that cycle of faith you sit right now.

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 me and I suspect many in my age group, 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 did not have.

Most of us go through some disorientation as we grow up. For some people, the impact is so deep they never leave it and give up on faith. But those of us who are still here found our way back to some sort of reorientation.

And then, 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.

For me, the year Sam was so sick and my mom died was such a time. 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.

As hard as they are, those kinds 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 midst of the uncertainty and the questions.

This Psalm series takes us through that cycle. The Psalms from last week and this week are examples of orientation Psalms. They are typically praise Psalms. Starting next week we'll move into the 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 in general. 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.

With that, let's take a look at Psalm 113. This is a typical praise Psalm. It's a Psalm of orientation that presents us with a God who can be trusted.

The first part of the Psalm literally orients us around God. The first verse is key - Praise the Lord, praise O servants of the Lord. The Psalm is very specifically addressed to the people as servants of God.

Praising God and serving God are linked. When we praise God, we are oriented with God as our center. We recognize that God is God and we are not. From there, we can serve God without our egos and our idols getting in the way.

From there, the Psalm has two movements. In verses 2 through 5 we get the image of God enthroned in heaven. God is high above the nations ruling over heaven and earth.

The Psalms were written over an extended period of Israel's history. Israel's history is marked by the successive rules of human kings – a practice that was never God's intent. God's intent was that God would be their king. The people thought their lives would be better with a human king, so God gave them what they wanted.

But one after another of those kings proved to be disappointing. And ultimately the monarchy failed completely.

The first part of this Psalm points us back to God as ruler over heaven and earth. It gives us an image of God on a mighty throne high above our earthly dealings. It reassures God's people that whereas human kings fail, God does not.

But the second part of this Psalm tells us this God is anything but aloof and uncaring. This is not a God content to stay removed from the suffering of the world. This is a God who bends

down to lift up the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap – or dung heap as the King James version calls it. This is a God who sees to the needs of the barren woman.

This is a God to be praised not just for God's power and glory, but for God's care for even the lowliest among us. That's the kind of ruler we have...a ruler whose care and love for us can be trusted.

This Psalm leaves us reassured that God sees each one of us – that God knows our struggles and sorrows and that God is not detached from our suffering. And it reassures us that God will act to pull us out of whatever ash heap we have landed in.