

Lent 2023



Open and Unafraid: How the Psalms Teach us to Pray

When we're honest with God in prayer, we open our hearts to a deep and intimate relationship with Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

Prayer is an essential practice of the Christian life. A common instruction for prayer is “just follow your heart.” There is certainly truth in praying from your heart and being honest with God. In reality, however, we frequently find the chambers of our heart filled with anger, jealousy, fear, doubt, or despair. How do we pray from the heart when these unsettling feelings cloud our vision and desires? How does the language we use in prayer open us up to God’s transformation?

Well, good news! God gives us the book of Psalms as a guide to open our hearts to the transformative work of God. Through the Psalms we find words from God, we find words about God, and we find words to God. The more we recite the words written long ago the more their words become “our words, their trust becomes our trust, their wholeness becomes our wholeness” (Taylor, 39).

Suggested Structure of Gatherings (if 90-115 mins)

Prior to the gathering, members of the group should have listened to this theme's sermon. This can be done by worshiping in person or via a replay of the livestream or podcast found at www.wakeforestumc.org/replay for WFUMC or www.vcrolesville.org/sermons for Village Church Rolesville

- **Fellowship Time** (over a meal or snacks to connect to one another)
- **How Was Your Week?** (How did God show up this week? If you participated in any of the exercises how did those go? Any more insights from last week's topic?)
- **Review of the Homework** (How did God speak to you this week?)
- **Discussion and Questions** (Follow the bullets for the Core Topics and Discussion, additional questions are listed if you have extra time.)
- **Prayer Time** (Share personal needs for the week in prayer, pray over the homework and how God can continue to shape the week ahead)

Sunday, Feb. 26th- 1st Sunday in Lent

Theme- Honesty

The Psalms teach that we must tell our secrets before the gracious light of God so that they no longer hold power over us. In fact, we must honestly pray who we are, not who we think we should be to become the people God wants us to be. Once we honestly pray who we are - all of our hopes, dreams, mistakes and sins -then we have the power to pray who we can become by God's grace.

Sermon Text- Psalm 139

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- What things in your life can you be honest about relatively easily? What things are more difficult for you to be honest about?
- What are you afraid will happen if you are fully honest to God and with others? What feelings rise in you when you think about no longer hiding from God or from others?
- What things would help you become honest, vulnerable, porous, and unafraid before God and others?
- Theologian Karl Barth is quoted saying, "we are forbidden to take sin more seriously than grace, or even as seriously as grace." God in Christ does not take sin more seriously than grace, even if it remains true that God takes sin with deadly seriousness. We can be honest to God about the best and worst parts of our human condition because we know that the grace of God precedes our honest confessions and follows our honest laments. (Taylor pg. 8)
 - In what ways have you taken sin too seriously or not seriously enough? In what ways have you taken grace not seriously enough?
- Explore the types of grace often taught in the United Methodist Church (<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/teaching-grace-in-christian-education>)
 - **Prevenient grace** (God precedes our honest confession) and **justifying grace** (forgiven in Christ) are key to how we as humans experience God in our lives.

Homework:

- Start a journal and share your thoughts and feelings with God honestly. If you prefer, develop a practice of walking and talking with God instead of writing it down.
- Take time each day this week to practice confessing sin. This can be in a journal, in prayer, or with a trusted pastor or friend.
- Read Psalm 32 two verses at a time. Pause after each section for silence and “Lord in Your mercy, hear our prayer.” Take time to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

Additional Questions for Reflection

- Scripture: Genesis 3:1-13 - Adam and Eve hiding before God in the garden.
 - What role did honesty play in this scripture?
 - Where do you draw the line between honesty and lying? This can vary by person and situation.
 - How much information can be withheld? How much can one embellish information?
 - What about saying you’re okay when you’re not?
- In what ways have your family or community or culture shaped your thinking about honesty—with God or with others? What specific factors in your life make it difficult for you to be open and unafraid?
- What secrets would the psalmist invite you to bring openly to God as a trusted friend? What hope or healing might a confession of these secrets to God bring to your life?
- How do the Psalms help you understand the difference between true honesty on one hand, and self-absorption and self-hatred on the other?
- Scripture tells us Jesus is full of truth (John 1:14) and is the truth (John 14:6)
 - As the hands and feet of Christ and the body of Christ in the world, how does this impact what we do in our lives?
 - What should Christians do or not do to live into this calling?

Sunday, March 5th- 2nd Sunday in Lent

Theme- Sadness

Prayers of lament offer an opportunity to become whole through naming realities that help us to make sense of senseless things and bringing our realities, and us, face to face with God who is compassionate, gracious and loving without end.

Sermon Text: Psalm 42

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- It can be a challenge to find words in prayer in the midst of sadness and lament.
 - Romans 8:26 reminds us of the presence of the Holy Spirit in “sighs too deep for words”
 - John 11:35 remind us that Jesus wept and that God goes before us in our emotions and prayers
- In what specific way do you wish for God, or for others, to be present to you in your lament today?
- What do you think might be lost by not sharing our sadness and our laments as a community? What do you think might be gained by sharing these feelings as a community?
- What is one thing from this past week that you feel needs to be lamented in your own life? What is one thing that calls for lament in your own community? What is one thing that deserves to be lamented at a national or global level?
- What is one thing that is hard for you to lament? What are things that might be easier for you to lament?
- “In the face of incoherent experiences, the Psalms offer us a coherent poem. This may seem like an odd gift. Who needs a poem when you need justice or a livelihood? Who wants a rhyme when we want a family member back from the dead? But when nothing makes sense, the lament Psalms give coherence to the incoherence of our world. They suggest an orderly world of metaphors, instead of a disordered mess of thoughts and feelings.” (Taylor 75)
 - What metaphors have given you peace in the midst of lament?
 - The Psalms were often set to music. What music has given you peace in the midst of lament?

Homework:

- Find a few moments to be silent this week. In that time of silence, think about the most recent thing that caused you to feel sad or upset. In what ways is your sadness bearable or unbearable? In what ways do you feel your experience is seen or unseen by others or by God? Invite God to be present in your sadness and trust that God is with you.
- Write out your own Psalm of lament following the basic pattern of Psalm 13. Include your complaint to God, specific petition, and your resolution for trust. You can end the Psalm on a tone of hope like Psalm 13 or in the midst of dust and darkness like Psalm 88.

Additional Questions for Reflection

- “Psalms can be written for an individual or communal lament. The typical pattern in lament Psalms is a complaint, a petition, and a resolution.” See Psalm 13 for an example of this pattern. (Taylor 70)
 - Have you ever prayed in this order?
 - Many lament Psalms include the “interrogation,” or questioning, of God. Are you comfortable praying in that way?
- What kinds of experiences help you to feel your sadness? What makes it hard for you to feel sadness? Do you feel embarrassed by it? Ashamed? Scared? Does it feel wrong, like you might be the only one to feel what you feel?
- What is one passage in the Psalms of lament (Pss. 5; 7; 13; 22; 35; 42-43; 59; 88; 109) that resonates with your experience of lament?
- Lament Psalms focus on hope and include requests for healing, provision, protection, deliverance, vindication as well as, usually, an affirmation of God’s faithfulness. The psalmist moves us to this affirmation even if we do not have the data to support it.
- “We must first name our traumas before God to discover this hope with integrity to both our faith in God and the profound anxiety around us” (Ellen Davis, Duke Divinity Pastors Convocation)
- Many Biblical characters have modeled emotions with God. We are called to wrestle with our feelings before God, not apart from God
 - Example: Jacob wrestles with God (Gen. 32)

Sunday, March 12th- 3rd Sunday in Lent

Theme- Anger

Being angry is a normal human emotion. Jesus got angry and rebuked the Pharisees (Matt. 23). We trust that God gives us these Psalms to help us feel angry without being undone by our anger. Said another way, to be angry without sinning means to be angry for the right reason and to respond to our anger through prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon Text Psalm 35

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- Scripture shows us models of faithful anger. All anger is not bad, and anger can be a natural part of pursuing justice and righteousness for God
 - Ephesians 4:26 “In your anger do not sin”
 - Jesus and the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; John 2:13-22)
 - Romans 12:18-20 - Don't take vengeance into your own hands
- What is one thing in recent weeks that has made you feel angry? It might be something relatively small, like being cut off in traffic, or something big, like experiencing a form of violence, or something that's happened to others.
- “The purpose of enemy language in Psalms is to remind us that the violent and sinful ways of human beings—including our own violent, sinful ways—need to be named so that God can step in and do something about it. It is a way to get us to talk to God. The goal is healing, not self-gratification” (Taylor 113-114).
- Explore the process of Sanctification and Christian Perfection often taught in the United Methodist Church
(<https://www.umc.org/en/content/what-did-john-wesley-mean-by-moving-on-to-perfection>)
 - How does anger play a part in the journey toward perfection of self and of the world?
 - How do the biblical examples of anger intersect with this United Methodist doctrine?
- Brene Brown says “Anger is a catalyst. Holding on to it will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection. It's an emotion that we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, justice.”
 - What ways do you transform anger in your own life?

- How can anger be used towards these life-giving ways?

Homework:

- Make a list of modern-day enemies (abusers, slave-traders, murderers). After writing the list, pray for each of them that God would intervene and make things right.
- Write down a list of things that have made you angry in the long past or more recently. Be honest about how these experiences made you feel—not how you wish you felt or think you should have felt.

Additional Questions for Reflection

- Matthew 5:43-48 Jesus says love your enemies, By praying these Psalms, God sets us free to love our enemies...Jesus models his forgiving work on the cross with his words "Father forgive them"
 - Can you share a time that you chose to forgive?
 - How do you show love towards your enemies?
- Do you know someone who expresses anger in healthy ways? What do you admire about them? Do you know someone who expresses anger in unhealthy ways? How do they express their anger—blow up, give the cold shoulder, shut down?
- In what way might it be hard for you to be honest about your feelings of anger? What are things from your family background, or personality type, or community culture that make it difficult for you to express anger? Do you feel embarrassed by it? Ashamed? Scared? Or like it feels wrong?
- What is one passage in the Psalms of anger (Pss. 5; 11; 35; 40; 54; 69; 79; 83; 109; 137; 143) that resonates with your experience?
- In what specific way do you wish for God or for others to be present to your anger today?
- What would it look like to create a hospitable space in our communities for people to express their anger faithfully, trusting that God is with them, rather than against them or removed from them? What would need to change in the culture of our communities for this to happen?
- What practices in your personal and communal life—preaching, singing, prayer, testimony, mission, and so on—might cultivate a habit of faithful or righteous anger?

Sunday, March 19th- 4th Sunday in Lent

Theme- Joy

The Psalms teach us a “realistic but jubilant joy in God, taking up the good and the bad into a faith that always (even if it takes a struggle) results in praise of God. And they offer to all of us an antidote to all the things that would tempt us to become a joyless people (Taylor, 104).

Sermon Text: Psalm 47

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- Joy Proceeds and follows sorrow, and as often as not, joy exists alongside sorry (both/and situation) Scripture gives countless mentions of joy. Which one resonates with you the most?
 - John 15:11 - Jesus came so that our “joy may be complete”
 - John 16:20 - We will have pain but our pain will turn into joy
 - Acts 13:32 - to be filled with joy is to be filled with the Holy Spirit
 - Romans 12:12- be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer”
- How would you explain to a neighbor or friend the difference between happiness and joy? And how might the practice of the Psalms of joy become a subversive witness in our culture today?
- What do you think we as a community are losing by not participating in the kind of joy the Psalms show us? What is one thing you might do to cultivate a spirit of psalmic joy in the life of your community?
- In what specific way do you wish for God or for others to be present to you in your experiences of joy?
- As John Wesley said, “The end of your praying is not to inform God, as though he knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves; to fix the...sense of your continual dependence on him who only is able to supply all your wants” (Sermon on the Mount IV).
 - How is God with you in Joy?
 - Do you feel God more closely in Joy or Sorrow?

Homework:

- Make a list of times in your life where you experienced joy. Did any of these begin with lament or sadness?
- Joy is contagious. Intentionally spread a compliment, celebration, or other positive interaction at least once each day this week.

Additional Questions (as time allows)

- What is one passage in the Psalms that resonates with your experience of joy?
- What things make it hard for you to practice joy? What things make it hard for people in your congregation to practice the kind of joy that the Psalms show us: joy inexpressible, effusive joy, quiet joy, shouting joy, or convivial joy?
- The pastor and novelist Frederick Buechner once said that our calling in life exists at the intersection of our deepest joy and the world's greatest need. What might that be for you?
- "Snatch a little joy out of life, keep a little romance in your hearts, snatch a little joy out of life, don't let folks drive you crazy" (Bud Stanley, folk singer)
 - How have you lived into these song lyrics in your life?

Sunday, March 26th- 5th Sunday in Lent

Theme- Justice

The Psalms teach us to understand not only personal guilt and individual actions as sin but also structural injustice within society and sin that pervades institutions and cultures. There is no account of God that makes justice secondary to his work of redemption for all creation. Psalms give us the courage to seek justice in our world.

Scripture Text: Psalm 82

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- Consider this C.S. Lewis Quote: "Christians cry for mercy instead of justice. The psalmists cried for justice instead of injustice."
 - In what ways do mercy and justice belong together? Do you spend more time focused on mercy or justice?
- God especially concerned with the Quartet of the Vulnerable (society's four most defenseless people: widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land).
 - Who is in this quartet today?
- Micah 6:8 says: He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?
 - This scripture joins together 3 areas that are vitally connected. Often, these are related to the "Three Simple Rules" from Methodism (Do no harm, do good, stay in love with God). How do each of these rely on the others?
 - Which of the 3 comes easiest to you? Which of the 3 is most challenging?
- Who are individuals or groups or movements you admire in their work for justice? What is one thing you want to learn from them? What is one thing you might wish to adopt for yourself as an action or commitment to justice?
- In what ways have you witnessed injustice in your community, city, country, or around the globe? How has it made you feel?
- What injustices do you feel strongly about? What injustices do you wish you cared more about?
- How is your idea of God affected when you read about all the injustices in the world that never seem to be made right? How do the Psalms help form your understanding of the character and work of God as it relates to justice?
- In what ways might the language of the Psalms help you articulate your thoughts and feelings about injustice? In what ways might these Psalms convict, confirm, challenge, or complement what you have thought about justice and injustice?

Homework:

- Read Psalm 113, Isaiah 61, and Luke 4, one after the other. Read these once a day all week. How do these passages talk to one another? What do they tell us about the character of God? What do they tell us personally relating to justice?
- Find three organizations that support the work of justice in your community. Bring these names back to the group next week and discuss ways in how you can support them.

Additional Questions (as time allows)

- What are ways in which you have experienced injustice? What happened? How did it make you feel? How has it affected the way you thought or felt about God?
- How do you feel about the injustices in our world? Sad? Angry? Numb and ambivalent? Overwhelmed and exhausted? What aspects of justice make you feel uncomfortable? What are the tensions you feel?
- What is one story of justice toward the “Quartet of the Vulnerable” (widows, orphans, poor/needly, strangers in the land) that had encouraged you? What is one story about justice in general that you wish to share with others?
- Shalom: “Justice and Peace will Kiss Each Other” - Consider this quote
 - “Peace is more than the absence of war: it cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces nor does it arise out of despotic dominion, but it is appropriately called “the effect of righteousness” (Isa 32:17). It is the fruit of that right ordering of things with which the divine founder has invested human society and which must be actualized by man thirsting after an even more perfect reign of justice.”
(read the full article at
<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/shalom-as-the-dual-approach-of-peacemaking-and-justice-seeking-the-case-of-south-korea/>)
 - Peace means flourishing and well-being...justice is vital to make this happen
- Whenever we take communion, we quote Jesus’ first sermon in Luke 4 about his calling to release captives, give sight to the blind, set the captives free, bring good news to the poor
 - How are you helping the world move towards justice?
 - How can WFUMC increase justice in our neighborhoods, town, state, and around the world?

Sunday, April-2nd 6th Sunday in Lent (Palm Sunday)

Theme- Community

The Psalms paint the clear picture that the life of faith is to be lived in a diverse & welcoming community. We are not merely a person of God, we are the people of God. A healthy congregation is made up of people who do not necessarily think alike on all issues but love alike..and this is a good thing! The communion of loving alike is perhaps best experienced when praying together- “We do not always see the answers to our prayers, yet we pray knowing that the community is with us, around us, supporting us, bearing witness that we are not alone (Taylor, 15).” The psalmist could not see himself as an individual apart from Israel. [His/Her] self-identity was bound up in his participation in the community of faith~ C. Hassell Bullock. The Psalter not only names our need for community but shapes our vision for community.

Sermon Text: Psalm 111

- What themes stuck out from this week's sermon?
- What aspects of the sermon are already a part of your everyday life?
- What aspects were the most challenging?

Core Topics and Discussion

- John Wesley is quoted saying “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.” (Sermon, “Catholic Spirit”)
 - Think of the 10 people you spend the most time with. Do you all think alike?
 - Where do you spend the most time with people who think differently than you?
 - How do you connect and work together with other children of God who may be different than you?
- Have you had experiences of a really good community? If there were an “ingredients list” to good community, what would you include in that list?
- What makes it so easy for us to hide from our community? More specifically, what dynamics in our society make it easy for us to hide from our community?
- What might help us to not hide from our community? What might help us to share our secrets and be fully honest with our community?
- In what ways does the communal culture of the Psalms differ from our culture? How does our culture think about the relationship between “me” and “us,” “my” and “our,” “I” and “y’all”?

Homework:

- Take 15 minutes to write down specific ways that you thrive as an individual and a list of ways that you thrive being in community.
- Make a list of people who seem to be lonely or need friendship in your community. How can you invite them to find connection with your or others this week.

Additional Questions (as time allows)

- Are there specific times in your life when you have felt especially lonely? What was it like?
- Stanley Hauerwas describes friendship as the capacity to “tell the truth” to one another. This of course means risking the friendship. Have you had this kind of friendship? What makes it possible? And how might our communities support such friendship?
- Eugene Peterson translates Psalm 22:26 as the experience of “down-and-outers sitting at God’s table and eating their fill.” Have you ever felt like a down-and-outer? Do you know people who may feel this way? What might it look like for you to welcome such a person into your community?
- What comes to mind when you read what Reggie Kidd, drawing on Psalm 22, says about the kinds of songs that Christ sings? What questions does that raise for you/ What could you do to make that kind of “song” happen in your community?
- A community of faith not only prays for others but prays on the behalf of others who cannot find the words, or the will, to pray for themselves (Taylor 19).
- Scripture calls the church into active community time and time again:
 - Galatians 6:2 says This is one way we Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ
 - Matthew 18:20: When we gather together in community we know that Christ is with us
 - Romans 12:5 So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
 - Psalm 106:48 - A faith community makes space for “all the people”

Emotions Wheel

This wheel can help open up more breadth and depth of language to describe what you're feeling in your prayer life. See if this can help you get more specific with an emotion, or to see an emotion in a different light through its nearby emotions.

