Let Evil Speedily Hunt Down the Violent: Reflections on Troubling Psalms in Turbulent Times

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“Let Evil Speedily Hunt Down the Violent”:
Reflections on Troubling Psalms in Turbulent Times

Psalm 140
For several years, I have engaged various seminary classes in the discipline of praying through the Psalms. This enterprise is especially helped by the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship’s renditions of most of the psalms, appended with brief prayers. So once again this summer I presented the Hebrew class a schedule to read together from Psalm 1 in July to Psalm 150 in December.

Unlike the Revised Common Lectionary, which selectively amputates sections of about half of the psalms it suggests for preaching, the Book of Common Worship’s directory of antiphonal psalms leaves out very little. Psalm 139, which begins with “Lord, you have searched me and known me,” directs the congregation to sing or recite together something that never appears in the lectionary: “O, that you would slay the wicked, O God.” Psalm 137 directs a unison reading of the inspiring final verse against Babylon, that exilic beatitude: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Of course these two resources, the lectionary and the book of common worship, proceed from two different sources. I’m sure it is not meant to look like we are supposed to pray things we aren’t supposed to study. But that strange inconsistency reflects in a backward way something like my own ambivalence about these psalms. I believe as a teacher and preacher I must not pretend verses aren’t there that anyone reading the Bible can see. Yet for the purpose of morning devotions I yield to the temptation to edit on the fly, omitting verses in which lament spills over into vindictiveness too ugly for Alta Vista Road. All the while I’m uncomfortably aware that at least one of my faithful students has his own Bible out and is doggedly skipping down the page with me. And when the Hebrew students sat down to pray before their final exam last month, and I announced that we would not be reading Psalm 58 (“The righteous will… bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked”) but rather Psalm 121 (“I lift up my eyes to the hills”), the ambivalence of the enterprise of using the Psalms as meaningful Christian prayer seemed overwhelming.

There are many and various conflicts between what the Scriptures say and what we may wish they had said, each of which warrants its own honest elaboration. But tonight I’ll focus on this one, and I’ll put it this way: In these days of war and war rhetoric, of rage engulfing whole regions of the world, and especially with the prominence of religiously justified hatred, what do we as religious leaders do with psalms of imprecation? In a world where rage is rapidly becoming a constant—righteous outrage, trivial road rage, rage in international relations, in partisan politics, on reality TV, within beloved communities—how might we speak in a way that is responsible both to Scripture and to pastoral sensibilities?

I’ll begin with the assumption that most of us here are, or at least can become, aware of our ambivalence in this regard, an ambivalence I certainly felt all week seeing my own smiling photo on flyers next to the words, “Let evil speedily hunt down the violent,” and felt even more in asking my gentle colleague Amy [Professor Pauw] to read those words as Scripture, and I imagine many felt in hearing her read it. A number of viewpoints on this issue present themselves, and it may be wise for us to hold some of them in tension together.

Let’s begin with the question, what do we read the psalms as? One of the most intriguing realities about them is that they are not portrayed as God’s word to humans, but rather human words to and about God. It is the very humanness of the struggles they present that make the psalms meaningful to readers. They are, as John Calvin said, “An Anatomy of All Parts of the...
Soul,” reflecting all the “griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities with which human minds are wont to be agitated.”

But as human language, psalms do not simply retell someone else’s experiences. They are structured, rather, to invite or even demand participation. Most psalms are strikingly empty of historical particulars, and yet filled with soulful images. When the psalmist says, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O God,” we do not know, or perhaps even wonder, what kind of depths the psalmist refers to, on what date and in response to what crisis the psalmist speaks. Yet we recognize what the psalmist describes as depths because we know our own.

Moreover, psalms employ pronouns to draw us in to their speech. No narrator’s voice seats us offstage watching the action from a comfortable distance. Rather, psalms of praise address us with an imperative, “Sing to the Lord a new song!” We cannot be an audience, we have to be the congregation, with whom the speakers are making eye contact, whose response the speakers seem to expect. In psalms of lament the pronouns are even more demanding. Most often the second-person “you” of lament psalms is not the congregation, but God: “You are my God, give ear, O Lord.” These psalms frequently employ the third person “they” as well, as in: “They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.” The most prominent pronoun, however, is the first person, “I” or “we”: “protect me from those that are violent,” “guard me from the wicked.” Searching for a seat in the psalm, we find ourselves unwilling to sit with the enemy “they,” unable to take the seat of the divine “you.” The only seat left for us is in the psalmist’s own lap. In short, the Psalms present themselves not simply as the words of someone else long ago and far away, but rather as guidance for the reader’s speech before God.

Yet even though invited to identify with the psalmists, we know they are the words of someone else, and in that lies a great deal of their power as prayer. In gazing on the suffering of the psalmist we see both the inside and the outside of the person. We project ourselves in to see the inner darkness, despair, even chaos portrayed in the lament psalms. But we also can see what the one suffering cannot see, what Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of empathy, described poetically as “the clear blue sky against the background of which [t]his suffering outward image is delineated for me.”2 This compassion, evoked from us, mirrors the compassion the psalmist implores from God.

The psalmic sense of the world out of joint, of dissonance between what is and what in God’s moral universe ought to be, is an unstable state that seeks resolution. The dissonance opens up a need, and a space, for divine answer. It is this opening that leads the psalmist eventually from despair to faith, through the recognition of being seen sympathetically through divine eyes. Not all, but nearly all psalms of lament travel such a path, from despair to confidence in God; from hopelessness to hope. Readers, entering into that journey through the psalmists’ words, sympathetically enter the path laid out for them by the psalmist. In empathetically viewing the psalmist, we are more able to look back and see ourselves empathically, and thus to imagine the kindly presence of God for us within the worst of circumstance.

So we are invited into a prayer that has the power to transform our own suffering from estrangement and solitude to communion with God. As the psalmist moves from despair to hope, so we too are urged to move, or at least, as Dean Thompson so eloquently reminded us [in his first LPTS chapel service (September 10, 2004)] to allow another’s faith, in this case the psalmist’s, to speak for us until our faith returns.

Thus the sheer eloquence of lament psalms gives readers a kindlier portrait of our own suffering than we might have alone. Yet, right in the midst of such prayers, right when we are most
deeply engaged in the psalmist’s struggle, we encounter the problem. There is pathos in praying for God’s protection from violent enemies, there is beauty in praying for justice. It is even understandable to request poetic justice. But the psalmic language goes further, reaching past the point of acceptability. When a psalmist asks God to “let evil speedily hunt down the violent,” many people recoil, and perhaps even wonder if the psalmist is aware of the irony of wishing violence upon the violent. I’m not that angry—usually. And if I were, left to my own devices I might have said something ugly myself, that is, till I heard how it sounded on the lips of the psalmist. Surely the final redactors could have edited out this embarrassing stuff, couldn’t they?

There are some viewpoints on curses in the Psalms that may seem natural at first glance, but if we think about them, they are not really helpful. First is the notion that these psalms express pre-Christian sentiments, the worldview of a time before God’s love in Jesus Christ was revealed. Would that Jesus had saved Christians from invective! But we have only to read some letters to the editor in religious magazines to see self-affirming Christians spewing hateful language for causes both worthy and not. As Walter Brueggemann observed, “The real theological problem… is not that vengeance is there in the Psalms, but that it is here in our midst. And that it is there and here only reflects how attuned the Psalter is to what goes on among us.”

Another attempt to explain away the psalms of imprecation is to allegorize them, spiritualizing the enemies into such abstractions as sin, temptation, and the like. And while it is true that such a perspective helps us confront the enemy within, it seems clear that the psalmists are describing actual human enemies without, and not their own faults.

A third attempted resolution is simply to descripturalize these psalms, to say, of course such anger is human, but it reflects the chaff of human culture in Scripture, which we must winnow out from the wheat of timeless spiritual wisdom which we will regard as authoritative. The problem with this is that not just part, but all of the Bible comes from particular human cultures, all of it is a product of its times and conditions, so the process is not one of separating wheat from chaff, but of separating a tree from its roots. Moreover, we who propose to make these divisions are also culturally situated, and have no objective viewpoint from which to rule what part is baby and what is bathwater. We can say that parts of Scripture don’t seem to play well in our context, but we cannot say they won’t speak differently in some other time or place.

I believe there is a good reason why we in our context recoil from these psalms. We know deep down that most of the people we get mad at are not really enemies. They’re bad drivers, thoughtless friends, ideological opponents who threaten our certainty in class discussions. But the enemies in the Psalms are a different lot altogether. They are described as exploiters of the downtrodden, murderers of the innocent, greedy for gain, eating up the poor as they eat bread, killing widows and strangers, murdering orphans, and saying “God does not see us.” Even more maddeningly, the Psalms call them deceitful, hypocritical, liars—clever enough to look respectable while letting someone else bear the blame for their deeds, so that they are never caught, and the evil continues.

Several years ago a professor of Old Testament from the country of Myanmar, which used to be Burma, was our seminary’s visiting scholar. Dr. Anna May Say Pa of the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Rangoon had much to teach us about a place where Christians are a tiny minority relentlessly persecuted by an unelected government—a story told several years ago in the movie Beyond Rangoon. When Anna May came to talk to my Scripture I class, I asked her, how are the imprecations against enemies understood where you live? She didn’t hesitate for even a moment; she seemed unaware that we would see them any different way. She said this language gives Burmese Christians a place to pray their outrage at the afflictions they suffer. Knowing they cannot
defend themselves against displacement, rape, and even genocide, they find their strength in prayers for divine victory. In a horrific context, these psalms serve not to horrify, but to reassure that no rage is too outrageous for God’s ears.

Few American Christians, or at least few white middle-class American Christians, can easily relate to such outrage. For brief periods some of us encounter personal enemies who make us miserable or even do us irreversible harm. Many of us have suffered slow rage at seeing our world or our community going awry. But very few of us have endured legalized discrimination, exploitation, degradation with only the dimmest hope of change. Writing in a tiny country overrun by surrounding empires, the psalmists knew sides of life that unfortunately are more common to human experience even today than most of us sitting here will ever know. In such situations it is not the rage that is remarkable, but the ability to articulate anything of faith or hope. The trivial road rages we enjoy can blind us to the sustained outrages we do not know, and to the power of divine grace operating when oppressed people find equilibrium in their faith.

And that is the second significant point in the psalmists’ responses. The psalmists refrain from acting upon their rage, and instead they pray it. “May the LORD avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you,” said the young renegade David to his pursuer King Saul (1 Sam. 24:12). Similarly, the psalmists submit to God their long lists of grievances and vengeful fantasies, knowing that God is far more capable than humans of arranging not just for retaliation, but for what the whole community needs to right itself, that is, not retributive justice but restorative justice. Righteous outrage is not a decision—it is reflex against injustice. But how that reflex is expressed influences all that results. As David Blumenthal has put it, prayer is performative speech, “more than speech but less than action.” The psalmists trust the God who sees everything to sort out the judgment. The Psalms provide language that is harsh enough to express utmost bitterness, vigorous enough to name and unmask the worst of human evil. They speak rage not to stir up rage, but to heal it.

In the context of teaching, preaching, and pastoral care on Alta Vista Road and in similar places, a great deal can be said to interpret the existence of imprecatory psalms. But these psalms that help heal outrage in ancient Israel, or in Burma, or in battered women’s shelters, do they have a role in the prayers of those of us who are safe? It is one thing to understand the settings from which they proceed, and even to make them available in very particular circumstances. It is another thing to prescribe such strong medicine for the whole American congregation, even if they are Scripture. One teacher described an assignment that underscored this point. He asked students to write their own prayers of imprecation. Some found they simply could not bring themselves to finish the assignment. Others wrote their prayers not for themselves, but on behalf of victims of violent crime. They seemed to realize instinctively that such prayers cannot be artificially induced. And it is indeed in the very ugliness of these psalms that their potential for our spiritual growth may lie. The pathos of grief has a beauty to it that anger does not. It is easy to love the downtrodden as long as they are meek. “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” With compassionate hearts open, we astheticize, perhaps even romanticize, the pathos of grieving psalmists, to the point that when we arrive at the devastating speech of the final three verses, “Babylon, you devastator, pay back, your babies against the rocks,” we may feel we’ve been tricked into signing onto something we didn’t comprehend. The serious temptation when encountering such rage, whether in the Psalms or in our own world, is to pay more attention to the contorted face of anger than to the cause of the anger. It has been said by one interpreter, and to some extent I agree, that in Psalm 137 and others like it, by dint of its form as prayer, we are forced into a hermeneutical decision: we are either drawn in to say unspeakable
things or we must decide consciously to drop out. But I think there is a third option. The core of our faith is love for neighbors, and even love for enemies. But affection only for what is attractive is hardly love. Love begins at the point not of others’ worth but their need. If we romanticize suffering we see no need to oppose it. If we become angry with the outraged who are saying ugly things, we save ourselves the trouble of listening. Our third option, to stand at a middle distance, neither opting out nor repeating words too harsh for us—after all, what is said in a rage is often not worth repeating—but rather, bearing witness to the anguish that is expressed and to the truth it tells, staring into the face of outrage, and praying fervently alongside of the psalmist and with those who can and must pray that way, and especially on behalf of those who can no longer merely pray their rage, for the day to come when such prayers are no longer needed.

And in those cases the Psalms also give us pause, because when we pray for the oppressed, when we pray against violence and greed, we Americans know, or should know, that we are praying against powers and principalities—against people, if only we could identify them, who have us caught in an ethically unsustainable web—who are giving us our oil, our inexpensive clothing, our many luxuries that cost more than some people earn in a lifetime. Whether we like it or not, we live on the receiving end of systems so appalling that they survive only by hiding from our view while pursuing our dependence. So when we confront the righteous anger of psalmists, we may find ourselves asking, where do we want to be when these prayers are answered? Can we afford to pray these psalms? Can we afford not to?

There was a discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls that I find rather amazing. Many remnants of Psalms scrolls were found in the various caves of Qumran dating to the time of the Roman occupation of Judea, the century when Jesus lived. All of the manuscripts that contain parts of Psalms 1-89, that is, the first three books of the Psalms, show them in the same sequence we know them today. In some scroll fragments parts of Psalms 90 to 150, that is, books 4 and 5, seem to follow the order we now have, but in other scrolls these last two books are found in a completely different form—different order, and at some points different psalms altogether. This Psalter concludes with several texts centered on King David, culminating in a retelling of the slaying of Goliath—an understandable allusion in a world engulfed by the giant Roman Empire. Moreover, this final psalm, which is today called the apocryphal Psalm 151, was also the conclusion of the Greek translation of the Psalms, which otherwise followed the order we know.

During the Roman occupation of Palestine, in fact probably in between the two revolts that resulted first in the destruction of Herod’s temple and second in the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem, several books of the Bible that had existed side by side in different versions were standardized to the version Jews, and therefore Protestants, know today. Some scholars think one version of the book of the Psalms was chosen at this time as well. What I find remarkable in that ravaged world from which the Psalms emerged, is not that bitter speech was preserved, but that it is hedged all about and finally overtaken by praise. And the decision was evidently made, not during a time of peace and prosperity, but during a time of turbulence, that the last word would not be the giant’s death, or any other of the many things it could have been, but a lifegiving universal hope: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.”

This was an audacious wish then. It remains an audacious wish today. “Praise the LORD! Praise God in the sanctuary; praise God in the mighty firmament, for mighty deeds, with trumpet, lute and harp, tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe, clanging cymbals; loud clashing cymbals!” This joyful noise rang out not in victory but in the midst of struggle. The more we pray for God’s righteousness to reign on earth, the more audaciously hopeful we will find this final psalm: “Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the Holy One of Israel!”
Bibliography


