

The rhythm of hope - Happiness, then despair, then joy - Happiness only a memory - Joy merely a dream
- Despair a glaring reality

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A citizen of earth - I'm human till death - Imperfect since birth - I long for my rest

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During my first bout of depression when I was around 16, I took to writing poetry as a way to get my thoughts out and these are excerpts from some of those. Now, don't judge the quality of poetry too much, I never claimed to be a poet, just an angsty, depressed teenager who needed to process his thoughts.

But these serve as an introduction to my sermon today for two reasons: (1) these words speak to the struggle I was having and have had in trying to live with hope, joy, and peace in this broken world, something we'll see in our scriptures today and perhaps something that is reminiscent of some of your journeys. And (2) they were an attempt at poetry and today I want us to look at the book of Psalms, which is a book of poetry, and what we can glean from this book.

A big part of what these wisdom books in Scripture have communicated to me is that living with hope, joy, peace, in the midst of a broken world takes more than complacent wishful thinking or ignorant optimism. That a necessary step is to honestly grapple with brokenness. Sitting with Ecclesiastes leads me to a place of honestly wrestling with the Hevel of life, and that by doing so I can see a path toward hope and joy and embracing life and the God who gives it. Sitting with Job leads me to see that when life punches us in the face, again honestly reckoning with that can lead to hope by reminding me of God's "beyond-us-ness", of the value of staying curious and humble, and that I can learn to dwell in the dissonance and rest in the Mystery that is God. Honestly sitting with the Hevel of life, can help show me the pathway to hope.

And I think the book of Psalms, and the fact it's included in Scripture, can communicate something similar to us. I see in Psalms a collection of honest, at times messy, at times beautiful, but very human reflections on both the beauty and brokenness of our world and our lives and help for the journey toward hope and joy and peace.

So Psalms is this book of 150 poems and hopefully no one has anywhere they need to be so that we can read and reflect on all of them! Maybe not all of them, but Psalms is this collection of poems and we see all sorts of themes in them. Derek Suderman, in the Anabaptist Community Bible said, "**The psalms express the full range of human emotion and experience.**" (p. 615). So within these poems we see:

1. Psalms of praise and thanksgiving to God. (see also 139, 67)
 - a. Psalm 8: "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth! You made your glory higher than heaven!...When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made—the moon and the stars that you set firmly in place—what are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?"
 - b. Psalm 30: "You changed my mourning into dancing. You took off my funeral clothes and dressed me up in joy so that my whole being might sing praises to you and never stop. Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever."

2. Psalms of instruction, teaching us wisdom. (see also 1, 49).
 - a. Psalm 1: "The truly happy person doesn't follow wicked advice, doesn't stand on the road of sinners, and doesn't sit with the disrespectful. Instead of doing those things, these persons love the Lord's instruction."
 - b. Psalm 37: "Trust the Lord and do good; live in the land and farm faithfulness. Enjoy the Lord, and he will give what your heart asks. Commit your way to the Lord! Trust him! He will act and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like high noon. Be still before the Lord, and wait for him."
3. Psalms of confession and repentance.
 - a. Psalm 51: "I've sinned against you—you alone. I've committed evil in your sight...wipe away all my guilty deeds! Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me."
4. Psalms expressing trust
 - a. Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me."
5. Psalms of lament. (see also 25, 44).
 - a. Psalm 13: "How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me? Look at me! Answer me, Lord my God!"
 - b. Psalm 88: "Lord, God of my salvation, by day I cry out, even at night, before you—let my prayer reach you! Turn your ear to my outcry because my whole being is filled with distress; my life is at the very brink of hell....Why do you reject my very being, Lord? Why do you hide your face from me?"
6. Psalms of anger and cries for justice and vengeance and even violence
 - a. Psalm 94: "Lord, avenging God—avenging God, show yourself! Rise up, judge of the earth! Pay back the arrogant exactly what they deserve!"
 - b. Psalm 137: "Daughter Babylon, you destroyer, a blessing on the one who pays you back the very deed you did to us! A blessing on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!"

The Psalms run the gamut of human emotion expressing anger, sadness, despair, joy, gratefulness, confusion, worry, fear, wonder. ***And the fact that there is this book in Scripture communicates to me that there is a place for these emotions, these feelings in our human journey and room to fully feel and express them, even the hard-to-accept ones.***

We humans are complex beings and to make sense of our reality we sometimes differentiate the various aspects of our selves: the physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, sexual, relational, etc. This is good and helps us make sense of things but I think it important to remember that these parts aren't neatly separated, that we are one whole and the various aspects of ourselves are interconnected, each influencing the others and working together to make us who we are. And I think we can run into trouble if, in the process of differentiating our parts, we take it a step further and hierarchize them. One of the ways we *can* tend to do this is prioritizing the spiritual over all else and in response, trying to neglect, repress, or deny the more 'human' parts of ourselves like the physical or emotional. But I think

scriptures like the Psalms and these other wisdom books, or the story of Jesus' incarnation, in addition to just our experience and knowledge, all of these can push back against this idea and help us accept that being authentically human, with all the messiness that can come with it, *is* part of our spiritual journey. That our various parts can't always be neatly separated and our emotions, our thoughts, our desires, our sexuality, our physicality...all of this is interconnected with our spirituality *by design*.

Focusing on our emotions for today, since we see this emphasis on emotionality within the Psalms, it is often tempting to think that becoming more spiritual means we should repress our emotions, at least the harder-to-accept emotions like despair and anger and confusion. But I think that mindset can be and needs to be challenged and that the Psalms help in this. What if repressing or minimizing this part of ourselves actually worked against our growth and health even as spiritual beings? What if acknowledging and expressing our difficult emotions is part of our spiritual growth?

Casadi and I have appreciated the work and writing of Hillary McBride. In her book, 'Holy Hurt: Understanding Spiritual Trauma and the Process of Healing' (2025), she says, **"avoiding and suppressing emotions are what harms us, not the emotions themselves. When we learn how to feel and allow the feelings to move through our bodies in the way they naturally want to, they actually pass. They come like waves rolling in and building until they crest and then settle on the other side. Experiencing them allows them to move through, not suppression, shaming, control, or avoidance."** (pp. 134-135).

Trying to deny, suppress, and/or avoid our emotions works against our holistic wellbeing. Somehow we need to learn to actually feel and express these emotions, even the difficult ones. I was talking with someone once who compared our human emotions to a smoke alarm. When the smoke alarm goes off, the alarm isn't the problem. The alarm is just there to make us aware of what is going on. So too with emotions. Experiencing a particular emotion is not the problem, it's signalling to us that something is going on that needs attention. Just muting the alarm won't deal with the actual situation and likewise, repressing or ignoring our emotions won't help. Sitting with them and trying to discover what is leading to these feelings will be more helpful.

Now, this doesn't mean we will or should act on every emotion or feeling we have, we can differentiate between feeling and acting. I think a good example we see in the Psalms is when the Psalmist speaks of dashing the children of their enemies against the rocks (137:9). That sort of intense emotion, anger, desire for vengeance and justice...can be part of the human experience. There is *no* place to act on something like that and cause that harm. But there is room for our emotion and then sitting with that emotion to understand what is going on in ourselves. And that can include giving expression to and processing these thoughts and emotions through writing, like the psalmists seemed to be doing.

So the presence of the Psalms in Scripture communicates to me that there is a place in the human journey for every emotion and that we need not repress these or avoid them or pretend they don't happen but rather, we can honestly acknowledge and wrestle with them.

And there is another angle through which we can look at these Psalms. I turn again to Derek Suderman who wrote the introduction to the book of Psalms in the Anabaptist Community Bible. He says:

"While the desire to follow Jesus may prompt readers to recoil from Psalms' sometimes violent and vindictive language, this is often because we habitually identify with the *speaker* of the psalms. Recognizing the presence of the broader community opens the interpretive possibility

to situate ourselves as *listeners* rather than speakers of these words that draw attention to inequality, injustice, and suffering. The psalms invite us to consider who could express such frustration and anger, both in the ancient world and in our own. The commitment to hear and respond appropriately represents an essential task of the Christian church.” (p. 616).

We can identify with the writers of the Psalms and understand that there is room to feel and express our emotions as we process them. But we can *also* identify with the listeners, the audience. And by doing so we can see the place for compassion, for empathy, for listening to those crying out for justice. Bearing witness to the suffering of others and being moved to work for justice. As we’re told in Romans 12:15 we can rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

We can read words like Psalm 13 “How long will you forget me, Lord?...How long will you hide your face from me?” or Psalm 94 “avenging God, show yourself! Rise up, judge of the earth! Pay back the arrogant exactly what they deserve!” We can read these words and think about those in our circles who may be feeling these ways and how we can come alongside them. Who is maybe feeling like God has rejected them or forgotten them? Who is maybe feeling the weight of injustice and is crying out for change? And how can we be allies, people who come alongside? How can we listen and respond with compassion?

But whether we read these Psalms and at any given time identify with the writer or with the audience, one of the things this book’s inclusion in Scripture can communicate to us is that there is a place in our lives, in our humanity, in our spiritual journeys, for the messiness and brokenness that so often is part of life on earth. And that perhaps the way forward, the way towards peace, joy, and hope, is not to deny or repress our humanity or the difficulties of life on earth, but to honestly acknowledge and wrestle with these. Similar to what I see in the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, the way to peace and joy and hope is not through complacent wishful thinking or ignorant optimism, but through an honest assessment of our human situation that includes both blessing and curse, beauty and brokenness. And we can dwell in the dissonance and sit in the complexity.

I want to close with a quote I came across in Brian McLaren’s recent book entitled ‘Life After Doom.’ Within this book he quotes an environmental activist by the name of Derrick Jensen who speaks about the complexity of hope and despair when looking at the state of our world. And word of warning that Jensen curses in his quote but he states:

“People sometimes ask me, ‘If things are so bad, why don’t you just kill yourself?’ The answer is that life is really, really good. I am a complex enough being that I can hold in my heart the understanding that we are really, really f*cked, and at the same time that life is really, really good. I am full of rage, sorrow, joy, love, hate, despair, happiness, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and a thousand other feelings. We are really f*cked. Life is still really good. Many people are afraid to feel despair. They fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate our situation really is, they must then be perpetually miserable. They forget that it is possible to feel many things at once.” (Jensen, as quoted by McLaren, pp. 77-78).

I’ve appreciated this quote because of its acknowledgment that we, as humans, are complex beings and are capable of holding complex feelings, even seemingly opposing feelings at the same time.

In reflecting on the Psalms, my prayer for us is that as we continue our journeys we would feel the freedom to accept our emotions, thoughts, feelings, even when they are hard to accept. That we would

not feel the need to deny or repress our humanity or the messy parts of being human but learn to acknowledge and give expression to these parts of ourselves in healthy ways. That we can learn to sit with them before a God who rejoices with those who rejoice, weeps with those who weep, a God who creates and embraces not just our spirituality, but our whole humanity. And that by doing this, we would then develop the capacity to sit with others as they experience the messiness of being human.

Benediction: May the Psalms of scripture give you permission to embrace your humanity. May you experience the freedom to feel what you feel and allow the messiness of being human to draw you deeper into yourself, deeper into relationship with others, and deeper into the God who embraces you as the human you are.

Resources:

McBride, Hillary L. (2025). Holy Hurt: Understanding Spiritual Trauma and the Process of Healing. BrazosPress.

McLaren, Brian D. (2024). Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart.

Suderman, W. Derek. (2025). Anabaptist Community Bible. Introduction to Psalms.