

Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation and Reorientation

Memorial Sunday, November 21, 2021 by Patty Friesen

Psalms of Orientation

On this Memorial Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent, we remember our loved ones who have died during the year and name their names, grieve their loss and give thanks for their lives. I've had the privilege of leading two funerals at Osler Mennonite Church this year. Karen Dyck, daughter of Susan Bueckert died this July at age 58 from cancer and William Friesen, husband of Betty Friesen died in October with dementia at age 93. For both funerals, family requested Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is a psalm of orientation. I've used Psalm 23 probably at a dozen funerals and I never tire of the deep comfort and personal connection to a Gentle Shepherd that the psalm gives us. It is the perfect psalm for a farmer funeral because of its observance of the natural world as the grounding of God's love and grace.

The Psalms are an essential part of our funerals because they give us the breadth of human experience from birth to death and the whole range of human emotions associated with those experiences. There are 150 psalms and we need each one. Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman describes the psalms in three categories - psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation and psalms of reorientation. Psalms of orientation describe God as Creator who made us and has an eye on us. We can endure everything else that happens in life when we know this fundamental truth of orientation to who God is in the world and who we are in relationship to our Creator.

A new prayerbook in our church library called, A Rhythm of Prayer by Sarah Bessey is ordered in the same way with prayers of orientation, prayers of disorientation

and prayers of reorientation. As a prayer that orients us in God's love, she offers: Love has happened and is happening and it will happen. It is kind and patient towards you. You're already so loved, you aren't earning a breath of love or tenderness more than what you already have just by breathing - just by existing, just by being here in the wonder. Your name is already written in the lines of the hands of the universe. You are beloved, intimately, faithfully, wholly. It is your lifelong rock. You are known. You are loved with delight and abundance, with choice and desire, with covenantal love. Whether you feel it or not. (P. 26)

Psalms of Disorientation

And sometimes we don't feel oriented to the love of God. The psalms acknowledge that bad things won't happen to us. Bad things do happen to us, we suffer illness or mental stress, our relationships go sideways and sometimes we can't figure out what we are supposed to be doing with our lives. The psalms that reflect these honest struggles are called psalms of disorientation. Psalm 42 which we read this morning is such a psalm of disorientation. It speaks of thirst and longing and asks the existential question - "Where is God when everything is falling apart?" The psalms of disorientation could also be called psalms of lament where the writer lets it all hang out - the anger, the distress, the disappointment and grief. No emotion is kept hidden but is released openly to God. In the words of fantasy writer Madeleine L'Engle,

"I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present. We do not need the

sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly.

Psalms of lament allow us an honest relationship with God and the unknowing of the future of our situation. Brian Bantum, professor of theology in Chicago writes in his essay of A Psalm of Unknowing, "I'm sitting in my home office after sat was going to be my first in-person work trip became yet another virtual gathering. There is a tangle of feelings I can't quite sort out - disappointment, relief, uncertainty, rest. Disappointment because even as an introvert I can feel the fraying of so much time in the same room and the same routine. Even the bike rides, those lifesaving rides into the world, have become well-trod paths. And there's the awkwardness when my spouse comes home from work and asks about my day. "I caught a rat," I say. It was the most interesting thing that had happened in a month. For days there was just walking the dog, sending emails, cleaning the house, talking to some faces on a screen. So I was disappointment that I wouldn't have a few days away on a work trip and the monotony would remain a little longer. And I was also relieved that the monotony would remain a little longer so I wouldn't have any surprise social encounters to expose my atrophied social muscles.

Once I'm home I can rest. I sink into the couch, put on some soft music and rest. I thank God for my little home office, my little house, my small circle and a dog I get to share it with and the gift that I can live talking to people through a little screen on my desk. I wish there was some deep theological meaning to our moment, something profound I could point to that makes this tangle of emotions make sense. It feels a bit like we are in a psalm of lament. I write this psalm, "We cry out to you O God. We

know there is an end, but we cannot discern it yet. We know you are there, but we cannot always feel your smile behind the mask. So we wake every morning, we work and go to school and hope. We wait on you, O God.” (Christian Century, Oct.6/21, p. 37)

Psalms of Reorientation

But even the worst parts of life will not destroy us and in the end, life will calm and reorient again. Psalm 40 is a psalm of reorientation, “I waited patiently for the Lord who finally heard my cry, therefore I will sing a new song.”

The Psalms are models of how to deal with our emotions in the entirety of our experiences. They deal with every social-emotional dimension of human growth and struggle: celebration, mourning, fear, loss, praise, hope, faith, confusion, disappointment, struggle. To get in touch with those human responses is to become more fully human. The psalms can do that for us.

And so in the spirit of the psalms we may lift up the names of our loved ones who have died this past year since last Memorial Sunday and light a candle in their memory. We may also light candles for whatever losses we’ve been experiencing. We have untouched candles on the right that we can light and then put out on the left. We may say names or losses aloud or silently. Facebookers may comment and we will say those names or losses here in the sanctuary.

Let us pray...God of our honest prayers and more honest silences, open our eyes to see and our ears to hear and our hearts to understand how you are already here with us in our memory of our loved ones. Amen. Sarah Bessey, p. 142

(I light candles for Bill Friesen, Karen Dyck)