Written in an engaging style that is both conversational and informative, *Inwardly Digest* is a timely invitation to life in the Spirit sustained by the patterns and rhythms of the Prayer Book.

—Frank Griswold
25th Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

With the spiritual foundation in *The Book of Common Prayer,* Derek Olsen shows how everyday Christians can grow closer to God through a "training regimen" that incorporates the spirituality of Anglican liturgy as a daily practice. In straightforward and accessible writing, Olsen provides a guide to Prayer Book spirituality for everyone.

—The Rev. Susan Brown Snook
Episcopal priest and editor of *Acts to Action: The New Testament's Guide to Evangelism and Mission*

INWARDLY DIGEST

THE PRAYER BOOK AS GUIDE TO A SPIRITUAL LIFE

DEREK OLSEN

FORWARD MOVEMENT
CINCINNATI, OHIO

extended on the cross embracing the world; the second prayer in the evening is based on a prayer by Saint Augustine and paints a lovely picture of the compassionate presence of God.

The option for a general intercession has two main referents. At Morning Prayer, this is the point where the Great Litany may be inserted. Classically, it was prayed on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday at the conclusion of Morning Prayer because it served as the transition to the Eucharist that was appointed on those days. The regulation to insert it on those days remained in the American prayer books until the 1928 revision, and it still appears in the English *Book of Common Prayer*. Alternatively, two prayers were written to be used together at the end of the service on days when the Litany was not being used: the Prayer for All Sorts and Conditions, which served as a general intercession, and the General Thanksgiving. While the General Thanksgiving is still included here, the Prayer for All Sorts and Conditions has been relegated to the back of our prayer book on pages 814-815.

The Final Prayers

A set of optional prayers then follows. The General Thanksgiving is a much-loved prayer for its stately cadences and its even-tempered joy. The echo of the *Benedictus* in the passage that speaks of "walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days" is surely not accidental. The Prayer of Saint Chrysostom likewise puts beautiful poetry to our request that God hear our prayers and grant them as may be best for us. Just as this section opened with the Lord's Prayer asking that "your will be done," this final prayer comes full circle, requesting that we be reconciled to the answering of our prayers— whether we receive the answer that we wish or not. The final optional act is to bless God and for us, in turn, to receive a blessing as well.

CHAPTER 7
THE PSALMS

THE SOURCE OF THE PSALMS

At the heart of the historic discipline of the Office are the psalms. The recitation of the psalms has always been a central part of the Office, and many of the other elements in the Office are either borrowed from or directly inspired by the psalms. As a result, it's worth taking a closer look at them.

Psalms (capitalized) refers to a book of the Old Testament containing 150 chapters. These chapters are, for the most part, discrete poems or songs known as psalms (not capitalized) that involve the relationship between God and his people, whether individually or corporately. What makes the psalms unusual, given our typical perspective on the Bible, is their direction. That is, we ordinarily consider the Bible to be God's self-revelation to humanity—God's Word, revealing himself to us. The psalms, though, are prayers from humanity to God, noteworthy for their emotional vulnerability and self-disclosure—feeling often more like humanity's self-revelation to God! Thus, the psalms are a paradox of sorts: divine revelation laying bare the soul of humanity.

Recalling our metaphor of running and training, verses from the psalms, some of the most beloved and well-known, can serve as a kind of mantra—similar to what some people use for exercise. The psalms also can be seen as similar to the war stories that runners tell one another—both the triumphs and the struggles. The psalms give us the companionship of knowing that others have trained before us, and they, like us, have had both good and bad days. The psalms lay bare the reality that this training can be unbelievably joyful but also incredibly painful.

Having noted this unusual state of affairs, let's turn to the question of authorship. Who composed the psalms, and how and why does that matter in our reading of them? One view, deriving from modern biblical scholarship, asserts that we don't know who wrote the psalms—they are largely an anonymous collection. Another view, the traditional view handed down by the Early and Medieval Church, asserts that King David was the author of the psalms. Yet a third view, given by the psalms themselves, helps us nuance and appreciate the importance of both perspectives.

By looking at language in relation to dialect shift over centuries, the possible original settings of the psalms, relationship to other scriptural texts, and parallel material from the Ancient Near East, modern academic scholarship of the Bible sees the book of Psalms as a collection of material spanning several centuries from a diverse set of sources. Some psalms give a pretty clear indication that they were connected with worship in the temple; others don't have a temple anywhere near them. Some are connected to court life; others are written in the voice of the poor pleading for justice against rich oppressors. Some connect the king and temple worship in ways that require a setting in Solomon's Temple before its destruction by Babylonian armies in 587 BCE; others reflect on that act of destruction and one famously records the

lament of those taken into exile to Babylon and taunted to sing the songs of their homeland for their captors. Some are gems of theological complexity and subtlety; others reflect a more simplistic conception of God and the human-divine relationship. Some are placed in the voice of the king, yet others (like Psalm 131) are heard more easily in the voice of a young mother.

So what meaning do we take from this? For me, this breadth of the collection, the diversity of the voices and the anonymity of the writers gives me the sense of being in contact with a whole people of God at prayer. This anonymous collective is part of the great cloud of witnesses, just as I am—just as I will be when twenty-five centuries have covered my own tomb with dust. From this perspective, the authors who wrote the psalms may be nameless and faceless but are by no means either voiceless or soul-less. Indeed, what gaps the chasms of time between then and now is their earnest cry—whether it be joy, devotion, or fear—a cry I recognize within my own breast as well. Thus, the diversity of the collection and the anonymity of its myriad authors and editors bind us to our heritage as the sons and daughters of God moving through time.

On the other hand, the tradition has insisted upon the person of King David as a centerpoint around whom the psalms are hung. While modern scholarship agrees that at least a few of the psalms contain linguistic and conceptual markers consistent with David's time and place—and that therefore could conceivably have been written by him—it rejects the notion of Davidic authorship of the full Psalter, saying that would be inconsistent with internal evidence from the psalms themselves. Whether it's historical or not, there is some spiritual value for us in seeing the psalms in relation to David, so it's worth looking more closely at why this attribution was so important to the Church through the ages.

The first reason is because the biblical narratives about David frequently connect him with music. According to 1 Samuel 16:14-23, even before the episode with Goliath, David was taken into Saul's service precisely because his music soothed the king. Even after rising to a high rank and commanding the king's armies, David still played music daily for Saul—indeed these music sessions twice became opportunities for the increasingly deranged Saul to attempt to kill David lest he usurp the throne (1 Samuel 18:5-12; 19:9-10). Three songs ostensibly from the hand of David appear in 2 Samuel: the first his lament at the death of Jonathan and Saul (2 Samuel 1:17-27), then an adaptation of Psalm 18 (2 Samuel 22), and finally a song before his death (2 Samuel 23:2-7) that names him "the sweet psalmist of Israel."

Later biblical materials build on this aspect of David's legacy. 1 and 2 Chronicles portray David as setting up all of the details of the temple's worship even though the structure wouldn't be built until the reign of his son, Solomon. Even later still, the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus honors David's musical achievements as much as his military ones saying,

> In all that [David] did he gave thanks to the Holy One, the Most High, proclaiming his glory; he sang praise with all his heart, and he loved his Maker. He placed singers before the altar, to make sweet melody with their voices. He gave beauty to the festivals, and arranged their times throughout the year, while they praised God's holy name, and the sanctuary resounded from early morning (Ecclesiasticus 47:8-10).

A more profound connection of David to the psalms is the fuller picture that we get of him in the Samuel-Kings material. While the pages of scripture are filled with memorable people,

few are drawn with great emotional depth. Two characters of the Old Testament stand out as fleshed-out emotional beings: Job and David. The view we get of Job is one-sided, though. Due to the purpose of the book, we see Job in various stages of lament and despair. In David, however, we see a man at full-stretch: the passionate lover, the exuberant warrior, the reverent monarch, the penitential father. We see him at his best and worst, in his highs and in his lows; he experiences the complete emotional range that the Psalter explores. In him we can make this anonymous collection personal and individual. We can see how events in his life might have prompted the cries of despair or the calls of joy—and find the parallels in our own lives.

A final reason why the Early and Medieval Church strongly emphasized the Davidic authorship of the psalms is because they saw the psalms as deeply prophetic. They understood David to be uttering divinely inspired praises. But, more particularly, they saw him engaging in an act of divinely facilitated clairaudience reaching across the centuries: he was writing in the tenth century BCE what his descendant Jesus—Son of David—would be feeling in the first century CE. In insisting upon the Davidic authorship of Psalms, the Church could assert that they gave a unique perspective into the interior life of Jesus. The Gospels tell of his deeds and allude to how he felt; having established the genetic connection, the psalms lay bare Jesus' own prayers and tribulations.

As modern people, it is harder for us to embrace this perspective wholeheartedly than it was for our ancestors. Nevertheless, the Christological reading of the psalms has an important place in our spirituality. Granted, it requires some rather creative interpretive gymnastics to explain how some psalms show the psychology of Jesus. However, despite these problematic areas, the Church is saying something profound in attributing the emotional range and depth of the psalms

to Jesus. It is another way to explore and ponder the full humanity of Jesus. Only a Jesus who feels deeply, passionately, fully, is a completely human (while completely divine) Redeemer. Indeed, this perspective brings us full circle to the paradox of revelation with which we began: How are human prayers to God part of God's self-revelation to us? Seeing them in and through Jesus' own self-communication to the Father clarifies how the revelation of the depths of our own humanity connects to divine self-revelation.

Having looked at the modern idea of corporate, anonymous authorship alongside the early and medieval understanding of Davidic authorship, I would like to add in a body of scriptural material that can serve as a mediating, uniting term. The psalms in the prayer book lack one contextualizing piece that you find when you read the psalms in a Bible: the superscriptions. These are brief headers that appear at the start of most of the psalms—only twenty-four lack them in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. These headers aren't original to the psalms but have been added in the process of compiling and editing. They likely tell us less about history and more about interpretation. Often, these superscriptions give instructions to the choirmaster or give a tune name. (The tunes themselves have been long since lost.) Some superscriptions, however, attribute the psalm to either individuals or groups.

Predictably, seventy-three of the psalms are attributed directly to David, fourteen of which are connected with specific incidents in his life. However, several other names also appear: One is attributed to Moses, two to Solomon, three to Jeduthun (this one is unclear—this could be a person's name or an instrument), then groups identified in Kings and Chronicles with Temple Levites, eleven to Asaph, and twelve to the Sons of Korah, with Heman and Ethan named explicitly.

Religious traditions hate a vacuum, though. In the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek that occurred in Alexandria sometime around the second century, superscriptions were added to twenty-two of the psalms, leaving only Psalms 1 and 2 without them. Significantly, Psalms 146 to 148 are attributed to Haggai and Zechariah, writers and leaders of the post-exilic period.

In essence, the interpretative tradition reflected in the superscriptions enable us to have it both ways. On one hand, the superscriptions explicitly refer to a wide range of people all of whom were involved in the creation, editing, and compiling of the Psalter. They give enough names to confirm our sense of Psalms as a communal document in process over a long period of time. Also, they forestall simplistic attempts to pigeonhole the psalms as strictly Davidic. On the other hand, they solidly connect the psalms to a significant, emblematic figure of history—David—who stands forth not only as a heroic figure, an anointed leader, and a cultic pioneer, but also as a thoroughly flawed human being who, nevertheless, was "a man after God's own heart."

THE FORMATIVE QUALITY OF THE PSALMS

One of the reasons why Psalms was selected for our daily meditation rather than Proverbs or Isaiah is because it was seen as uniquely formative. That is, there is something about the psalms that shape Christian character in a particular way. In order to properly understand the focus of the Daily Office on the psalms, we need to take a closer look at this.

Psalms has been recognized from the time of the Early Church as unique among the books of the Bible. One of the clearest expositions of this comes from Athanasius in his letter on Psalms to Marcellinus where he pulls out two

characteristics in particular. The first special characteristic of the psalms is that they are a microcosm of the rest of scripture. Athanasius writes; "Each book of the Bible has, of course, its own particular message." He goes on to list what some of those are:

> "Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one kind of special fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some of those of all the rest." [Then Athanasius connects a wide variety of psalms to events in the historical books of the Old Testament]: "You see then, that all the subjects mentioned in the historical books are mentioned also in one psalm or another; but when we come to the matters of which the Prophets speak we find that these occur in almost all."[18]

Athanasius is talking about witnesses to Christ, and he offers another section where he connects the psalms to a long list of items from the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Of course, these days, we not only recognize that the psalms contain messianic passages that the Church properly associated with Jesus, but also that the evangelists themselves used both passages and themes from the psalms in their own constructions of the Gospel narratives. So the psalms really do act as a microcosm. They contain all of the major genres of Old Testament writing, from histories, wisdom, legal material, prophetic curses, and destruction oracles, as well as promises of hope and salvation. The psalms also both represent and prefigure a host of New Testament themes—recalling that the New Testament quotes more from Psalms than any other book of the Old Testament.

If the psalms are a microcosm of scripture, if they represent a summary of scripture, a condensation of scripture, then they have to be profoundly interpretive. When you summarize something, it means that you are pulling out the key points.

There is not space for everything, so central themes and actions get selected for summarizing. Thus, the psalms don't just summarize things; they put their own particular spin on them, they infuse them with their own particular angle such that when we encounter these situations elsewhere in the Bible, our perspective has already been shaped by the approach the psalms have taken in highlighting what's of primary importance.

The second special characteristic of the psalms is their focus on interiority—they speak to the inner life of the individual and the community more consistently than any other set of texts. Athanasius says it this way:

> Among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed and, seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that be done, you listen to the prophets to learn about the Saviour's coming or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all of these things, you learn about yourself.
>
> You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill. Prohibitions of evil-doing are plentiful in scripture, but only the Psalter tells you how to obey these orders and refrain from sin. Repentance, for example, is enjoined repeatedly; but to repent

> means to leave off sinning, and it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed.[19]

Athanasius points to the personal and interior quality of Psalms. No other book of scripture—with the sole exception of Job—contains such intimate expressions of personal feeling—not only intimate but also uncensored in ways that sometimes both shock and offend us. Of course, as Athanasius reminds us, what shocks and offends may be a reflection of what we do not wish to see in ourselves.

The emphasis upon interiority is one of the ways that the psalms place their own interpretive spin on the other biblical material. Sometimes the psalms give a flat account of something: In the beginning, God created stuff. But far more often, the psalms embed their summary of other biblical events into personal or communal pleas: *God, we're having a really hard time right now. Hey—remember that time in creation, when you created all of that stuff? We could really use you to do something like that for us now.* The psalms don't just recall the mighty acts of God; through prayer, they remind us and God of the mighty acts done on behalf of our ancestors, and they give us the courage and the boldness to beseech God's mercy for mighty acts here and now.

Through attentive practice of the Daily Office, the psalms and canticles give us an interpretive lens through which we experience the rest of scripture. Three fundamental concepts within the Psalter are crucial and inescapable elements of a Christian social conscience. First, the psalms and canticles show us the center—that is, they define a reality where all creation is oriented toward God and participates together in the mutual worship of God. Second, they emphasize the rule of law—that is, they emphasize that justice is a key attribute of God and that justice, righteousness, and equity must be

central values for us because they flow directly from the identity of God. Third, they form us in the habit of empathy because they place in our mouths the words of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and they invite us to see the world through those eyes, to recognize the injustices seen through those eyes.

First, the psalms center us, orienting all of creation toward God. We see this most clearly in the lauds psalms—147 to 150—and in the *Te Deum* and the Song of the Three Young Men. The Song of the Three Young Men, the *Benedicite*, is a second-century BCE expansion of Psalm 148 that calls sequentially upon all parts of the created order to praise God: "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise him and magnify him for ever." Then we proceed from the Cosmic Order with the angels, the heavens, the sun, moon, showers and dews, frost and cold, nights and days to the earth and its creatures with the mountains and hills, the whales and all that move in the waters, the fowls of the air, the beasts and cattle and finally proceed to the people of God, the priests of the Lord, the servants of the Lord, the spirits and souls of the righteous. This is nothing less than a doxological ontology: Things exist and persist to the degree that they recognize and praise the Creator who created them. There is a center, there is a source, there is a stable point around which everything else is anchored. And it is God. God has made us and not we ourselves.

This is a crucial point in establishing a social conscience of any kind. There is something greater. There is something beyond us and beyond our desires to which we are accountable. Our desires and appetites, the desires and appetites of those who currently hold political, economic, or social power, stand accountable to something greater, to something more permanent, more stable, and more real than

they are—than we are. It is from this place and in orientation to this reality that we are able to offer a critique of existing systems—even existing systems within which we find ourselves ensnared. We renew this orientation in our acts of worship and praise. As Evelyn Underhill reminds us, the heart of true worship is adoration. She writes, "For worship is an acknowledgement of Transcendence; that is to say, of a Reality independent of the worshiper, which is always more or less deeply coloured by mystery, and which is there first." This adoration, this acknowledgement of transcendence, this reality independent of ourselves of which Underhill speaks is the pure and unadulterated praise that we find ourselves called to in the psalms: "Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the world; Young men and maidens, old and young together. Let them praise the Name of the Lord, for his name only is exalted, his splendor is over earth and heaven." Notice that the political powers here get put on notice. But the psalms are happy to get even more explicit than that:

> Praise the LORD, O my Soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, for there is no help in them. When they breathe their last, they return to earth, and in that day their thoughts perish. Happy are those who have the God of Jacob for their help! Whose hope is in the LORD their God; Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever (Psalm 146:1-5).

The very strong message here is that all political powers and systems are transitory and ephemeral in the face of God and in the face of the reality that endures beyond even the full span of creation. There is a standard—and we aren't it.

Furthermore, as all creation persists in and through its ceaseless praise of God, all of creation stands as fellow

witnesses with us to the creating Word. When we despoil and disdain the created order and fail in stewardship of it, we cease that which is not ours to silence. As we diminish creation, the universal song of praise to God is likewise diminished.

The first concept in the psalms and canticles for our formation is that they show us the center—that is, as previously stated, the psalms and canticles define a reality where all creation is oriented toward God and participates together in the mutual worship of God. We stand rightly within this order when we join in acknowledging God as the center and ground of all being and when we offer the respect due to our fellow witnesses to the glory of God.

The second fundamental concept in the psalms and canticles is that the emphasis is on the law. They regard justice as a key attribute of God and thus justice, righteousness, and equity must be central values for us. One of the things that's so fascinating about this is how often we see it in direct relation to the first concept—the worship of God flows directly into praise for justice:

> Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth stand in awe of him. For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth, and with righteousness to judge the world and the peoples with his truth (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 45).

For those of us who pray the Morning Office in Rite I, we hear these words almost every day. It is composed of two snippets from Psalm 96 that have been grafted onto the end of Psalm 95. And that's entirely appropriate because these two psalms form part of a block from 93 to 99 that celebrate God as king and that underscore this tight connection between the universal praise of God and the universal justice of God. Thus we get the end of 96:

> Tell it out among the nations: "The LORD is King! He has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the LORD when he comes, when he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.

The end of Psalm 98 resounds with the same theme:

> Shout with joy to the LORD, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing. Sing to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the voice of song. With trumpets and the sound of the horn shout with joy before the King, the LORD. Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, the lands and those who dwell therein. Let the rivers clap their hands, and let the hills ring out with joy before the LORD, when he comes to judge the earth. In righteousness shall he judge the world and the peoples with equity.

One word on this judgment language: We Christians can sometimes hear this with the wrong ears and take this the wrong way. In so many of our traditions, judgment is about sin. You're always going to come out on the short end of the stick, and the judgment of God is something to be feared rather than rejoiced over. (Why are the hills so darned happy about this? Do they really hate me that much?) C. S. Lewis in his writings on the psalms gives us a very helpful frame of reference to better hear this as good news. He says that too often we hear judgment and think of it as a criminal proceeding where God is going to put us in the dock and convict us. The judgment here in the Psalter, however, is best thought of as a civil case—it's a property matter. The world is not as it should be. Things are not the way that God intended.

The resources of the land and seas, the bounty of the earth are not distributed as they ought to be. The good news, the reason why the trees and woods and floods rejoice, is that God is going to set things right. The goods that God intends for us will be apportioned as he designed. This judgment is good news because of the justice and equity of God.

Implicit in this judgment, however, is that there are those who are taking more than their appointed share. There are individuals and cliques and powers and systems that accrue benefits to themselves that were intended for others. Remember Psalm 146 that we mentioned above, the one that said, "put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth"? The first half of the psalm is a call to the praise of God; the second half hammers this point home:

> Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! whose hope is in the LORD their God; Who made heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever; who gives justice to the oppressed and food to those who hunger. The LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked. The Lord shall reign for ever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!

From here, of course, it's a clear and easy jump to the Song of Our Lady that has grounded Evening Prayer for lo these many centuries:

> He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 65).

The justice and equity that stand as primary characteristics of God must be plumb lines for us as well. The justice and equity of God demand that we insist on and advocate for the just rule of law. Rule of law is a very simple concept: It's the notion that there is a system of standards that apply equally to everybody. The rules are the same for everybody, no matter your power or your prestige. That's equity. I am a privileged twenty-first century American. This culture is all I know, and every once in a while I need to be reminded that the way I live and the justice system I take for granted is an anomaly in the long stretch of human history. This way of life is the exception—not the norm. When I taught preaching at Emory's Candler School of Theology, one of the best sermons that I heard was from a Nigerian Anglican priest working through a passage from Deuteronomy. It was a celebration of and a stirring call for the rule of law that is tenuous at best in his homeland. It opened my eyes. I can assume rule of law. We can assume it. But when we start assuming it, we stop safeguarding it. The justice of God and the equity of God demand that we open our eyes to ensure that the rule of law is being carried out even in remarkably well-run systems such as in America and Canada. The psalms insist on God's concern for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the blind, and disabled—in short, those who had no voice or power and thus no recourse to justice in the patriarchal and often capricious justice of the first millennium BCE. Our own social conscience is formed and aligned with the scriptural witness when we ensure that the poor and marginalized in our communities are receiving their just due under law—that the justice modeled by God is being practiced by our courts and systems. In the grand scheme of human history, it's only fair to say that our systems of justice are doing a good job, and yet they still fall short of God's vision for justice.

The scriptures speak of sin, and our own lives can attest to its reality and power. Thanks to the enduring power of sin, we must be watchful lest those in positions of power and privilege use their prerogatives for oppression. Vested systems of power, whether in governments or corporations or the Church itself, need to be held accountable to the rule of law and the demands of both justice and equity. This attention, this attentiveness, is part of the preferential option for the poor that has driven much of Roman Catholic social teaching in the twentieth century.

The psalms and canticles emphasize the rule of law: That is, they emphasize that justice is a key attribute of God and that justice, righteousness, and equity must be central values for us because they flow directly from the identity of God.

The third key concept for our formation from the psalms is that they create a habit of empathy as we speak the words of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. We see the world through those eyes and recognize the injustice.

I am an educated, straight, white male from the American middle class, meaning that I am in the upper class globally, with a steady paying job and a house. I have it good. And that's who I am. I can't be anyone other than who I am. These combined conditions can create a perspective that assumes everyone has had and will have the same advantages that I have. But how do I get a clearer picture of the world as it really is and as it is experienced by the millions and billions who have not had the same advantages? How do I transcend myself? How do I raise myself out of my cultural ghetto for a broader and more informed view of the realities of the world? Certainly travel, seeking out and listening to the experiences of others, helps as does directly serving the poor, the homeless, and addicted at the South Baltimore Station with my parish. But these experiences are magnified and aided by the daily

reminders tucked into the psalms about life in a situation far, far different from mine.

Old Testament scholar John Day calls the individual lament psalms the "backbone of the Psalter."[20] Depending on how you classify them, forty-six of the psalms—almost a third—fall into this category. Add in another thirteen or so communal laments, and we see that many of the individual and communal thanksgiving psalms start from a situation of need and desperation. When we pray these psalms, we take into our mouths the pleas, complaints, and cries of those who are oppressed, who have experienced loss and injustice. Sometimes the laments are familiar to us. Sometimes they offer us comfort because we recognize in a voice almost three thousand years old a shared experience of betrayal or attack. At other times they imaginatively invite us into these experiences and challenge us to relate to them. They engage our empathy and require us to exercise and stretch it, to understand the world in a different way. They invite us to see life through other sets of eyes, eyes that have seen things that we have not seen and, honestly, that I earnestly pray we never see.

One of the hardest types of psalms to wrestle with are those we refer to as the imprecatory psalms, the cursing psalms. And there are even parts that pop up in some other, nicer, psalms that make us recoil. If you're curious which ones these might be, look at the Daily Office Lectionary in the back of the prayer book. The imprecatory psalms are marked as optional; they are the verses that have parentheses around them to let you know that you don't really have to read them.

But I want to take a look at one. I invite us to consider this psalm from an empathetic point of view. Psalm 137 starts out beautifully. In fact, the whole first section is a favorite of many people, and there was a popular folk song based on it:

> By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion. As for our harps we hung them up on the trees in the midst of that land. For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the LORD's song upon an alien soil? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

There you go—beautiful, plaintive, a true cry from the heart. Then we get these verses:

> Remember the day of Jerusalem, O LORD, against the people of Edom, who said, "Down with it! down with it! even to the ground!" O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

We are shocked and offended. Is that seriously in the Bible? Certain atheists take joy at pointing out the horrible sentiment expressed at the joy of baby killing and offer it up as an example of the warped mentalities of religion.

A little context is helpful here. This psalm dates shortly after 587 BCE when the Babylonian armies sacked Jerusalem for a second time. They had already been there ten years earlier when Judah rebelled against their Babylonian overlords. The first time, many of the leaders (including the prophet Ezekiel) were taken into exile in Babylon as a warning against further revolts. The rulers of Judah didn't listen, and they didn't learn. They revolted again, and the second time the Babylonian retribution was unrelenting. The city was entirely leveled to the ground, the temple was utterly destroyed. The vast majority of the population was put to

the sword and those who survived were taken to Babylon in chains. The Babylonian client-states in the region were welcome to whatever was left behind, and Edom in particular savaged the refugees. The book of Lamentations gives a more sustained sense of the devastation and despair while the oft-overlooked book of Obadiah explains in detail Edom's betrayal of Jerusalem and calls an oracle of wrath upon them for their actions.

That's the background of Psalm 137, the experience of these singers who refuse to sing a song of joy in their captors' land. In short, they are wishing Edom and Babylon the horrors already visited upon their own homes, their families and children. Does that experience make these lines okay, this sentiment justified? No, of course not. If you are offended by these lines, then congratulations: Your moral sense is intact. But these verses should cause us not to question the morality of God or the psalmist but to try and wrap our heads around the kind of horrific experiences that spurred these pleas. I have never experienced the brutal sack of my homeland, and I pray I never will. I do not want to be able to understand this psalm. And yet the stark reality of the situation is that multitudes of people around the world, both victims and veterans—some of whom are in our congregations—understand this only too well.

When I take these words into my mouth, I am forced to consider what kind of experience that must be, what depths of pain cause otherwise rational and faithful people to make this kind of plea to God. The Psalter places this experience of oppression before my eyes, my heart, and my imagination. In praying these alien lines, I am forced into an exercise of empathy that will broaden my soul. Likewise I can say: "Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth. For the arrogant have risen up against me, and the ruthless have

sought my life, those who have no regard for God" (Psalm 54:2-3). Or "My enemies are saying wicked things about me: 'When will he die, and his name perish?' Even if they come to see me, they speak empty words; their heart collects false rumors; they go outside and spread them. All my enemies whisper together about me and devise evil against me" (Psalm 41:5-7). Or even verse 21 from Psalm 109: "I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me." While I cannot honestly claim these words as my own, I can imaginatively extend my own experiences of betrayal and trouble to better understand them. And I can use these psalms as a point of reference in my conversations with those who have shared this type of experience. Regular praying of the psalms in the Office is not a substitute for engaging the people in your communities in these situations. But I believe your encounters with others may well be aided as a result of this sort of diligent, attentive, and empathetic exercise of reading the psalms.

This is the third fundamental concept from the psalms: They form us in the habit of empathy because they place in our mouths the words of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, and they invite us to see the world through those eyes and to recognize the injustices seen through those eyes.

A regular discipline of praying the Daily Office nourishes the soul with the psalms and canticles that have the potential to shape the concerns within us and aid us in seeing them more clearly throughout the rest of scripture. When we allow the psalms to speak their wisdom to us, they will form in us the conviction that God is the center and the source by which all other systems and powers are critiqued; that the justice, righteousness, and equity that characterize God must be reflected in our societies and systems; that we can transcend ourselves and situations by exercising our empathy and

broadening our souls to the experiences of others. But this doesn't happen on its own. Simply running through the words isn't enough. All of the catechetical and formational potential of the Daily Office, the Psalter and canticles, and scripture itself is for nought without the discipline of attentiveness.

Praying the Office every once in a while isn't enough. It has to become a discipline. That doesn't mean that if you miss a Morning or Evening Prayer cycle that you're lost, but power lies in the force of habits. Habits of mind, habits of devotion, habits of thought. That's what transforms us—patterns of life.

It is the same with the psalms. The benefits that we have talked about only occur with attentiveness. If you are not being attentive, then you might as well be reading the sports page. It is only while reading these words with our minds and our hearts engaged, with our souls open to the movements of the Spirit, that they can unleash their potential to melt our hearts of stone.

How do we go about doing this? What is the best way to read and pray the psalms to get the most out of them?

PRAYING THE PSALMS IN THE OFFICE

The traditional monastic practice of chanted psalmody—inherited by the Anglican tradition—is a form of breath meditation. That is, the psalms are read in such a way that the text corresponds to the breath, particularly deep, elongated breathing that assists the body with falling into a restful receptive state enabling deep contemplation of the texts. First, I will discuss the traditional technique for breathing the psalm used for congregational singing and speaking of the Psalter. Second, I will discuss how these breathing techniques may be adapted for solo use, either in reading the psalms aloud or silently.

There are two chief methods by which the psalms are sung in Anglican churches: the traditional Gregorian chant of the Western Church and Anglican chant. Originally, Anglican chant started as Gregorian chant harmonized, but it shifted, developed, and grew into its own particular style. While I have sung a certain amount of Anglican chant, I have spent a lot more time singing the psalms to Gregorian chant. I believe that it is through the tradition of chant that we encounter the psalms most deeply.

The typical psalm tone has six parts. The first part is called the incipit and typically contains two or three notes that move in an upward direction. When a psalm is being sung, the incipit is only used at the very beginning of the psalm or when psalm verses begin again after an antiphon. (Gospel canticles are different in that the incipit is sung at the beginning of each verse.)

The second part is the reciting tone. This is a note on which the majority of the psalm verse is sung. The psalm is recited on this note until it hits one of the next two parts.

The third part is the flex. This is a single note that drops either a second or a third. In the case of a psalm verse with a long first half, the flex is used as a brief break for the choir to catch a quick breath before returning again to the reciting tone. If, in *The Book of Common Prayer*'s printing, a psalm verse goes to a new full line before the asterisk, a flex would be used (e.g. Psalm 1:3; 2:2, but not Psalm 1:1,5; 2:8 because the line break does not start a full line).

The fourth part is the mediant. The mediant comes shortly before the asterisk that marks the middle of the psalm verse. The exact distance from the asterisk depends on the number of stressed syllables in the final words; the required number varies by psalm tone.

The fifth part is the reciting tone again. In the eight psalm tones that correspond with the eight modes, this reciting

tone is exactly the same as the first reciting tone. The ninth tone, *Tonus peregrinus*, which means wandering tone, has a different reciting tone in the second half than in the first half.

Note that there is no equivalent to the flex in the second half of the psalm verse. For instance, you might expect the equivalent of a flex at the end of the second line in Psalm 1:1, but there is no such part.

The sixth part is the final cadence. Like the mediant, where it begins in the last line of the psalm is based on the number and placement of stressed syllables in relation to the psalm tone itself.

You can see for yourself what these look like in a work like *The Plainsong Psalter*. Alternatively, all of the canticles from the prayer book appear with chant tone settings in the service music portion of *The Hymnal 1982* starting at S177.

Chanting the psalms in the traditional manner attends to breath. One designated person—the cantor—begins the psalm and sings from the incipit to the first mediant alone. Then the rest of the congregation joins in on the last half of the verse. From that point, the two sides (facing each other in a traditional choir configuration) alternate verses.

As one side comes to the end of a verse, the other side inhales, preparing to take up the next verse. As the verse ends, the other side picks it up smoothly, leaving no break or gap between the two. If the verse does not directly follow an antiphon, the verse begins directly on the reciting tone. Singing clearly expends the breath that the side had taken before the verse started. If there is a flex, the side snatches a quick catch breath before continuing on.

By the time the side reaches the mediant, there is not much breath left. There is a significant pause at the mediant because at that point the side exhales the remaining breath, then inhales a full new breath. As a community or a new person begins singing the psalms in this way, the break—which may

last five, six beats or even longer—will seem unnaturally long. Resist the temptation to rush; take the time to breathe.

With a full new breath in their lungs, the side then proceeds to the end of the verse and exhales the remaining breath after the final cadence. The other side then smoothly moves to the next verse.

Speaking the psalms in community follows essentially the same pattern as singing. The designated leader in the cantor's role speaks the first line from the incipit to the first median. After the asterisk, the whole group finishes the verse. Then they begin alternation by sides, usually starting with the leader's side. They begin right after the conclusion of the previous verse, read to the asterisk, exhale, breathe in again, and finish the verse as the next side smoothly takes it up.

The first few times you hear the psalms read this way, it will likely take you by surprise—it will sound like there's a big gap in the middle of the verse. Those unfamiliar with this practice, or unsure if they're doing it right, will have a tendency to rush the pause and to start speaking again as soon as possible. However, even in reciting, the mechanics of the breath work in exactly the same way as singing. Because speaking requires less breath control than singing, the urge to rush the breathing pause at the mediant is greater. Again, resist the urge.

If you chant the psalms by yourself, the pattern is basically the same as singing them communally. The difference is that at the end of every other verse, there is no alternate side to begin where you leave off. As a result, the end of each line must be treated in the same manner as the mediant. Exhale all of the breath left in your lungs and breathe in a new breath. Then continue on to the next verse.

If you are reading the psalms aloud by yourself, the pattern again follows that of singing. Take a full breath, read to the asterisk/mediant, exhale, breathe in a new breath, then read

the second half of the verse. Exhale again, inhale, then start the next verse. If a flex occurs, grab a quick catch breath.

Reading silently is the only form of reading that is not fundamentally based on the communal singing pattern. Basically, the difference between reading silently and reading or singing aloud is that no breath is expended in the process. As a result, exhalations and inhalations must be balanced differently. The best way to proceed is to simply alternate half-verses. Inhale slowly as you silently read to the mediant; exhale slowly as you read to the end of the verse.

Following these directions for encountering the psalms will accomplish several things. First, tying the psalms to breath forces you to slow your reading pace and to pay more attention to what you are reading. It is easy to let the words flow beneath your eyes and for your attention to wander. Tying the text to the breath will make you read more slowly even if you are reading silently (when you are more prone to rush).

Second, tying the two together also slows down and regulates your breathing. Regulation of breathing is regulation of the whole body. The slower, deeper breaths will encourage a meditative state of mind that will enable you to relax and concentrate more completely on the text. The more you concentrate, the more your mind retains and passively memorizes.

Third, when read or sung in community, following the breath will tie the whole community together in closer harmony. Listening and being attentive to the breath patterns of those around you so that you begin and end the mediant pauses at the same time will yoke the community closer together in common prayer. There is an indescribable harmony that accompanies a nonanxious attention to the community's breath—a literal discerning of the Spirit that moves within the gathered people at prayer.

CONCLUSION OF THE DAILY OFFICE

The Daily Office is the recurring discipline of the liturgical life. Habits are powerful things, and the Church has established the eternal rhythms of the Office as the central pattern by which Anglican Christians are formed. A person is a runner if they run regularly; a person is a singer if they sing every day; a liturgical Christian is one who prays the Office. The heart of the Office is the psalms. In the prayers and praise of Israel, we find a summary of the scriptures, we hear honest wrestlings with the mysterious ways of God, and we catch glimpses of Christ who is the scripture's fullness and fruition. The twin Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer are our daily sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. As we consecrate a period of time each morning and each evening to God, we join our voices with saints across the ages as we pattern ourselves in a continual turning toward God.

NOTES

1 Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (London, Harper & Brothers, 1937), p. 119.

2 Ibid, p. 120.

3 Ibid, pp. 124-125.

4 Life of Antony 3, *Early Christian Lives*, p. 10.

5 *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 120-121.

6 *Conferences* 10.7.3.

7 *Conferences* 10.10.2.

8 Letter 22. 37.

9 Letter 107.9.

10 *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 57.

11 *Institutes* 3.2.

12 Versicles are a set of one-liners that alternate between two groups—usually whoever is running things and the congregation. The lines usually come from scripture. They do in the case referred to here.

13 In the monthly system of reading the psalms, Psalm 95 appears on the morning of the nineteenth day of each month. Therefore, the *Jubilate* is used whenever this happens, if this course of reading the psalms is used.

14 The lectionary provides three readings, but there can be slots for four readings each day. Thus, an optional Old Testament Lesson can be included if you want to use all four slots. If you choose this route, you use the Old Testament reading from the other year of the Daily Office Lectionary as the first reading at Evening Prayer.

15 It should be noted that these verses from Romans were omitted in a revision of the Daily Office Lectionary completed in the 1940s.

16 Although we can't know for sure, it seems likely that this prayer was written at some point in the second century BCE and may have been composed in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic.

17 The earliest reference is from *Didache* 8. We're not sure exactly when the *Didache* was written; some authorities suggest it may have been as early as the end of the first century CE (and thus around the same time as the later Gospels and Epistles). Certainly it existed by the first part of the second century. Later second and third century writers make the same point repeatedly. Clement of Alexandria refers to prayers three times a day (*Stromata* VII, 7, 40:3) as does Origen (*On Prayer* 12.2), Tertullian (*On Prayer* 25), and Cyprian (*On the Lord's Prayer* 34).

18 "The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms," pp. 97-119 in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. Edited and translated by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 97, 98, 99.

19 Ibid, p. 103.

20 John Day, *Psalms*. (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 19.

SECTION 3
THE HOLY EUCHARIST