



Welcome to *Summer of Psalms*, the NC Synod summer Bible reading plan.

This study is the result of efforts from a variety of your fellow Lutherans from across North Carolina, both clergy and lay, and is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry. Many thanks to all those who took time to contribute to this reading plan.

Begin each day's reading by first reading the corresponding text from the book of Psalms and then reading the lesson which includes a thought-provoking devotional, some questions, and a prayer.

In her introductory reading, the Rev. Dr. Katherine Shaner invites us this summer to “romp through the treasures of the Psalms together with friends from across the NC Synod.” The Engage the Bible Task Group is excited offer this Bible reading plan for you—and the whole synod—to do just that!

We pray the Holy Spirit's richest blessings on your journey this summer with *Summer of Psalms*.



Reading 1 Encountering God's Imagination

So often the question I am asked as a biblical scholar is some version of this: Is the Bible accurate? We all ask this question in some form or another. Did Jonah really get swallowed by a whale? Did Methuselah really live 969 years? Did Jesus really walk on water? Did Paul really think women should be silent? Is Revelation literally going to happen someday? My answer inevitably is this: it depends. If the only way we judge accuracy is through scientific or historical precision, then we will miss most of the richness of the

biblical witness.

The Psalms are, perhaps, the best example of this richness. They communicate embodied experiences of song, poetry, prayer, emotion, relationship with God. Scientific accuracy, historical precision, even perfect transmission of language is not the point of the Psalms. Rather the Psalms are exactly the opposite. They hold the power to capture our imagination and to sing into our souls, to put expression to emotions we didn't even know how to attend, and to draw us into ever more living relationship with God.

And yet, like any of our most beloved hymn texts, they do draw on themes, histories, and theologies that tie us to millennia-old sacred memories. Although tradition ties them to King David, the headings that suggest David sang or wrote them could also simply suggest that they were dedicated to David or David's descendants. The headings were also added many centuries after the Psalms first appeared. We don't know for sure who wrote the psalms or the headings. That doesn't matter, because they speak so profoundly into our everyday lives. Millennia after their writing they connect our emotions to the histories of countless generations of faithful ancestors—generations who have absorbed and contemplated, chewed on and sung, found comfort and challenge in these songs across time, geography, and even religious communities.

I invite you this summer to romp through these treasures together with friends from across the NC Synod. Weep with snorting sobs, laugh uncontrollably at the silly images of sea critters and talking trees, give yourself over to moments even hours of praise, hold your head between your hands in lament, feel the intimacy of God as she knits you together so lovingly and names your loneliness and suffering in the same breath, and sing new songs in your own key.

To Consider

- What are your earliest memories of the Psalms? Was there one that you remember more clearly than others?
- What role do the Psalms play in your faith formation today?

God, your breath and your song, your laughter and your tears fill the corners of creation, waiting for us to encounter you more profoundly. Sing your song in us, even when we weep, even when we shout, even when words are not enough. Breathe your grace through our lives that we may know your justice, your presence, and your hope. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Katherine A. Shaner is Associate Professor of New Testament at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in Winston-Salem. She is also an ordained pastor in the ELCA. She enjoys digging in the dirt, whether in her garden or on an archaeological excavation. She also hikes, makes a mean turkey sandwich, and argues theology regularly with her dog, Karl Bark.





Reading 2—Happy Are They... Psalm 1

From its very first word, “Happy”, some people might be struck oddly by Psalm 1. “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked.” Some translations write “Blessed” instead. This Psalm starts out by drawing direct parallels between a person’s emotional condition and one’s spiritual state. Merriam Webster defines “happy” as an adjective that expresses a state of good fortune or well-being and contentment. Similarly, “blessed” is that which enjoys happiness or that which is held in reverence. The implication in this Psalm, then, is that contentment comes not from dwelling in the ways and issues

of this world, but in focusing on God’s word and law.

I am reminded of those who welcome the season of Lent with a fast from social media or mainstream news. Too often the news channels we watch or the Facebook feeds we follow can become echo chambers that merely amplify positions we already hold or empower biases we nurture and protect. These do not provide “happiness.”

Richard Niell Donovan, author of the blog sermonwriter.com, encourages readers of this Psalm to pay attention to the action verbs in the first verse: walk, stand, sit. Too often what begins with a simple accompaniment turns into a lingering in a place of alienation and leaves us stuck in something we would not want to be or defend. Following paths that lead us away from God’s word and love can mire us in the muck of those things which we would not want to define us.

This standing with sinners and sitting with the scornful can be contrasted with the steadfast rootedness of trees planted by streams of water. Plants with strong roots draw nourishment from the depths of the earth and hold fast through a diversity of seasons. Winds may blow, but well-rooted trees stand firm. The prosperity of endurance, growth, and new life are seen in healthy groves. Such are the fruits of the spirit of one who draws strength and sustenance from the life-giving word of God.

Finally, the chaff which the wind blows away may be compared to those in verse one who are wicked and scornful. The Hebrew word for wind is *ruach* which is also understood to include the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has the power to blow into those places in our lives muddled over with chaos and unnecessary commotion. It can clear out the dross of wickedness and sin and make room for that which is healthy and sustaining.

To Consider

- What is the “counsel of the wicked” or the “seat of the scornful” that regularly pops up on your news feed? Would it hold up to the power of God’s word blowing through it?
- How does the Holy Spirit blow away the sinful distractions of your life?

God of all wisdom, make us seekers of your word and followers of your way that we may cherish knowledge of you above all else and may drink from the depths of your life-giving streams.

Christy Lohr Sapp is an accomplished bread-baker, a novice cheese-maker, and the pastor of St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church in Hickory where she and is looking to grow her family through fostering a shelter pet (or two!).





Reading 3—Glory Everywhere Psalm 8

This Psalm celebrates our creator God who fashioned the universe from the stars above to the earth below, who exalted humanity over and above every other creature. Acknowledging the beauty and wonder of all God has made, the psalmist shares an important truth about “glory”: God who has set His glory above the heavens has crowned us, His children, with glory and honor. As great as the heavens are, humanity is

greater. Not only has God made us, He reveals his glory to us. We are loved. We are cared for. We matter to him.

In the Lord’s Prayer we affirm that “Thine is the glory,” but wonder of wonders, God’s glory is a glory that He shares with us. Someone has stated that from the eternal side of life, this is how we will pray the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father, how good it is to be here with you in heaven. Your name is so special. Your kingdom has come, your will is finally done by all of us everywhere. You give us each day our spiritual strength. We no longer sin against you or one another. We know no sickness, no evil, no death. Your kingdom has become our kingdom, your power our power, your glory our glory; forever and ever, it is so.”

“Glory” is wherever God is: in time and eternity, on earth and in heaven, in life and death and the life that knows no end, right here and right now.

To Consider

- How can I reflect the glory of the Lord in my daily life?

Glorious God, may I glimpse your glory and majesty in the events and people of today. And may they glimpse your glory in me. Amen



The Rev. Joseph A. Miller has served congregations in the Illinois, Iowa, South Dakota and North Carolina. He likes to travel, play the accordion, and collect U.S. commemorative stamps. He and his wife, Marcia, have two sons and two granddaughters.



Reading 4—“Speedbumps” Psalm 19

Psalm 19 always makes me think of my dad, Paul Conrad. Before my dad would preach, he would pray the Psalm’s last verse, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord. Our strength and our redeemer. Amen.”

For my dad, this prayer served two purposes. First, it was a spiritual way to focus on the task of preaching to the congregation. Second, and most importantly, it was to put all his trust in God.

My dad was never at a loss for words, especially when it came to God. He knew and believed with all his heart that God was “true and righteous” (v. 9) and would provide. He knew that God was always with him as he prayed and reflected on the Scriptures. He also knew that God was with him and **within** him as he spoke the Word. Through God, my dad had an incredible faith. A faith he loved to talk about and share with everyone.

My dad passed away in 2010, but to this day, he is still teaching me how to trust God with all my heart. There are days when I hit a “spiritual speedbump” and my faith in God is not as strong as I would like for it to be. When those days hit me, my dad’s prayer speaks loudest to me. For it is in those dark moments that God truly provides strength through the memories my dad and I made together. Those memories are filled with adventures and a lot of love. A LOT of love. When I remember the love my dad and I shared, I give thanks to God for that love and for the support God has given me through my dad, my mom, my friends and family. I not only give thanks, I live out my thanks by putting my trust in God, knowing that God is always with me.

Even during my speedbumps.

To Consider

- Is there a Bible passage that always makes you think of a loved one?
- How does God speak to you during your “spiritual speedbumps”?

Holy God, as we walk along the road of discipleship, lead us through our spiritual speedbumps. Walk alongside of us, in front of us, and behind us, to make sure that we stay on the right path, so that we can proclaim your Good News to all your children. Amen.

The Rev. Jonathan P. Conrad is the Senior Pastor at St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wilmington, NC. He enjoys reading mysteries and playing golf. He is the proud husband of Kristen, the joyful father of Paul and Madelyn, and the blessed son of Paul and Kay Conrad.





Reading 5—The Shepherd and the flock Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved and cited passages from Scripture. It is often used as a funeral psalm, but it is also used for those planning to adopt a child (*Book of Common Prayer*, 443). This is one of the many psalms ascribed to King David, and it discusses the relationship between David and God. David describes the personal relationship between Israel and God, as God is the shepherd of the flock, Israel. As it describes the relationship between God and his people, it also describes how David served as a shepherd, his former profession, and then his kingship. He guided both flocks into the way of righteousness. He sought to uphold the covenant instituted by God to Israel's ancestors, but David acknowledged God as the ultimate sovereign. Throughout the psalm, David alludes to Israel's history as God shepherding his people from slavery into life (Ps. 23:4). The Israelites endured 460 years of slavery in Egypt, and God working through Moses, shepherded them into the Promised Land. God's "rod" and "staff" were the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, and this brought comfort to the Israelites. God then delivered his people from the warring tribes in the Promised Land, and they shared in the banquet prepared for them by God. David sings the praise of God in this psalm, and God continues to bless his people.

As Christians today hear this psalm, we are reminded that Jesus serves as our Good Shepherd, a title that he gives himself throughout the gospels. It is in John's Gospel where we are given the brief discourse as the duties of the shepherd. The shepherd is to lay down his life to protect his flock, and Jesus fulfills this through his death on the cross. It is through the cross that we are given new life by God's saving mercy through the power of Jesus. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" references this personal nature Jesus has with his sheep, the church, and this personal nature is also invoked by David when references God as his shepherd (John 10:14; Ps. 23:1). It is through Christ's death on the cross and his glorious resurrection that we can no longer fear evil. It is at Christ's table that his sheep are fed, nurtured, and renewed.

To Consider

- At an initial glance, what are some images that come to mind when you think of a shepherd?
- As people of faith, how are we called to be sheep to God's flock?
- In what ways are the baptismal promises we make (to live among God's faithful people, to hear the Word and share in the Lord's Supper, to proclaim the Good News through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace throughout the world) reminiscent of a sheep following the voice of the shepherd?

Holy and Gracious God, you sent your Son Jesus to serve as a shepherd to your wayward flock. Continue to guide us along the path of righteousness, so that we may fear no evil and join the shepherd at the heavenly feast. Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Thomas Johnston is a senior in the Religious Studies Program at Lenoir-Rhyne University. He is from Charlotte and enjoys reading.





Reading 6—Glory Psalm 24

Long ago, our ancestors in the faith prayed and sung these ancient words on the way to worship God in the Temple. As they came to the place of encounter, the Holy of Holies, they start with the affirmation that the whole earth is God’s handiwork.

God’s holiness and majesty is not just revealed in worship. As important and vital as it is to worship God in community, God’s people also recall that the created world is a gift from a holy, loving Creator.

We are in the middle of summer. And while we may find ourselves longing for slightly cooler temperatures during the middle of July, one of the fun parts of this time of year is to see the beauty of God’s creation. Many of us have memories of taking time during the summer to go to the mountains, the beach, or another special vacation spot. One of the refreshing things about that is to see the diversity of God’s creation. For instance, if we live far away from the ocean, it is a wonder to experience the smells, sounds, and sights of the ocean.

The good news is that God’s glory isn’t on display only in remote places that require long trips with children asking, “Are we there yet?” God’s glory is on display as the faithful gather to sing praises to the God of Jacob, hear the Word, and share in the Lord’s Supper in our local congregations. As we gather in worship, we find ourselves seeing the presence of the Spirit in the lives of God’s people.

As beautiful and holy as our congregations are, God’s glory will not only be contained to spaces that are set apart for worship. God’s glory will also be on display as we serve our neighbors. That holy presence, which we talk about bringing as we serve others, is not limited to us. Because the earth is the Lord’s, God’s presence will be in those we serve, many times in surprising ways.

To Consider

- In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther says, “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1162). What things and people will you come in contact with today? As you think about those things and people, remember that God has created them.
- During the summer many people take vacations and miss Sunday worship in their home congregation. If you haven’t normally done so, how could you incorporate worship and service into your next vacation?

God of glory, we give you thanks that you surround us with abundant signs of your presence. Bless us with hearts and hands that would see and proclaim your glory in our lives. We ask this through Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Russell Peek is pastor at Epiphany, Winston-Salem. He spent far too much time trying to come up with a witty description about himself, but failed to do so.





Reading 7—Remember to Remember

Psalm 30

David writes this "Psalm of Thanksgiving" after finding himself in great darkness. He remembers when he, "felt secure" and declares, "I will never be shaken." David knows God as a provider who is close, who "made his royal mountain stand firm." However, when the darkness comes, David becomes dismayed. He cries out to God with confidence and courage. In his absolute depravity David asks God, "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?" If I don't

praise you, who will?

David never forgets who God is, what God has done, and what God will do! As a, Man After God's Own Heart, he remembers God. David calls to God for help, he cries out to God in praise. David remembers that "God's anger lasts but a moment," and "weeping remain for a night." David waits, with an unrelenting patience, knowing "God's favor lasts a lifetime," and "rejoicing comes in the morning." David knew God's love and that God would find him and bring him back from, "the realm of the dead." Even in the darkest night David never forgot.

This Psalm makes me ask, "Where does my heart and mind go in times of darkness and trouble? Where does my heart go in times of success?" I find that sometimes, I forget the good times when I felt, "secure and unshaken." The times when God was close. When God seems to turn His face from me, I think, God doesn't care about me, or my troubles. God is not listening to my cries. God won't fix this. In good times, I sometimes find myself taking credit for the success, saying, "aren't I amazing?" Yet, when I forget who the is author and perfecter of my faith, I lose everything. I forget to exalt God, I forget to remember that when, "I called for help, God healed me. You brought me up from the grave."

I chose to remember...that God loves me. God gave me everything. God never stops loving and giving. I will always praise God for the struggles and the triumphs. I will believe in the mystery of God's infinite plan. I will hold on to the truth that God is always and everywhere with me!

I choose to remember not to forget!

To Consider

- After reading Psalm 30, what quality do you see in David that you would like to model and perfect in yourself?
- What habits can you develop to help prepare your heart and mind for the inevitable times of trouble?

God, you are a God who loves beyond our understanding. With arms outstretched we praise your Holy Name. We sing praise and thanksgiving for your patience with us, your wayward children. Humbly we ask you to assist us in turning our eyes to You. Help us hold firmly to the gift of the Cross, so we may feel the love you shared by giving us your Son as atonement for our sins. Help us to care for those in need and reach out to others in our prayers. May our lives mirror the love we share with You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Deb Rosenberg writes: I am a loved Child of God. I currently serve Lutheran/Episcopal Campus Ministry with UNC Pembroke and Robeson Community College...called by the grace of God.





Reading 8—God, Our Mighty Fortress Psalm 46

This is a Korah Psalm (part of a collection of Psalms likely collected by the Korahites, who were a group of Temple singers). The Psalm (esp. v.1) inspired Martin Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It is a song of Zion celebrating God’s ultimate victory over the nations, even using what is bad in the world to make good of them. Its emphasis on the Holy City, that God’s dwelling place will remain secure in Jerusalem (vv.4-7), is why the Psalm is classified as a Song of Zion.

The Lesson begins with praise for the God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. As a result, we will not fear though facing the worst catastrophes (vv.1-3). Waters in the sea are said to be a threat to people, the Psalm states (vv.2-3). Famed modern theologian Karl Barth provides a thoughtful insight on this point. He claims that water has a part in all the force of the human world hostile to us; it gives life to all that opposes God. But God subdues the water, even puts it to good use in the river which is said to make the City of God glad (v.5; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol.III/1, pp.148-149).

Then the Psalm refers to this great and strong God being in the midst of us (v.5), presumably as He is found in the waters which He rules. Martin Luther elaborates on this point in a way most compatible with modern String Theory. He wrote:

He [God] is supernatural, inscrutable being Who exists at the same time in every little seed whole and entire and yet also in all above and outside created things. (*Luther’s Works*, Vol.37, p.228)

In order for String Theory to work it must posit the existence of extra, invisible dimensions in addition to height, width, depth, and time. Luther’s comments suggest that God occupies these invisible dimensions. He truly is in the midst of everything! Consider some object in the room in which you are reading, even your own body. God is Present in them, holding their components together!

With this awareness that we are ever in God’s Presence, that He never abandons us, the Psalm’s conclusion that God’s Kingdom overcomes the nations and brings peace (vv.8-11) is an obvious expression of praise. Confident in God’s Presence in every corner of our lives, aware that He is the Giver of everything good, fear begins to evaporate.

To Consider

- In what sense is God a mighty fortress?
- What are we to make of the sadnesses, tragedies, and evils in life? Does God send them? If not, how is God still in control?

O Lord what a mighty fortress You are, a God Who never fails. You’ve overcome all the evils in life and gained salvation for us. When sin and old age come to take away our lives, goods, honor, children, or spouse. Though life be wrenched away. Sin and evil still cannot win the day. For Your marvelous Kingdom stands firm forever and ever and ever! Amen.

Mark Ellingsen is an NC Synod pastor, who after years of service in Lutheran theological institutions and parishes (including here in North Carolina), has served for over quarter of a century on the faculty of our nation’s oldest and largest accredited historic African-American seminary, the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. Mark is the author of 23 book and hundreds of published articles with work often appearing in *Living Lutheran* and several NC Synod publications (including *Ever-Reforming: A Reformation 500 Cross-Generational Study*). His latest books include *Martin Luther’s Legacy: Reforming Reformation Theology for the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *Ever Hear of Feuerbach? That’s How Come the Mainline Churches Are In Such a Funk* (Cascade).





Reading 9—Unlimited Mercy Psalm 51

I recently had an argument with a Facebook friend. I had re-posted a statement that said, “Sometimes you are the bad guy.” Jake (not his real name) could never see himself as the bad guy. Jake is not the only one who thinks that way, but a more common view is, “Well, at least I am not as bad as that person.” A third

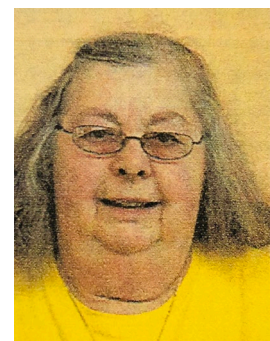
way to respond to this psalm is the person who believes that they are so bad they could never receive God’s mercy. Finally, is the person who knows he deserves God’s judgement and also know he has received God’s mercy. Whatever your response is to Psalm 51, the truth is you need God’s mercy, and God gives it to you freely.

To Consider

- Which of the above four ways is your response to this psalm?
- When and how have you experienced God’s mercy?

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit. Amen

Judy Schlegel grew up in Lutheran country in Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of the old Southeastern Seminary, not to be confused with the present Southeastern Seminary. She is a member of St. Paul’s Lutheran and Aldersgate United Methodist Churches, both in Durham.





Reading 10—Silent Time Psalm 62

“My soul waits in silence.” When can silence be found in our noisy world? When is your time to wait in the refuge of silence to hear God’s word transform your very being? Our confidence in God’s power stands firm and the time of silence creates coherent order. We are not shaken by the noise of those who huff and puff, tossing their opinions into the sound of rushing wind. All their huffing and puffing is lighter

than a breath. Noise is nothing.

“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down.” Remember *The Three Little Pigs*? Their mama sent them into the world to seek their fortune. She gave them a warning. The wolf wants to eat you up. Off they went. The first piglet came upon a beautiful hay field and quickly built a house of straw. The second piglet came upon a forest of tall oak trees and quickly built a fence of sticks. They were very pleased with their good fortune. The third piglet came to a rock pile and began to build a house. They mocked the third piglet.

The piglets became prominent. The only plan of the wolf was to eat up those plump piglets. The wily wolf tells clever lies. Huffing and puffing is the wolf’s big super power. He easily terrified the piglets with his great noisy breath. The house of straw and the tottering fence blow down, two shaken piglets run to the house of solid rock. The mighty huffing and puffing breath has no power against solid rock. It is the refuge of silence that cannot be shaken by the huffing and puffing of mockery or malicious intent.

All day we are assailed and battered by noisy huffing and puffing, by the sound of nothing. Now is the time to take refuge in silence and listen. Listen to the silence, what do you hear? Again and again, “I have heard this: power belongs to God and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.” Silence is found when we listen.

To Consider

- Where in your calendar would you schedule time to listen to silence?
- What would you expect to hear when you listen to silence?
- How would you describe what you actually heard?

God of Steadfast Love, when the huffing and puffing threatens and batters us, mercifully grant that we may be led to the refuge of silence so that we may hear that all power belongs to you, our Rock and our Salvation. Amen.

Margaret Ashby is a pastor who writes: I love to discover what I didn’t know I didn’t know. I find ordinary daily life is very interesting, filled with silence. I love quiet times and places, the garden, the library, the church sanctuary. When I began to actually listen to silence, I was surprised to hear how deeply dimensional it is. Silence has height and depth; it takes up space and fills time. Who knew?





Reading 11—Sing for Joy Psalm 66

It is easy this time of year in Western North Carolina to appreciate the beauty of God’s creation. Lush green mountains, cool trout streams, warm sun and nourishing rains, and even the friendly Asheville black bears are all reminders of our masterful Creator. Every time I step outside, it is so easy to proclaim with the psalmist “How awesome are your deeds,” and sing for joy for all that God has made.

The first section of Psalm 66 encourages us to sing to the glory of God, our Creator, joining our voices with the earth and all its creatures in worship and thanksgiving for life, providence, and steadfast love. As much as I believe that everyone CAN and SHOULD sing, and that music is a true gift from God, I believe that joyful proclamation of the goodness of God, in word and deed, is the kind of singing that the psalmist has in mind.

The second section of Psalm 66 recalls the Exodus, the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea on dry ground. We can almost hear Miriam and the women dancing, playing tambourines, and singing for joy! This story reminds us that God brought the Israelites, God’s covenant people, from slavery into freedom, and gave them a new life.

As we recall this story in our study of Psalm 66, we can be reminded today that we too are God’s covenant people. In Christ’s death and resurrection, we have been brought from slavery in sin to freedom in grace, and have been given new, eternal life. We are sealed with the cross of Jesus in our baptism, and are called beloved, forgiven, redeemed, children of God forever.

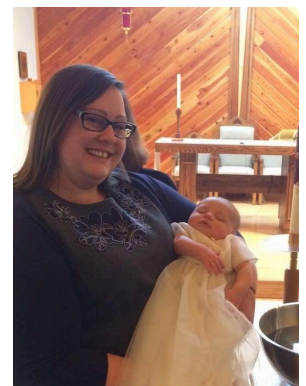
Psalm 66 concludes with reminders of God’s providence. Verse 12 declares “we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.” Just as God brought the children of Israel to the Promised Land, God has cared and continues to care for God’s people today through all the difficult times we encounter. From the immense to the particular—from the trees on top of mountains to the hairs on top of your head—God’s love for creation is without end. You were fearfully and wonderfully made in the image your Creator for a purpose, and given gifts with which you can serve and give thanks to God. With love, mercy, forgiveness, and joy, God will continue to care for you all the days of your life.

To Consider

- If you are able, get outside today and marvel at God’s creation. What do you see? What do you hear? “Sing” for joy at what God has made!
- What “fire and water” have you been through in your life? How did God bring you through it? How did you see God at work?
- How can you join your voice in singing for joy in thanksgiving to God? How can you use the gifts that God gave you to glorify God?

God of all creation, we sing for joy with our whole being, and give you thanks for your steadfast care and providence. Open our eyes to see the beauty you have made. Open our mouths to raise our voices with the earth and all its creatures. Continue to make us new each day so that we might proclaim in all we do that God is good! In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Deacon Katie Rivers serves alongside the people of God at St. Mark’s, Asheville. She sings for joy while cooking, brewing beer, caring for her English Setter, and teaching children that Jesus loves them.





Reading 12—How Fleeting is Fame? Psalm 73

This prayerful song—for psalms are both prayer and song—paints a vivid picture of those who are “righteous” and those who are “wicked.” The author tells God that although he tried very hard to be righteous, it appeared that all around him people who were flouting both the laws of the land and God’s laws were appearing to prosper. “Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence” (Ps. 73:12-13).

We know that the Psalms were composed many thousands of years ago, yet these two verses could just as easily have been a social media post today. So too could be the conclusions that the author draws: “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!” (Ps. 73:16-19).

The German word for this is *schadenfreude*, which means taking some pleasure in the discomfort or downfall of others. In person when conversing with friends, how often do you and I speak ill of a mutual acquaintance not present? Even more do social media and reality-television shows encourage this. The psalmist appears to have had all his questions resolved: God punishes people who have appeared to have been getting away with bad stuff!

Scholars classify Psalm 73 as a Wisdom Psalm, because it shares features with the Wisdom Tradition of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). These psalms often address the injustices of life and the justice of God, choosing the righteous or correct path in life, and the relative and fleeting value of wealth. Some suggest that the event that prompted the composition of Psalm 73 was the fall of King Sennacherib and the guidance of the prophet Isaiah to his successor, King Hezekiah (II Kings 18:13-19:37).

To Consider

- How has our use of the Internet and social media influenced our tendency to find pleasure in, and converse about, the ups and downs of people in public life?
- How does it affect our individual relationship with God when we attribute to God or God’s will or God’s actions the misfortunes of other people? What does that do to our own heart and our own journey?

O God, Creator of the Universe, you alone love each person you have created with fierce, unconditional, and truly equal compassion. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, that we might see each person we encounter, in person or on social media, with the eyes of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, in whose name we pray. Amen.



The Rev. Beth Woodard is the chaplain at Trinity Elms, a senior-living campus of Lutheran Services Carolinas, in Clemmons, NC, and the part-time interim pastor of St. Michael Lutheran Church in High Point. She lives in Greensboro, with her husband, son, miniature dachshunds, and cat. Pastor Beth knows she is not the boss of anyone in that household.



Reading 13—A Daily Pilgrimage Psalm 84

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.” (Psalm 84:5, NIV)

Have you ever been on a pilgrimage?

I’ve never traveled to visit a temple, but I have been in places where the ground felt holy. A few places that come to mind: walking through a forest and noticing rays of sunlight slanting through a canopy of autumn leaves, sharing struggles and joys with a friend in a coffee shop, and waiting at a bedside late into the night. In each of these places the boundary around my ordinary surroundings blurred just enough that I was able to glimpse something more, something bigger than the reality my senses could detect.

The journey that leads to these “holy ground” moments may feel like a walk in the wilderness. It can be uncomfortable or even scary, and I tend to respond with worry and checklists as I make my plans and struggle to get myself back into familiar territory.

I’ve never traveled to visit a holy site, but I have access to the dwelling place of God every day. The Bible tells me that my very body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit lives in me. (1 Cor. 6:19) The pilgrimage that God invites me to take is not a journey of miles, but a movement of heart and mind. When I lift my eyes from my own plans and schemes, when I turn to the Lord and put my trust in him, when I lift my voice in prayer and praise God is faithful and gives me the strength to move forward in peace.

The writer of Psalm 84 reminds us that to be with God is to be in a place of safety and blessing, and those who go on a pilgrimage are blessed as they go. God strengthens the pilgrim, providing everything she needs, and more. God provides so much in fact, that the pilgrim’s life overflows with good and holy gifts, nourishing the dry ground of her journey with life-giving water.

When we put our trust in the Lord, we can be sure that God will strengthen us for our journey, providing exactly what is needed, at exactly the right moment—every mile, every minute, every moment of our lives.

To Consider

- Can you think of a time when you felt you were standing on holy ground? What was it about that time that made it feel set apart from the ordinary?
- If there is a wilderness place in your life now—maybe a decision, an unwelcome situation, or a difficult relationship—can you bring your struggle before God and ask for the faith to trust that he will provide everything you need?

Holy Lord, open our hearts and minds to the leading of your Spirit in our lives. Strengthen us for our journey and let us put our trust in you. Amen.

Carolyn Anderson is married and the mother of two young adults. She is a preschool teacher and a member of Nativity, Arden. In her free time, Carolyn enjoys long walks and good books.





Reading 14—The Sheep of His Hand Psalm 95

Have you noticed how the tone of several of the psalms can suddenly change direction? The psalmist may praise God one second and then call for divine retribution on personal enemies. No psalm changes direction quicker than Psalm 95.

The first part (vs 1-7) is, for my money, one of the most beautiful hymns of praise in all of Scripture. It has had a place for centuries in the Matins, or Morning Prayer, order of worship. This part is in the voice of the worshipers. They are exhorting themselves to worship

this God who is their rock and the creator of all. Why do this? “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (v 7a).

Then the tone and voice change completely. Now God speaks. And you would think he would be pleased with the worshipful nature of the preceding verses, but, no. He warns us not to harden our hearts lest the fate of the first generation of Israelites of the Exodus befall us. You will remember that God kept that generation, even Moses, from entering the Promised Land. And, on this note of judgement, the psalm ends.

The two parts of this psalm sound dissonant to the modern ear. How can God, whose definition is Love, loathe his children? As with all human attempts to describe God, language falls short of its goal. I sense that some of this language is hyperbolic to drive home a point. Namely that to truly follow and worship God, we must live in his Love and seek his will. When we insist on going our own way—i.e. hardening our hearts—there are consequences, none of which are good. And not brought on by a vengeful and petulant god but just the result of our being bone-headedly wrong. But even then God’s grace enfolds us.

The psalm ends with a word of Law, a reminder we often need, but the core of its message is that he is our God and we are his people. Let us rejoice in that and worship the rock of our salvation.

To Consider

- Where, in our daily lives, do we find ourselves going our own way, hardening our hearts to God’s call of love in Christ? What calls us back to God?
- What is your favorite hymn? What about that hymn speaks to you of God’s many attributes? Take a moment now to sing it joyfully. (Or as soon as you are out of the carpool or the line at Starbucks, etc.)

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

(From ELW Order of Morning Prayer page 304)

Dan Voelkert is a member of Macedonia, Burlington, who loves singing hymns, playing guitar and uke, and accosting strangers on the street with pictures of his grandkids. (You have been forewarned. Of course, I guess it is hard to be post-warned. Funny language this English.)





Reading 15—It's Christmas in July Psalm 96

It's Christmas in July.

Not really, but today's psalm is appointed for use during the Christmas Eve Service, "Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice. For the LORD comes to judge the world with righteousness and truth" (paraphrase v. 11, 13). The popular hymn *Joy to the World*, makes reference to this psalm. But before this psalm was used as the basis of a Christmas hymn, it held an important place in the life of the people of Israel.

Originally, the Psalms were Israel's hymnbook.

In Hebrew, this psalm is known as *Shiru Lashem* ("Sing to the Lord") and repeats the word "sing" three times.

According to the 11th century commentary on the Psalms, the *Midrash Tehillim*, these three instances allude to the three daily prayer services:

Shacharit—Morning prayer, corresponding to "Sing a new song to the LORD" (verse 1)

Mincha—Afternoon prayer, "Sing to the LORD, all the earth" (verse 1)

Maariv—Evening prayer, "Sing to the Lord, bless the name of the LORD." (verse 2)

Additionally, this psalm is one of the six psalms prayed to welcome in the Shabbat, the Sabbath.

In both Jewish and Christian life, this psalm unequivocally states that God is in control. God is to be praised "above all gods; for all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens."

This psalm is a touchstone, a way to remember that in spite of wars, violence, poverty, strife, illness, and all the ways that we can become world-weary, God *is* in control. God's righteousness and love redeems all creation, not just humans. Trees, rivers, oceans, mountains, all sing praise to the Creator.

In Celtic Christianity, the natural world constantly sings its cosmic praise to God. This song, the great Oran Mór praises the Creator of the World. We too can join our voices in this song.

To Consider

- Where in creation do you hear God's song of love and grace?
- Listen to the hymn *Joy to the World*. What new words or phrases catch your attention?

Creator God, You sang the world into creation. Help me hear and sing that song of creation so that all may know your love and grace. Amen.

Pastor Laura Wind lives in Winston-Salem with her husband Heath, her daughter Catherine, and Nike the dog. When not searching for her keys or her coffee, or plotting her next novel, she is planning to hike the Appalachian Trail.





Reading 16—Living in Joy Psalm 98

I love to sing. It is one of the things which I *most* love to do, especially with a choir or a congregation. If I were pushed to analyze the why of this, I would have to say that music and singing fills my heart with joy. Sitting on a bookshelf in my living room just above my CD player is a small plaque which reads, “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.”, words of Aldous Huxley. There is something beautifully and powerfully mysterious about the effect music has on us humans and

writers have been writing about this across the centuries.

- *Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.* ~Plato
- *He who sings prays twice.* ~St. Augustine
- *Music is a fair and glorious gift of God.* ~Martin Luther
- *Where words fail, music speaks.* ~Hans Christian Anderson
- *Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife.* ~Kahlil Gibran
- *Music can name the unnamable and communicate the unknowable.* ~Leonard Bernstein
- *Music can change the world because it can change people.* ~Bono
- *If I cannot fly, let me sing.* ~Stephen Sondheim

Psalm 98 is all about singing, all about praising God with song. And the psalmist gives us reason after reason why we should do this, reason after reason why using our voices—using music—is the highest form of giving praise to the Creator. “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises,” the psalmist tells us, calls us to do. “Get out those instruments, too- the lyre, the trumpet, the horn, and make a joyful noise.”

Were you paying attention to the words? The “noise” we make, the praise we offer is to be joyful. No dour expressions or long faces as we worship, but rather the wonderful, mysterious, life-affirming expression of joy. For even all of nature offers such joy-filled praise: the floods and the hills, the sea and all its creatures...all offer their joyful singing to God, to the One who created and creates, to the One who loved and loves, to the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Praise be!

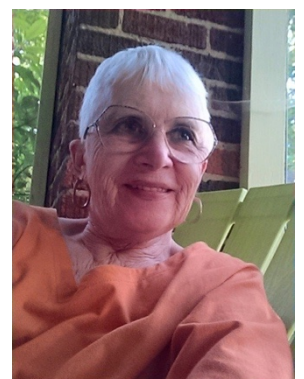
To Consider

- What about worship makes you most joy-filled?
- Is there a difference between happiness and joy? How would you describe this?

How does this psalm remind you of our oneness with other humans and all creation?

Holy Mystery, Creator of the Universe, we offer our songs of praise, our words of thanks, our hearts filled with the joy of knowing you and being recipients of your grace-filled love. Keep us ever mindful that, even in the midst of troubles, even in the midst of things we do not understand, you are present, upholding and empowering us, and for this we give you thanks. Amen and amen.

Hi, I’m Pastor Linda Faltin, a second-career and now-retired pastor. I am also mother of four and grandmother of nine. I have been a spiritual pilgrim for all of my life, writing my heart and journey into poetry for many years. An avid reader, I also love to travel and to hear the stories of people in many places. And I do love to sing!





Reading 17—Our “Blueprint” for the Christian Life

Psalm 100

Many Bible commentaries cite this psalm as the background of *The Doxology* (Praise God from whom all blessing flow) and the familiar hymn “All Creatures who on earth do dwell”. Some of my earliest memories of this psalm go back to the two-room elementary school of my childhood in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The practice back then was to read a

psalm each morning before the start of class. The teacher read the psalm in the younger grades, but students read it in grades 5 to 8. Since this psalm contained only five verses it was often chosen to be read, and I heard it on many mornings. I must admit too, that when it was my time to be the reader, I chose psalm 100!

What struck me as I studied this message again these many years later, is that this psalm is a summary of what our Christian life ought to be about: worship, singing, and offering thanks; accompanied on our journey by our Good Shepherd who loves and sustains us. Worship is central to our faith and we are encouraged to come forward singing. Those of us in the Lutheran tradition treasure the great hymns of our faith: “A Mighty Fortress;” “Children of the Heavenly Father;” “Gather Us In;” and many others. We do make a “joyful noise unto the Lord.”

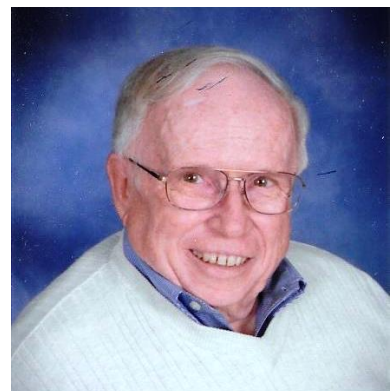
We come each week to worship, sing, hear the Word, give thanks, share in a meal, and then go forth. We have the great assurance that wherever we go and whatever valleys and deserts we may face on our life’s journey, He loves us and is with us helping to show the way—our “blueprint” for living.

To Consider

- Do you have any specific memories of this psalm?
- Was there a time in your life when these words really spoke to you?

Merciful God, we give you thanks for all the blessings in our lives and for the gift of song. We pray that you would continue to guide us in all that we do. Amen.

Bill Oelkers, (Mt. Pisgah, Hickory) grew up in Pennsylvania and was active in Lutheran Student ministry at Penn State where he majored in Accounting. He worked for the federal government in Washington D.C. for more than 35 years before retiring to Hickory with his late wife. A member of the Synod Campus Ministry Committee, and long-time church treasurer, he has one daughter and two college-aged granddaughters.





Reading 18—Praising Our Creative Creator Psalm 104

This psalm poignantly describes creation and most importantly points to God as the Artist behind the canvas and the Creator responsible for creation. There is an interesting Hebrew word used in this psalm (*yada*) which delicately mingles confession and praise as flowing from the same heart. This dynamic duo of praise and confession reminds us that this is a worship psalm and that God is the object of our attention. Confession comes when we know that the One that we pour our hearts out to is the One who is always

“faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Praise, particularly in this psalm of creation, is not just enjoying the quiet simplicity of a Walden Pond, as much as being utterly caught up in the hidden mystery and overwhelming grandeur of creation. To the psalmist it is impossible not to notice the signature of the Creator written all over creation.

As someone has said, “praise is simply letting off esteem.” God is the focus of our highest praise and blessing not because He needs it, but through our humble transparent confession and our awestruck wonder of creation, we are the ones who are fulfilled in our connection with Him. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “I think we delight to praise that which we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment, it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.” It is frustrating to discover a new book or a good joke and have no one to share it with. David is inviting us in this psalm to enjoy God as Lewis shares elsewhere to praise is to be, “drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves..., flows out from us incessantly in effortless and perfect expression.”

So, it is no wonder that this Psalm was written by a shepherd who, perhaps as he lay on his back at night under the brilliant luminous starlit sky, must have felt that he could reach out and touch one of God’s bright mysteries. This is the same shepherd who patiently tended to obstinate sheep and who relentlessly rescued many a runaway, who would know firsthand how praise was embedded in confession to a Good Shepherd who time and again rescued him.

David knew what true praise was as he wrote elsewhere, “Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless His Holy Name.” To bless is to surrender ourselves in abject wonder and in so doing to not only find ourselves but to find the heart of the Creator behind it all.

To Consider

- Remember when you were so overtaken and awestruck by creation that you could not help but in utter silence, song, or prayer, give thanks to the Creator.
- Remember when the act of confession before God was so freeing and exhilarating that you knew as David did, that our God is, “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” How is this similar to the speechless-beyond-expression feeling we can have as we are caught up in the wonder of God’s creation? Does it make sense that the Spirit at times needs to intercede for us when, at such moments, words utterly escape us?

Take a moment to simply be still and know that He is God. As closing prayer time watch on YouTube the song, “So will I” by Hillsong.

For 33 years Pastor Mike Stone has been blessed to serve thriving congregations of all sizes and ministry settings in Ohio, Florida and North Carolina. He currently resides in Hickory, NC with his wife Laura, serving as pastor of Mt. Pisgah Lutheran Church.





Reading 19—God’s Gift of Compassion Psalm 111

This psalm initially brings to mind the awesomeness of God and that God is worthy of praise. I picture people singing hymns during a worship service. I think of breathtaking mountains I have seen and what it feels like to take the time to really look at them. I remember standing by the ocean and enjoying the powerful and calming sound of the water. When I think about how beautiful the natural world is around me, I instinctively find myself feeling amazed by God and what God can do.

But after reading this psalm several times, I was also struck by how God cares for us. “He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant...He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever.” Other words demonstrate God’s care for us in this psalm: gracious, merciful, faithful, just, trustworthy. When I stop to think about the contrast between God and myself, I am even more amazed.

When I was a social worker, I met many people who didn’t think very highly of themselves. They felt that they were defined by their past, by actions they wish they hadn’t taken or events they wish hadn’t happened. Yet in looking at this psalm, it seems clear that God doesn’t take pleasure in judgment. God’s focus is on “his covenant” with us. God wants to be in relationship with us, no matter what—“he has commanded his covenant forever.” The psalm also says, “all his precepts are trustworthy” and are “to be performed with faithfulness and righteousness.” Yes, God’s rules exist, and they can help us live meaningful and healthy lives. But God also knows we are not perfect and “sent redemption to his people.”

While the word isn’t used in this psalm, God’s compassion seems evident. Since compassion is what God demonstrates, perhaps this is an example for us. In writing about self-compassion, researcher Dr. Kristen Neff writes, “...having compassion for yourself means that you honor and accept your humanness...You will make mistakes...The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.” The next time we find ourselves ready to criticize, maybe we can instead extend God’s gift of compassion to ourselves and those around us.

To Consider

- When have you felt God’s compassion in your life?
- How can you show compassion to yourself or someone in your life today?

Gracious God, thank you for the times that you show us compassion, especially when it’s not what we expect. Help us to recognize your gift of compassion and to share it with ourselves and those around us. Amen.

Kimberly Dunbar is the Outreach Ministry Coordinator at Good Shepherd, Brevard. She recently completed her third semester in the Masters of Religious Leadership Program through Lenoir-Rhyne University and Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. She is a Candidate for Minister of Word and Service through the NC Synod and feels very blessed to be the mother of 10-year-old Sophie.





Reading 20—Look up. Look down. Look all around... Psalm 121

This beloved psalm doesn't begin with a declaration about the Lord as Shepherd. Instead, with eyes raised towards places up high, the psalmist asks a question as old as humankind: from where will my help come?

How many times throughout history have eyes turned heavenward and posed that ancient question? There's no age requirement: it's as readily asked by kids as by adults. Nor is size a factor: it's equally at home in lone individuals and nations. Why does it endure?

Regardless of which way we turn, we encounter news steeped in human-forged acts of violence, tragedies wrought by natural forces; strife and discord rising from myriad us-them differences too many us-es or them-s deem irreconcilable, intolerable. On our home-fronts lurk illnesses and surgeries, financial struggles, employment stresses... Epochs pass and still we're under grim shadows of the same fears that haunted our forebears and our psalmist today.

Yet, even in the murkiness of the grim shadows, there is neither hesitation nor doubt in the voice that answers. Whether the voice is a priest's, a companion's, or the question-asker's inner dialogue, the helper's identity is the same: it's the Lord, the one who made heaven and earth.

The maker of all that has ever been, is, and will be, is your helpmate! The guardian of all of Israel is *your* guardian. The One who assures your footsteps and your pathway; who shades you from scorching sun and beguiling moon; who protects you from evil and holds closely your very soul.

The Lord, who fashioned and deemed 'good' everything around you, also fashioned you and deems you 'very good.' You're worthy of your Lord's love and guardianship and protection. What might that look like? How might you discern it?

For one young couple on the journey to being first-time parents, it looked like this: driving home after a great 26-week check-up, some water trickling from mom-to-be signaled something awry. A whirlwind ensued: hospitals, nurses, doctors, needles, ultrasounds, ambulance and crew, and tests, tests, tests. Mom, Dad, and babies are okay and at the hospital until the babies come. The Lord, their helper, sent aid in many forms in the whirlwind: hospitals, nurses, doctors, first-responders, researchers, scientists, praying folks, visitors.

I lift up my eyes: from where will my help come? Bringing my eyes down, looking around, I see the Lord all around me, especially in the everyday saints I meet.

To Consider

- When you reflect upon challenging times in your life, where do you see your Lord at work helping you?
- Who are your everyday saints? Do they know that's how you see them?

Lord Jesus, when I lift up my eyes and look for you, fill me with the psalmist's blessed assurance that you are right beside me, watching over me. Open my eyes and my heart to see everyone and everything you guide into my path each day to help me through times good and bad. Amen.

Pastor David Drysdale: I am privileged to serve the wonderful folks gathered as Zion, Hickory. I am also the personal chef and binge-watching wingman to my beloved wife Judy, bonus-Dad to seminarian son Joshua, and barely adequate masseuse and slave of our feline master, Indy. I have a rich interior life where I often have visions of shadow-casting teeny flies fresh from my tying vise to massive trout in the waters of my home state of Maine. In those visions I'm usually daydreaming of brewing stunning beers that make angels weep. Then the Batphone rings...





Reading 21—God’s Love Endures Forever

Psalm 136

Each October for the past several years, on Homecoming Sunday at Mt. Zion in Richfield, we have begun worship with a litany of praise based on this psalm, written by someone in the congregation. Beginning with “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; His love endures forever,”¹ the litany recounts the history of the congregation from its formation in

1895 and gives God the praise for the work of faithful members and pastors throughout the years. It even incorporates the ELCA tagline, **God’s Work. Our Hands.**

This psalm reminds me of a camp song. You remember the ones with the leader singing (or shouting) one phrase and everyone else singing a response, over and over again. It is full of repetition, but at the same time, it spans the entirety of salvation history from creation to the exodus from slavery in Egypt, through the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, right up to the entry into the Promised Land. It also reminds us that even now, God remembers each of us and rescues us from our foes.

In his scripture paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson gives us fresh phrases to sing in this psalm, beginning “Thank GOD!” and concluding each and every verse with “His love never quits.”²

Psalm 136 provides an opportunity for us to sing gratefully over and over again, in praise for all the wonderful and miraculous things that God has done, remembering the most important thing of all: no matter who oppresses us, no matter what we struggle with, no matter where we go, no matter what—God has rescued us and “his love never quits”!

To Consider

- When have you needed to be reminded over and over again of God’s steadfast love?
- How could you rewrite this psalm to tell the story of your life or that of your congregation?

Gracious and loving God, we sing your praise and give you thanks for your unfailing love and for all you have done, are doing, and will continue to do for us! Amen.

The Rev. Ruth Ann Sipe serves as pastor of Mt. Zion in Richfield and St. Stephen’s in Gold Hill. She is frequently reminded of God’s abundant love shared through the words and actions of others!

¹ Thanks to Kay Cosgrove for the “Litany of Praise,” written for Mt. Zion, Richfield!

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress, 1993, 728-729





Reading 22—A Cursing Psalm Psalm 137

The psalms are not God’s word to us. They are record of the psalmist’s words to God. Sometimes the words of the psalmist give voice to the darkest emotions of the human heart. In her book, *Getting Involved with God—Rediscovering the Old Testament*, Ellen F. Davis refers to these psalms “the cursing psalms” Perhaps the most notorious is Psalm 137.

The psalm begins innocently enough with a lament:

¹By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,
when we remembered you, O Zion.

But it ends with these disturbing words:

⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

In his book, *The Book of God: The Bible as Novel*, Walter Wangerin Jr. places this psalm in the context and form of a letter written by Ahikam, an exile in Babylon, to the prophet Jeremiah who is exiled in Egypt. In the letter Ahikam tells Jeremiah how angry and sad he is. He goes on to write about an incident that happened to him the day before.

As Ahikam was out walking, he heard men’s voices singing slowly in the distance. They were Jewish men, singing a weary melody. Following the song, he came into the presence of 10 men standing on the bank of a little canal singing. Then through the trees behind them came a group of Babylonian guards, all armed. The guards shouted in their own tongue, “Sing a happy song!” Immediately, the men stopped singing. Their captors yelled: “Get up and sing a cheerful song, something your mother sang when she was happy!” A soldier grabbed Ahikam and said, “You, Ahikam, have a good voice. Sing to your God.” Ahikam replied in Babylonian, “how can I sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” The soldier produced a small dagger and so Ahikam sang a song, in his native tongue, a tongue the soldiers did not understand:

“Daughter of Babylon, you destroyer! Blessed be the man who takes your children one by one, smiling infants, lads and lasses, and dashes their skulls against the stones!”

Such is the subversive nature of this psalm. A psalm sung by the powerless to the powerful, by the oppressed to their oppressor, in hopes that God will once again set them free.

To Consider

- How does this psalm affirm or disturb your understanding of prayer?
- How does this psalm make you feel?

God of courage and compassion, comfort the exiled and oppressed, strengthen the faith of your people, and bring us all to our true home, the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Phil Thorsen has been a pastor in the NC Synod since 2000 and currently serves at St. Mark’s, China Grove. He and his wife Meg reside in Salisbury. In his free time, he plays guitar in the Salisbury Swing Band, Rev It Up, or with anyone who is interested.





Reading 23—A God Who Gets It Psalm 139

Are you running? Are you hiding? GOD understands; He understands the human condition. “Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence?” Much of life is a mystery to us! We look for answers that will help us to see through the veil of confusion. Our understanding of God is limited, fragmented, hidden, *until* we come to know certain truths about Him. “You know when I sit down and when I rise, You know my thoughts...even the words that come from my mouth, before

they’re spoken, You know them altogether. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in Your book were written all my days, even before one of them was lived.” What unsearchable wisdom comes from the mind and presence of God’s Spirit! He gets it.

As a boy, I attended church regularly; curiously wondering about the beauty and order of creation, wondering where man fit in? Then, in adolescence, I started having dreams of running from God whose presence was manifested in the form of tornados. There were older persons in the dream, saints of God, who told me, “It’s alright, young man, God’s going to take care of everything, “to which I sarcastically replied, “Yeah, right.” While they sang His praise, I hid in the barn, behind their interlocking arms. When the twister began to shake the barn, I slid out from their protection and in the dust scrambled to my feet, so that I might hide again behind them. When the twister dropped the barn, it dropped it on the choir of praise worshippers, killing them all. In my confusion I asked, “Why them? They worshipped you; they loved you,” and in my confused state, I uttered, “they were ready to die.” That’s when I heard that still small voice. “They were ready to die...you’re not!” That was the day I stopped running *from* God and took measured steps *toward* God.

Even before you’ve finished this devotional, He knows what your next thought will be. We’re all sinners; called to be re-born; called to become ministers of His grace. Do we have the courage or the hope to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my anxious thoughts! And see if there be any hurtful way within me?” And, if there is, put me on the path to Christ Jesus, in whom we find hope, forgiveness, and love.

To Consider

- Look at the attributes of God as related to mankind. What do they tell you about God?
- Some form of the word “know” recurs throughout the passage. Why are we afraid to be known thoroughly?
- How can facing our shortcomings help us grow?

O GOD of hope, turn us from self-destructive ways to embrace the Light and Life that is in Christ. Help us not be fearful, but joyful, as we’re learning to put our trust in You, for Jesus’ sake. Amen. (ELW 842 “O Worship the King”)



Pastor Hugh Mzingo is a survivor of brain cancer (seventeen years) and recently retired after 41 years in ministry. He lives with his wife Janice in Hubert, NC; they have three children: Zach, Hannah, and Mark



Reading 24—The Five Ws Psalm 150

Like many of you, in elementary school, I learned that in order for a story or report to be complete, it had to answer the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why (and sometimes a sixth question, how, is also needed). My third-grade teacher drilled this concept into our heads and I'm sure she could have used Psalm 150 as a perfect example. In only six short verses, Psalm 150 tell us who, where, and how to praise the Lord, the reasons for the praise, and who or what should do the praising. God is to be praised in God's sanctuary and

in the mighty firmament; God is to be praised on earth and in the heavens. God can and should be praised everywhere. God's mighty acts and deeds make God praiseworthy. You and I, and everything that breathes—all living creatures—should praise God. Psalm 150 even gives us various examples of how to praise God.

When I reflect on this psalm, I'm reminded of the many places where I've worshiped and the various ways that I've praised God. The church where I worship most Sundays is a hexagonal building and at the top of each of the six walls are huge clear glass windows that extend another story high at their peak. Over the years during worship, I've watched rain pour, storms arrive, snowflakes fall, the leaves on the trees change colors and fall, birds fly and rest, and more. I've also worshiped and praised God around a campfire and in a sports arena with thousands of youth. I've stood in silence with the crowds in the Sistine Chapel and attended noon Lenten services at Westminster Abbey.

If your congregation has ever hosted a week of Agapé Day Camp or if your child or grandchild has been to day camp or a week of camp at Agapé+Kure Beach Ministries, you are probably familiar with one of the perennial favorite camp songs based on Psalm 150. It's a call and response song with a simple chorus of four words (Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen) and exaggerated motions and fun voices as we "Praise the Lord" with trumpet sound, lute and harp, crashing cymbals, a big bass drum, and all creation. And after many years of hosting day camps and watching my nephews and niece attend, the song immediately comes to mind when I read or hear the final four verses of Psalm 150. The camp song and the Psalm give us musical examples of how to praise the Lord.

To Consider

- Where are some of the places you have worshipped and praised God? Where do you find it easiest to praise God? Where do you find it difficult?
- What are some of your favorite ways to praise the Lord? Is it through music or art, by being in God's creation, or in the way you serve others? Or do you praise God in another way?

In all that we say and do, we praise you, O God, for your mighty acts and deeds. Amen.





Reading 25--Conclusion

I hope that, if not before, you have an appreciation now for the immense depth and breadth of this wonderfully earthy and human hymnbook of the ancient Israelites and for Christians as well. In most congregations that follow the lectionary, the Psalms hold such a revered place that it's the only book of the Bible from which we read/sing every single week.

The Psalms stir us to "make a joyful noise, all ye lands" (Ps. 100) and allow us to shake our fist at God, even as Jesus quoted Ps. 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Most of them fit into

the five scholarly categories of praise, wisdom, royal, thanksgiving, and lament (communal and individual), but each of them on its own is a beautiful work of poetry, emotion, and deep and authentic faith that is just as ready to question as it is to celebrate God's work in the world.

No wonder this book is at the heart of any serious spiritual journey and practice. These poems/hymns allow and invite us at once to be completely real while still seeking and growing in faith that spills over into joyous praise.

Most of my earliest and still most deeply ingrained scripture memory verses come from the Psalms and I suspect that I'm not alone. If I say among regularly-worshipping Christians or Jews, "I lift mine eyes to the hills..." there will be plenty who will respond "from whence cometh my help." (Ps. 121). If you say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," I can't help but at least think, "He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters..." (Ps. 23). Oh, and I'm not a big fan of the King James version, but it was the translation of my early childhood Psalm memorizations and to this day is my preferred translation, if for no other reason than it lifts up the poetry of these powerful verses.

We've just touched on a relative few Psalms in these 25 days of reading together, and I both challenge and encourage you as a spiritual exercise to read through and meditate on all the Psalms as a daily devotion. You'll be joining the vast majority of our great spiritual mothers and fathers who have done just that!

To Consider

- Have you noticed the Psalms as they appear in our lectionary take out most of the really vengeful and accusatory language? I know we don't to in worship pray that God would dash our enemies' babies against the rocks (Ps. 137), but would you find a more balanced presentation of Psalms helpful or troublesome?
- What Psalm have you committed—or might you like to commit—to memory? Why?

O God, we give you thanks that you love us in the totality of who we are—when we are vengeful, when we are feeling sorry for ourselves or without hope, when we are overflowing with awe and praise. We give you thanks for the Psalms that give voice to the breadth of our humanity, and we pray that we might continue to read, sing, and pray them to draw us closer to your people of old and to you. In the name of Christ we ask it. Amen.

Tim Smith has been bishop of the NC Synod for almost 4 years now! He is, unimaginably, back in Salisbury where he graduated from high school 41 years ago and then left for 37 years. He and wife Wendy have three adult children and four grandchildren who are their "hobbies" and their "joy."

