

LISTEN TO MY WORDS, HOLY ONE

*Rev Jim Allan, with Ray McGinnis
Camrose United Church
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Psalm 131 - Childlike trust in God
Psalm 133 - Love for one another
Psalm 150 - Chorus of praise
Matthew 13: 44-49 - Parables of hidden treasure

[Note: This follows a Friday/Saturday workshop on psalm writing conducted by Ray McGinnis.]

I'm really delighted that everybody is going to have a chance just to see you, Ray, and to hear you talk about this exciting work that you have been doing for a while, and your way of talking about psalms and psalm writing. The first thing that really strikes me is that you've discovered just how to enable people to write, and I think many of the people in the workshop were surprised at how easily things started flowing. And then we--including you and I--started getting more than surprised, indeed amazed, at what each other was saying. You know that experience of having something that just opens up the flow, when you're writing something and say "Oh, where did that come from?" And yet in a way it's not a surprise because this whole tradition of ours contains that richness about it.

You are going to start off by sharing a piece about writers' block. I think that's where we start off with people here thinking about going to a psalm-writing workshop and saying "Well, I can't write," because so many of us just feel blocked.

Ray: It's my experience time and time again as one who writes, that I have my own writer's block. Although I may have written many prayers, psalms, poems, and journal entries, I can come on a brand new day and think that I have absolutely nothing upstairs, and I can lose my own confidence. I can doubt myself. I can doubt that God is still at work in me, that somehow I've said it all. And then I have to simply move forward with trust, and start to write on that blank piece of paper.

One of the things I did in gathering together the final chapter of my book *Writing the Sacred* was to commission each of thirty people to write a new psalm or a new sacred poem. Some of the writers were Christian, some were Jewish, some were Muslim, and some were other contemporary poets in Canada and the United States. Several of the people I asked, some of whom were published, wrote back and said "I don't know if I can do this." Sometimes we think it's the people who have already written and been published who are the ones for whom it can just roll off the page. But that's not so. Any one of us can feel suddenly hesitant or intimidated. It doesn't stop. It's like stage fright. I received this very eloquent e-mail from one person who said "I'm really sorry but I just can't do this." I looked at all the things that were said in the e-mail, took the phrases and put them together, and sent the e-mail back as a psalm for writers' block. The person

wrote back and said “Can I use this?” I said “no,” but that person did send me something about a week later.

Here is what I had sent:

A Psalm for Writers’ Block.

*Who am I, Creator, to write a psalm to you?
The very idea intimidates me
and I feel paralysed.
I start to write it down,
and then I think about the others who are writing too.
I compare myself to them.
I judge myself.
Am I just a fraud?
Do I have nothing to say to you?
What good are my words?
They fall like withered leaves,
lifeless, forgotten.
How can I express to you my essence?
How can I tell you what I really want to convey,
without worrying about appearances,
without worrying what others might think?
Help me trust again that you
are at work in me as I begin to create.
Help me to let go of control of the outcome.
Let me do this imperfectly,
and move away from fear to love.¹*

And so even the experience itself of feeling totally blocked and at a loss for words can be the prompt to begin to write a psalm.

Jim: It has been my experience, Ray, that once one has done that, it’s like you say there are days when you sit down and feel like you’ve done it all, or written it all. And yet, because of the experience of that sense of something coming from deep within, you learn to trust that it is not you sitting down and making it up; rather, it is you opening yourself to something already there, always being replenished, and will never again run dry. And that’s why I chose the parable about the pearl and the treasure. It’s imagery that I think Jesus used to reflect that sense of something deep within us, something of the soul or of the unconscious, and that there are pearls--we talk about pearls of wisdom--and treasures that are buried within us, within every one of us. One of the most important ways of proclaiming the gospel may be to proclaim to people that in you, in every one of you, is that treasure and that pearl, and ready to flow. So I’m sure that’s kind of the base of the work that you do, because you come to a bunch of strangers and you sit down, and you know that it’s there.

Ray: It’s there. And one of the most important things to know is that it’s there for each one of us uniquely. When I sit down to write, or when you sit down to write, or when any one of us sits down to write, we say things that resemble each other around

¹ Ray MacGinnis, *Writing the Sacred*, “A Psalm-inspired path to appreciating and writing sacred poetry” (2005, Northstone) p. 138.

themes like thanksgiving, or lament, or confession, or wisdom, or vision. But each of us will say it in his or her own way. If I'm going to write a psalm, I'm not trying to imitate the way you write, and you're not trying to write a psalm to imitate what I would write, or to imitate what any of the 150 Psalms are. It's not about competing.

Jim: And I would add that I'm not writing a psalm to imitate what I've already written. In other words, something good came out once, and I'm asking how I can do another one that good? It's like coming to each one as something new and unique.

Ray: It would be like making a meal. It will be brand new even if the same recipe as before is used. One apple pie will not be exactly the same as another apple pie one might make.

Jim: Yes, or like someone else made. Another thing that was a valuable insight for me, Ray, was that as you introduced the whole workshop day you talked about the larger context of psalm writing. You spoke about its history and how Israel was not just doing psalm writing within themselves, but that it happened over a long period of many centuries. You mentioned that the people of Israel were mixing with Egyptian and Babylonian cultures, so that we find materials in those other cultures that are very similar to the Psalms. We realize, therefore, that the Psalms are one of the places where our spiritual tradition overlaps with other spiritual traditions and becomes, therefore, a channel or a potential channel for that connecting and celebrating and touching the common humanity that transcends lines of religious denomination. So tell us where your psalm--the one you had there about thanksgiving--has come from.

Ray: As I began to work on researching the Psalms and all the different connections, I discovered that the for the Hebrew people, when they were in captivity in Egypt, slavery was a very difficult thing. One perhaps enjoyable thread was that they encountered psalms written in the Egyptian culture, and so it was their first interaction with the psalm. And when they crossed into the promised land of milk and honey, the Canaanite people were writing psalms as well. And then, of course, the Hebrew people made their own psalms for Yahweh. Over time, in addition to the Jewish people having the psalms, the Christian people began to use psalms in worship, and then also in the Islamic faith the Muslims read our psalms. They have a book called The Psalms of the Household of Mohammed, so they are fluent in psalm writing. Some of the people whom I invited to write new psalms for my book were, therefore, Muslim. One person, Pamela Taylor, lives in Indianapolis, Indiana. She writes a psalm addressing it to Rahman, which is the Muslim name for compassionate and merciful:

Rahman

How can I doubt your mercy, my love?

Let me not forget

the flamingo sun.

Aflame in an evening sky

streaks gold, fuchsia, violet.

Let me not forget

the butternut moon,

a round and ancient parchment

*hung like a Chinese lantern
between elms.*

*Let me not forget
the new-born calf with eyes of pure soul,
the cobalt powder of a butterfly's wing,
the exalted exuberant growth of spring leaves,
the curl of an infant's finger, the dimples in her elbows,
the perfect symmetry of a single snowflake.*

Who then can doubt your mercy?²

And so this is a form of thanksgiving, giving thanks for all that God has done.

Jim: I was struck by how you describe the effect of thanksgiving, of lament, of all of those that actually have a therapeutic effect. We've heard a lot today in our world about just how empowering it is in our own lives just to spend some time every day, thinking about that for which we're thankful. And you talked about the research around people writing their laments, writing out whatever they are suffering, whatever they are hurting, whatever their agony is in their lives, and about what a difference that makes to one's own personal health. So let's move on to the psalm of lament that you wrote. This is an example of a psalmist stepping into a particular voice that may be a voice of part of who we are, or someone else. Just listen to how it shifts into this voice and gives power to that.

Ray: I wrote this in quoting different voices, and there are several different voices that show up in the psalm. As I was writing, travelling since the 17th of September, I came to one community in northern British Columbia where a funeral had taken place. I was told the story, so I wrote this psalm:

*O God, why must your people suffer?
Why do they not turn to you, I said, in their hour of need?
The woman was only 37.
When was it, God, she made her vow 'I will drink myself to death'?
Her mother cries 'Who will comfort me now'?
Dressed in black she sits alone.
None of her children will publicly mourn with her.
And God, what of the father, why is his heart like a stone?
He who would not come to the funeral, who said 'I'm busy; I've got work to do.'
Hold them, God, I say, abide with them in this difficult time of separation.*

Jim: I found myself so inspired and moved by the way you can step into the really difficult times of life, and can demonstrate that we can do it, trusting in God's grace to be there with us, and that as we write or read or contemplate even words like that there is a healing and an empowering that comes from lament itself.

Ray: The process of simply writing it down moves us from the place where we're walking around in our home or on the street with our thoughts. Sometimes what can

^{2 2} Ray MacGinnis, *Writing the Sacred*, "A Psalm-inspired path to appreciating and writing sacred poetry" (2005, Northstone) p. 183.

happen is that, if we just let those thoughts stay caged inside our minds and hearts, we overanalyze or worry. All of a sudden we're walking down the street and we're buying something in the grocery store, and there we are again on the fourth of August 1993 thinking about that hurt or being wronged, or something that happened, and we can't let it go. Writing somehow provides an opportunity to move our thoughts from a place inside ourselves out onto the page. We move from inhibition to self-expression, and we allow God to help transform the situation and help something new to emerge.

Jim: Another of the transformations that can happen that I think is so important for us today is the transformation out of judgement. I can imagine writing three or four psalms every evening watching the news because there is stuff that is just heart rending. There are also times where people all over the world are doing some stupid, awful things, and I have this tendency to get a little judgmental. And by writing, you step into the minds and hearts of these people--as if you have a way to do so and have done this several times. Yet there is a kind of sympathy there. What a profound expression of grace! And so, listen to this marvellous piece called "Bully's Lament."

Ray: This was written by Helen Carmichael Porter, a story teller who travels across Canada and goes to different high schools doing a one-person show talking about stories of bullying in the playground and the community. So she wrote this "Bully's Lament."

*Where were you, God, when I was an infant?
Why weren't you there to protect me?
Why didn't you stop them from harming me?
Why didn't you surround me with love?
Why didn't you stop the poison arrows of envy
that filled me with fear and stopped me from growing?
Day and night I defended myself from my loved ones.
Why did you not give me a refuge, a safe haven?*

*Now they assault me from within.
The bullies are in myself.
They assail me with taunts and jibes
and show no mercy.
They tell me I'm stupid, unfit,
I will never be loved,
I will never belong.*

*No matter what drug, drink, or food I take,
Or how much I sleep or work.
They find me when I'm alone and quiet.
No matter where I go, they come
and waste my energy.*

*They make me angry and mean.
I lash out at my partner, my kid.
I blow my horn at the intersection.
I'm rude when the secretary gives me the wrong papers.
I swallow my guilt
and make dinner.*

*I am tired, God, of fighting them.
I'm weary of this battle
with these ghosts of my past.
I am fatigued with defending myself.
I am exhausted from running away.
I am bored with living in this prison of fear.*

*I want to delight in your creation. I want to be as whole and free as a flower. I
want to soar like a bird. I want to dance like the wind. I want to take my place
in the world that you have made. I want to trust your universe.*

*I see the colour in the sunset.
I hear your voice in the wind.
I smell you in the fresh bread baking.
I touch you in the cat's fur.
I taste you in the glass of wine.*

*I am your creation, too.
You made me in your image.
You gave me free will
and a mind of my own.
I am your handiwork.*

*Shut down the bullies in me, God.
Close their mouths,
shut their eyes,
stop their ears.
Keep them from assaulting me.
Blow them away.*

*I rise from my couch now,
and praise you,
the author of all.
I celebrate myself.
Your love surrounds me
and lifts me up.
In you I am secure.³*

Jim: So it can take us out of our judgmental nature. But a psalm like that also, in a way, empathizes with someone who has some kind of deep longing within even if that longing never gets voiced clearly. Each one of us can identify with that in some respect. It's amazing how laments, even though they can be very individual and personal, inevitably touch something that is universal in us.

Ray: About forty or forty-five percent of the entire Book of Psalms are laments, and yet many of them, after listing all the height and depth and breadth of what the lament is about, turn a corner and give God praise or thanks, or express trust that God is still there.

^{3 3} Ray MacGinnis, *Writing the Sacred*, "A Psalm-inspired path to appreciating and writing sacred poetry" (2005, Northstone) p. 172.

Jim: So there's a spiritual movement that happens through that writing by opening ourselves to what we need, and through God's grace we receive something that takes us somewhere. The lament touches the height and depth--the greatest joys and the thanksgivings and the praise, as well as the depth--of human experience. And through it all we touch into the pearls of wisdom that are there within all of us--the wisdom that God has planted within us.

As our last psalm I want to share a piece that I wrote. This was a wonderful experience because the exercise Ray gave us was about repetition. The idea is to take one idea and repeat it and repeat it, and just kind of build it and see where it goes. It really was one of those marvellous experiences of "Where did that come from?" And so I think what happens is that you take an idea which then deepens, going deeper and deeper until it touches something that really is a heart of wisdom within us. So this is the one that I wrote:

Carry me to my beginning

*Holy One with no beginning,
Sacred One that knows no end:*

*In the breaking of the morning
carry me to my beginning.*

*As the trail rises from the forest,
carry me to my beginning.*

*In the birth of my beloved son,
carry me to my beginning.*

*In the passion of new love,
carry me to my beginning.*

*In each call to serve your people,
carry me to my beginning.*

*As the river carries my frail boat,
carry me to my beginning.*

*As autumn leaves begin to fall,
carry me to my beginning.*

*As my eyes close and this life ends,
carry me to my beginning.⁴*

Ray: Jim, as you wrote that psalm what did you discover about the pearls within?

Jim: Well, it's that sense of beginning. You think of it as something to which you return, and so the end then becomes the new beginning. That idea becomes the circle of eternal life so that the twist in the last line of the poem flips out of the limits of this life into the eternal, and it's just there. That was the discovery. The movement of life and the integration of nature's images in that movement, have the sense of being embraced by the arms of God and carried through life, not really to an end but always to a beginning.

⁴ James G. Allan, 2005.

This has been an exciting experience, and as I said to Ray, we don't really need to prepare very much because the material is endless. It would be really exciting to carry on and on but we can't. In a moment we're going to sing a hymn that is a rendition of probably the all-time most popular, moving, profound, of the psalms--the Twenty-Third Psalm. Say a little bit about this Psalm, Ray.

Ray: Speaking as a poet, one wonders why the Twenty-Third Psalm is so popular. A couple of things are happening in the Psalm itself, at least in the King James translation, where we're working with sounds: "The Lord is my shepherd." There we have the first big word in the sentence, "Lord," and the final word, "shepherd." And we hear it echo in the second syllable of the word "shepherd" with the word "Lord"--the "ord" and the "erd" sound very similar. So there's a resonance there already, drawing us closer--a remembering, a recalling--in "Lord" and "shepherd." And hear the vowel "e" singing throughout the line "He leads me beside still waters." It's pleasing to hear that. There are other things that happen in poetry. We might use the sound of the "ck" and say "bakery truckck," "basketball court," "cameraman," and have a "ck-ck-ck" sound going through the same line. So it's a poetic element to try and let a particular vowel or consonant sing through one line. It's very effective and it helps us remember what the words are.

Jim: So let's turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm, number 748 in our hymn books. I've chosen the tune Brother James' Air instead of the more well-known Crimond.

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