

1-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Barton, Sara (2011) "The Power of the Psalms in the Lives of Urban Teenagers," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss3/6>

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The Power of the Psalms in the Lives of Urban Teenagers

SARA BARTON

A book so small that it can fit in a back pocket has influenced my ministry more than perhaps all the ministry volumes on my bookshelves. Walter Brueggemann states in *Spirituality of the Psalms* that this book pays special mind to the pastoral use of the book of Psalms. He considers the interface between the flow of the psalms and the dynamics of common life and shows how a pastoral agenda may benefit from critical scholarship while being neither excessively popular nor obscurantist.¹

I have utilized Brueggemann's *Spirituality of the Psalms*, with its scheme of "orientation–disorientation–new orientation" in several settings including the following: a teaching series at my home congregation in Michigan, the Rochester Church of Christ, my courses in Biblical Literature and Christian Faith at Rochester College, campus ministry pastoral care at Rochester College, women's retreat themes in countless locations, lecture material at Pepperdine University's lecture series, teaching material with Ugandan Christians, and in personal relationships with friends going through divorce, sickness and loss, as well as moments of joy and awe. I have utilized Brueggemann's ideas in a safari setting in Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda, as I led a student group through the orientation evident in praising God for his creation in Psalm 104. I have turned to guidance for disorientation from Psalm 22 as I prayed with AIDS sufferers. And, after walking through divorce and disorientation with a friend, I have found new orientation with her in Psalm 73.

All these experiences were guided and made rich because of my exposure to Brueggemann's *Spirituality of the Psalms*. But I had no inkling what depth would come from my use of the language of seasons and life in a classroom setting with urban teenagers who came to me as dual-enrolled inner city high school students taking college level courses at Rochester College. By the time these students finish high school, they will have attained an associate's degree with Rochester. They are gifted students in at-risk environments, and their local school district, through dual-enrollment partnerships like the one at Rochester College, is investing in their futures. With Hmong, African American and Hispanic students, some of whom had never read the Biblical narrative before, I emphasized the psalms in our study of literary genres of the Bible. In doing so, I learned from these students how right Brueggemann is when he states that the psalms are profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and cover over the darkness we are called to enter.² With my teenage travelers, as I looked through a lens into the heart of Israel's dead poets, I found these young companions willing to bring their life experiences to the psalms with vivid imagination.

In my psalms-experience with urban teenagers, I first introduced them to an analogy: the psalms are like a card catalogue. Few teenagers today know what a card catalogue is since most libraries are computerized, but we eventually established an understanding of the function of a card catalogue. We looked at a picture of one of these erstwhile library fixtures. I then shared with the students that a friend of mine had rescued

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), ix.

2. *Ibid.*, xii.

an oak card catalogue from near demise as it had been discarded with the trash beside the road in her neighborhood. My friend didn't need another piece of furniture, but I was greatly intrigued by what I might do with it in my house. Eventually, I decided to sand it, paint it, add drawer bottoms to its twenty drawers, and place it in my kitchen to use as a place to keep my kitchen utensils. There's a drawer for forks, knives, spoons, pizza cutters and ice cream scoopers. I took this obsolete piece of furniture and modernized it for new purposes.

I then proceeded to discuss the book of Psalms in terms of a guide to worship and prayer that can be renovated for contemporary use in lives today. I emphasized that the psalms may speak in Pontiac, Michigan, as well as anywhere else in the world but that we must meet the challenge of ancient understanding of concepts such as *the pit*, *sanctuary of God*, *seedtime and harvest*, *rivers of Babylon*, *enthronement* and *retaliation against enemies*, and refashion them for a new time and place, while the primary function of the psalms in conversation with God may stay the same in our context. I encouraged them to encounter the moves and seasons of the book of Psalms, acknowledging that we will inherently encounter them in various ways. The card catalogue analogy appeared to challenge the students to find in the psalms the timeless human experiences, especially as those experiences overlap with the ones faced by urban teenagers in Michigan. So together, we began the process of allowing the psalms to speak in our local context.

The card catalogue analogy and experience stay true to the Jewish way of naming the experience of "more" in the text: *midrash*. *Midrash* calls readers to determine a sense for the time and place of the interpreter. It is this process that makes performance of the text possible. It combines recognition of the plain sense with discernment of an applied sense.³ With thoughtful urban teenagers, I found the process to elicit vulnerability for me as I allowed space for them to seek wisdom out of their own experiences. I encouraged them to allow the psalms to provide a performance that guided them to interpret for *their here and now*. I often fought against my desire to explain my own or scholars' insights into the psalms before the psalms had a chance to perform for the urban teenage audience. When I patiently waited for them to enter the "more" of scripture, I found that the psalms functioned as a reliable, theological, pastoral and liturgical resource for conversation with God about things that matter most, from generation to generation.⁴

Because of the unique dual-enrollment educational experience of welcoming students from an urban public high school into a Christian college setting, I had to balance my goals for the course carefully. The goal of the course is not to indoctrinate, baptize, or convince. The goal of the course is to survey biblical literature. I chose to consider my pastoral role in the group to be hospitality, a central aspect of the missional and pastoral life. I had an opportunity to welcome strangers into my scriptural home; and while I felt vulnerable as to what they would think of my home, I knew that a hospitable spirit would be central to a positive experience for us all. While I obviously do not own scripture exclusively, I do know my way around, I am comfortable, and I can embrace others enthusiastically as they enter the experience with me. As students became comfortable in a hospitable environment, they shared with depth and insight about much of life's intersection with the human experience of God, too much to include in this short paper. I have chosen, therefore, to share themes that surfaced in our conversations according to Bruggemann's categories of orientation, disorientation and new orientation.⁵

ORIENTATION

Bruggemann defines these songs as those that express a confident, serene development of faith issues. In these psalms, the community has decided to trust God. Many of the psalms give expression to that

3. David F. Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians, and Muslims," *Modern Theology* 22:3 (July 2006): 359.

4. Bruggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*. 1.

5. All student comments shared with permission.

happy settlement, to the reality that God is trustworthy and reliable, and to the decision to stake life on this particular God.⁶

When discussing the definition of these psalms, students related the following observations:

- These Psalms are about when you look at the world and know that something like this could not appear out of thin air, like a baby being born or spring coming after winter.
- These Psalms are about how wicked people (like people in gangs and pimps) get blessings and good people do not, but the good people are really better because they know what real blessings are.
- A time of orientation is when you see death but you still feel okay, like when I saw my brother's body after he was killed fighting in a gang and I thought about life and death, but I knew I would see him again. Someone with orientation knows there's more than the current chaos.
- I feel orientation when I think about the mistakes I've made in these sixteen years I've been breathing, but I know the life lessons have brought me only on a better path for my future.
- Psalm 65 is like when many of us were accepted into the early college program. This is a blessing for all of us from God. He wants to do great in our lives and in return for giving, we will give to others. The program is hard but we all would not have been picked to be in it if we didn't have what it takes to pass. Our futures are bright thanks to God.
- Psalm 145 is a chapter of orientation, and it relates to me because it reminds me of my mother because she is faithful to all her promises, like God. My mother opens her hands and satisfies her children in the household, like God. My mother is a caring person and is forgiving like God is. My mother is the only one who is working, so she provides for the household, I love my mother; she was always there for me whenever I rebel against her, forgiving me when I run back into her arms. She is like God.
- Psalm 15 is about good people who do what is right and blameless. My father who is a shamanist (where my culture says he was the chosen one to heal people from their sickness) always does good and never turns his back on those who need him most. He's a busy man, yet he tends to put everything aside and deal with the people who call him and tell him about their illnesses. He then makes an appointment when he's open to do what we Hmong call "ua neeg." His attempt by doing this, is to get their souls back from the dark side, and once he does, he usually heals their sickness. This would sometimes cost one hundred dollars, but my father does this without cost because he stated to me and my siblings that we are human beings who should love each other equally. No one should love one person more. We should all have respect for each other, because if we don't love each other or even have respect for one another, who are we going to love and respect? For this, he never expected people to pay him in return, but more than ever was glad to see that he healed someone.

DISORIENTATION

Brueggemann describes these psalms as those that address the incoherence, loss of balance and asymmetry of life. These bold psalms insist that experiences of disorder are proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing inappropriate. These psalms lead us into dangerous acknowledgement of how life really is. They lead us into the presence of God where everything is not polite or civil. They cause us to think unthinkable thoughts and utter unutterable words.⁷

As we discussed psalms of disorientation, students made the following comments:

- Disorientation is what it's like to be a teenager.
- Disorientation Psalms fit with money problems.

6. Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 16–24.

7. *Ibid.*, 25–45.

- Disorientation Psalms sound like drug addicts are talking.
- Disorientation is about being depressed.
- Disorientation reminds me of when I was raped.
- These Psalms are about when God abandons you because you have sinned.
- A condemned prisoner would say these words.
- This is what someone might say on the deathbed with AIDS.
- Disorientation Psalms are about suicide.
- Psalms of disorientation are like when your best friend is not speaking to you, but you know that she's still your best friend, so you wait for her to forgive you.
- Disorientation is like when we say, "give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death," and we want to commit suicide, but we hang on because somewhere inside, we believe in God.
- Psalm 74, a Psalm of disorientation relates to my life when students at school mocked me about being the smartest kid just because I am Asian. This is like the story of Jesus Christ when he was mocked but God eventually showed who he was. Even when I am mocked, God will show who I am, that I exist.
- Psalm 88 relates to my life because when I was in sixth grade, my family and I were dealt a horrible disaster; we lost our home to a fire. We've never done anything wrong in the past to have anything of this nature hit us, and when it did, it left us speechless. We had nothing but the clothes on our backs, and that was it. The only option we had for a roof over our heads that night was the car. That night was a night I will never forget because I saw my father cry for the first time. "Why? Out of all the people, why us?"
- Reading Psalm 74, I automatically think of my high school. I feel like we are forgotten by all. Our city is dwindling to nothing. Our schools are closing, our police office is being cleared out, and we have no money. We are even being threatened takeover by the state and are being divided where our city no longer exists.
- Psalm 86 in my words: Lord I reach out to you so take my hand, for my parents are stressing and money is scarce. Five children are in a house that cannot be called a home. I have nowhere to go emotionally or physically because I am lost without hope. The place I valued as a home was taken from us, a foreclosure. My situation is great, but my agony is greater.

NEW ORIENTATION

These psalms bear witness to the surprising gift of new life when none had been expected. The new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back. The psalmists know that we can never go home again. Rather, the speaker and the community are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable . . . Neither we nor the psalmist know how such newness happens. The only response is to tell, narrate, recite, testify, in amazement and gratitude.⁸

The following comments were made to show an understanding of the psalms of new orientation:

- These Psalms are like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon.
- These Psalms are like when I was so stressed because cheaters got away with cheating in school, but then I saw how their lives would turn out, and I regained control of myself.
- New Orientation is about when we are jealous of people who prosper in the suburbs while we are suffering in the city and it's all we can think about. Then, we realize there are different ways to prosper.
- New Orientation is like when God helps us overcome what bad has happened (like my mother in prison) and fills us with joy instead of sorrow.

8. Ibid., 46–57.

- New Orientation in my life was when I doubted I would pass Philosophy in college, but I MADE IT! I felt like an angel watched over me, and that God has faith in me.
- New Orientation Psalms look like this: It seems like bad people are on pedestals above the poor, but then you open your eyes and see God above all and how his eye is on the lowly people as if they are closer to him than the proud ones.
- Psalm 73 in my life: Waking up in the middle of the night, hearing screaming and hollering. That's my nightmare. As I climb up from the darkness of the stairs, I smell the scent of alcohol in the air. I would see my mother in tears and my siblings with an expression of fear among their faces. I was always afraid of these weekend nights, but all I could do is say, "Why God, Why me?" I would pray to God every night hoping that he would hear my cries. As I waited patiently for his response, I saw no progress. Weekend after weekend, this scene replayed. I was mad and enraged with the unfairness that I told God I did not know if he existed anymore. However, all that changed! Just when I almost lost my faith, my father stopped drinking, and I stopped being a witness of torment. My mother's tears dried up and my siblings' fear turned into smiles. I was thankful to God because he recognized his child.
- Psalm 30 is about my life: Because they wanted another daughter along with their five sons and one daughter, but they weren't sure of my gender, my parents were questioning if I was another son, they would abort me. My mother made an appointment with the doctor and wanted the operation to be done in a week, yet my aunt took action and told her not to abort me and to keep me if I was a boy or a girl. For this, I am a girl who came into the family. Even though it was heartbreaking to hear this story from the ones whom I love, as time went by, I let go of the pain and became thankful for having a wonderful and loving family. That's when I felt good after a bad time, and I believe in god.

Reading the Bible with urban teenagers caused me to reflect on whether I believe that the Bible speaks pastorally into the serious problems of our world and whether or not pastoral reading is confined to the church. My resulting sentiment may sound unimpressively simple, yet it seems necessary once in a while to remember that the interpretation of the Bible must be pastoral in some sense if it is to be useful. I know this: appreciation for the beauty of life as well as the anger inherent in life is vividly expressed as literature in the scriptures, and particularly in the psalms. As I read the ancient poems within my unique classroom, I found that when I welcomed my students into my home in scripture, the Bible was able to help them with their lives and enhance their human possibilities because the psalms give voice to the human experience of a holistic relationship with God, described so well by Brueggemann's three categories. The psalms came alive as they fostered the spiritual life of a teenager who, in orientation thanked God for giving him an educational opportunity he never dreamed he might have, or another who called out in disorientation to God when her family home was lost to foreclosure, or another young woman who described new orientation as she experienced healing after being raped. I began to see that if the psalms were to come alive at all, they must offer hope and direction for the daily struggles of an urban teenager's life as much as they must do so in Sunday's liturgy. The experience is a reminder that in order to respond to our world, we cannot do biblical interpretation without remembering for what world we engage the scriptures.⁹ The lesson in my experience is that the scriptures speak eloquently for themselves when I get out of the way and allow them to perform.

As I opened my mind and heart to the world for which I purport to engage the scriptures, I found that the scriptures themselves attest to a story of God's love and concern, not only for the people of Israel or the church, but for the whole creation. The Bible never compromises on the psalmist's confession in Psalm 24, that "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Reading with teenagers

9. Jorge Pixley, "Toward A Pastoral Reading of the Bible Not Confined to the Church," *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3-4 (2003): 579.

in the world to which the psalms belong only served to remind me that the scriptures offer pastoral care to all.

PSALM 23, REWRITTEN BY ONE OF MY STUDENTS:

The Lord is my shepherd someone once said,
 So why do I still worry when I go to bed?
 Even though it says I'll lie down in green pastures,
 Why is it sometimes hard to believe that he is my Master?
 He leads me beside still waters but my life has had storms,
 So I get really insecure when the rain clouds form.
 He leads in the right paths but sometimes they're hard to see,
 And other times going left just seems easier to me.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valleys,
 I know I shouldn't worry because Jesus has me.
 And I never really knew what a rod or staff was,
 But I guess that's not as important as knowing what either does.
 They comfort me I know and that's what I really need,
 Because sometimes I feel He planted a tree in me instead of a seed.
 This life can get rough, as most of us know,
 But Psalm 23 is sometimes the best place to go.
 And even when I'm afraid and not sure of everything,
 I open up to Psalms and read the songs David would sing.
 The rod and the staff were shepherd's tools,
 Used to guide his sheep back when they wandered as fools.
 I never have to worry because God is here,
 But when I do, I turn to verse four, which clears up my fear.
 I walk unafraid so I don't carry a weapon or knife,
 I know only goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.
 And when people worry about foreclosures and mortgages I never,
 Because I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever . . .

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