

Susan Briehl and the Psalms at Covenant Cluster Consultation

Overarching image: Message of the Psalms by Walter Brueggemann (WB)

Post Critical Work by WB – Take seriously previous critical work, but move beyond them.

Psalms have knit themselves into the bones of our culture – check out Soap Operas!

WB says the Psalms follow the arch of our lives – three steps.

Orientation – God is in his garden and all is right in the world, i.e. Psalm 104

Psalm 145 – table prayer, this is when life is good and balanced

Problem is that these psalms can be co-opted by powerful and privileged-praise music by those who have it all.

So, First Move of the Psalm is **Relinquishment**

Disorientation – Things are falling apart and we are lost – we are shaken and off our footing. Songs of Disarray.

Then, Second Move of the Psalms is **Surprise**.

Reorientation – Songs of surprise of new life! Moments of restoration and return, for example coming back from Exile or out of the wilderness. You can guess the lament behind it!

This is not a clean three-step process, but the movement of life to death to new life, which is the Christian life.

Jesus is the chief example of the one who has known disorientation for our sake and was reoriented for us in the resurrection.

Theology of the Cross is another way of saying this picture! We don't stay comfortable with the reoriented state – we make gods out of that, and need to be disorientated again.

Immigrants lived this when they came to US.

Psalm 133 – Verse 2, long sentence, almost anomanapea – sounds like oil running!
Oil is out of control. Messy. Luxurious/plenty. Lots of it. Abundance.
All three verbs are the same.

Is Aaron now in trouble? Oil on his vocational symbol! Probably not the intent of the psalm. Rather it is a metaphor for how good unity of God's people/clans is. Maybe it is what he will smell each time he robes up to do his priestly vocation.

Good in verse 1 and precious in verse 2 are the same Hebrew word.

Gatorade cooler over the coaches head ritual. Extreme situation, above and beyond normal.

Oil is costly! How else is it used in OT? Lamps – gives light; anointing of feet; medicinal; anointing of kings and priests; Messiah = anointed one; Baptism = anointing of the spirit and marked by oil;

Maybe this Psalm was used at a family gathering/tribal reunion (how about our Covenant Cluster Consultation each year) = abundance is gathered together. Maybe this Jewish clan had been split by the divide, but was now celebrating a marriage!

Aaron from the south and Herman in the north! Representatives of a people divided, Israel and Judah. Unity has to stretch across the political divide. Easy to miss this key part of the story of this Psalm. Is it evoking a future that is not yet present at time of Psalmist? Keeps this from slipping into “praise song drivel.” This is not a cocooning Psalm!

How is Dew different from oil? Morning freshness, new life; oil is work of human hands, dew is natural! Manna is like dew – from God.

Is this a song longing for unity once again between the split country and clans?

First centuries, in baptism, whole body oiled down! Couldn't help but think this is about my whole life. We are very careful not to get anything wet! Maybe we are missing something. Abundant signs of God's abundant mercy.

Psalms are experiential – taste, smell, touch – do this when you study psalms.

ELW 649 is a paraphrase of this psalm.

Session 2

Psalter has a number of psalms that recall the mighty acts of God. Purpose is to help people to remember both their history and how God has acted in the past. The God who has been merciful in the past is the God who walks into the future with us.

Exodus 1:6 is a scary verse – if you don't know your history, you do crazy things! It is frightening to be lead by those who don't have knowledge of what has gone before.

So, how will we be telling the stories of the faith in fresh and lively ways to the next generation? One way is through the Psalms.

Psalm 78

"I will begin with a story welling up from ancient depths..." NRSV says a parable. Think of power of old family stories that you want to share with a new member of the family. It bears the truth about your story. We shared several with Susan.

But more to it than that. The reason we tell stories is to form the next generation to trust in God! (verse 7) Key is to decide which stories to tell the children – the psalmist rejects whitewashed version.

So that the next generation can be equipped to tell the story to their children, some of whom have not even been born yet. (Verse 6.)

So that they should not be like their ancestors, stubborn, bitter, wavering, unfaithful!

When have we been the generation like the one in verse 8?

Verse 17 is the antiphon of Psalm 78! Gets repeated after stories of God's mercy. "yet they kept on sinning."

Verse 38 – the final "yet, but God" in compassion did not destroy them.

Odd ending, with David as the shepherd. All is now well. But we know that the story doesn't end with David. Suffering is yet to come. There is rot in the core of this shepherd David! More suffering to come, so people head back to the beginning of psalm 78 and start telling the next chapters of the story. When a king rises who knows not Joseph, or David, or.... tell of yet but we kept on sinning.... but yet God remains merciful.

What are the Biblical stories now that we need not forget at this moment in the ELCA? We are in disarray.

Psalm 78 verses 1-8 can be the job description of every parish educator.

Session #3 Susan Briehl *Disorientation*

Psalm 137 is most historically specific of the lament psalms = exile in Babylon.

Center of their known world is gone. Sacred history wrenched away from them. Whose are they now?

Can we privileged North Americans even dare to sing this? Maybe Catholics in Northern Ireland, maybe blacks in South Africa until apartheid ended? Maybe American Indians who were moved/displaced and put on reservations, and asked to do their Indian thing for the delight and entertainment of their captors.

How has Babylon taken over the sacred spaces of the world today?

WB says it is natural for people of faith, to have the ground shake beneath us, sometimes by enemies and sometimes by natural disasters (IE Haiti and earthquake). Sometimes because our own political systems place people in jeopardy.

This nation has been a Babylon for many! Think of slavery and people hauled to our shores, who when they arrived sat and wept and at the same time were put on display and told to sing for the entertainment their captors.

When are we the captor and when the captive?

When we are dislocated, our memory holds the promise of God. Do our children know the story enough to hold it in their memory?

End of Psalm 137 is brutal. Blessing those who murder children of our enemies!!!! Jesus forgave those who persecuted him...

Note that the singers of the psalm aren't actually the ones being blessed or doing the killing. They are simply saying that when God wreaks vengeance on those who abused the Israelites, they pronounce a blessing on those instruments of God in the future.

These psalms draw their power from the confidence that God is present in the midst of the evil of the world that is causing the dislocation. God does not stop the dislocation or disorientation – but God doesn't leave or flee from it or us. These psalms of lament help us to lean into God's presence.

"To what do these psalms ask us to die to, in order that in their singing we might once again trust the presence of the light in the deep, deep night time of our fears?" (Susan Briehl's own question when she uses psalms of dissent)

God insists that lament language is true speech. Bigger than just God being merciful and letting us lament to God so we feel better. God wants us to speak the truth to God. Which is what the Hebrew actually says in the last speech of God to the friends of Job. Should be translated "You haven't spoken the truth to me." Job has and did.

Remember on the cross, Jesus doesn't make up his own prayer. He digs back into the memory of his community and cries out the lament of his people – Psalm 22!

What, at this moment in our life together, are we relinquishing or is being wrenched away from us? To what are we being called to die?

Susan put a list on the board: idolatry of control; give up idea that we are God!; ELCA will maybe change or go away; silos torn down; finding wisdom to know what to keep and what to let go of; friends ripped away; civility in church and culture is gone; loss of role of church in wider culture – we have lost our voice and prominence; we've learned that the center of our life together never was Christ – which is why we are being torn apart by this vote on sexuality and this is a painful realization (exposed the false assumptions for what they are – idea that our works will make us right with God, therefore you owe me God and it also ensures that we'll demonize those whose lives don't match our morality); loss of calls/jobs; somebody will fix things for us – that somebody is us!; when the enemy is your dearest friend we lament differently; loss of Euro-centered Lutheranism in the midst of companion synods; loss of skill and appreciation of compromise; church as a safe place to lament; closing congregations because they are not “economically” viable; dreams and goals for the future are cut due to finances; families are very different now, and what does that mean when we talk of households as key faith transmitters; insist on pleasing everyone's needs in worship rather than celebrating the long history of why we do what we do and singing together (currently young people are asking for things older than the 60s – don't want our garage bands, want something better); loss of sense of a future we could get to – things are so volatile right now we don't know what the future holds – can't plan on what we can't foresee and it drives Americans crazy! 5-year strategic plans are out the window – can't even have a 5-month strategic plan; because of financial issues, pastors/teachers can't retire because of the pension bust – so young people can't move into their vocations because their parents aren't retiring!!!! (Loss of the right order of things!)

Susan Briehl session #4 *Mourning to Dancing*

Psalms of Orientation

Creation: 8;104;145;33

Torah: 119;1;15

Wisdom: 37;14;33

Wellbeing: 133;131

Psalms of Disorientation

Personal Lament: 13; 86; 35; 88; 109

Communal Laments: 74; 79; 137;

7 Penitentials: 6; 32; 102; 38; 130; 143; 51

Psalms of New Orientation

Thanksgiving: 30;40;138;34

Community Thanksgiving: 65;66;124

New Kingship Psalms: 114;29;96;47;93;97;98;99

Psalms of disorientation discussion

Story of black flies and climbing a mountain. I can't even breathe without swallowing a fly. I'm hemmed in. I'm surrounded. Pressed into the pit of despair.

The psalmist describes God's intervention as giving us room, space, air to breath etc.

Think of Israel, space matters. Lives are hemmed in and constricted by other world powers all the time other than David and Solomon!!!!

Right now the ELCA is trapped – no money! How might we be surprised by space and room and breath that comes not in the form we were expecting it? Constriction release!

Think Frank Lloyd Wright and the small entrances to his houses. Also darker. Living quarters are higher ceilings and open and light.

How can I praise you from Sheol? Do the dead praise God? The solution is to be raised up out of the pit into newness of life. That = resurrection.

So these psalms talk about new orientation as receiving new space and new life.

Restriction and Release and Burial and Lifting Up.

Image of God's face – which direction is his face turned. If it is towards us it is life. If it is turned away it is death. Look at me, O Lord. Psalm 139 it is both/and. I want a God that is with me, but I don't want a God that sees me. God you are looking at me too hard/too closely. Think of our children and their own feelings to us as parents.

New Orientation

Psalm 30

Look at the Verbs:

Verses 1-3: nonspecific situation. Speaker knows but we don't need to know that! Song is one of praise because God has drawn the speaker up, healed the speaker. There was a time before this when I was lamenting from the depths, but we don't need to know what it was. In Hebrew it is an uncommon word for cry out but a very common word for heal. Wonder why?

Verses 4-5: What is the invitation to the community? 1. Sing praise. 2. Give thanks. This is communal worship at its heart. One individual has been saved from the pit, and now in her joy and praise, the whole community is invited to join.

Are we missing new life because we are so focused on what is causing despair?

Verse 6: This is Orientation...I remember when I was in control and my enemies were not pressing in on me...I was sure I was going to be just fine, thank you. We can't imagine the disorientation that was just around the corner. Might this be a confession of sin of pride/idolatry/arrogance? Verse 6 and 12 use the same Hebrew word "for eternity" so even this word has the corrected sense of eternity by verse 12.

Story of the little girl who wandered off and suddenly realized she couldn't find her mommy at Walmart. She frantically looked and when she found her mommy, she said: "Mommy, mommy, why did you get lost?" Might this be at the heart of verse 7?

Verse 9 and 10 are in quotes – past actions.

Verse 11 and 12 – no quotes, so present time. Reversal has occurred. Re-orientated from wailing to singing. Better translation is "free, loose, unbind" rather than "take off or put off." And then placed in clothes of gladness = image of resurrection. This could be a great baptismal meditation.

Session 5 with Susan Briehl

Psalm 136 – designed to be sung without text. People just sing the same response each verse. Actually this is our basic response to all of life. “for his steadfast love endures together.” We can tell the whole truth of our lives – call a thing what it is – and still say the refrain.