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Inviting the Text to Direct the Service

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B9: Inviting the Text to Direct the Service

Shaped by a Psalm¹

When I first began preaching and my chosen text for a Sunday was a psalm, I would simply preach about the psalm at the prescribed section of the liturgy, seeing myself as the one who was called to explain and expound on the psalm as a piece of biblical text. Of course, liturgists and I would also include other elements in the litany that connected to the psalm's language or meaning, and we would search for a great song of response to "seal the deal," but the psalm itself remained intact as the preaching topic.

Over several years, however, as my understanding of the psalms and their use in the Hebrew worshiping community deepened, I became much more interested in having us experience the psalms, rather than just listening to a cognitive "lecture" on them in a service. Experiencing the psalms in worship was, after all, a large part of the original context of a psalm for God's ancient people. Since we too are God's people gathered in community to worship, how rich it is to have a psalm actually shape and direct our communal time of worship, instead of it being a presentation that we dissect together.

I began to take more careful note of the ways in which psalms were divided into parts, like dramatic acts or musical movements. As a preacher works through a text in preparation, these are often noted, but they then usually become preaching subsections or points within a sermon. I began, however, to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider how to let the psalm shape our whole time of worship, rather than fitting the psalm into our preaching slot. To maximize the impact, I decided to preach a psalm in its separate parts as separate acts of our worship gathering, letting the design and content of an individual psalm lead us through our communal worship as much as possible.

Psalms are very different in tone and tenor from each other, and so our services changed according to the type of psalm. A wisdom psalm asked for different responses in a worship service than did a psalm of lament or a psalm of praise. Some psalms contain multiple commands, and I wondered how we could not just listen to, but actually do some of those things, as, presumably, Israel might have done. Finally, I hoped that by creating a response to each movement of the psalm, God's Word might have a deeper resonance with people.

John Calvin on the psalms:

"There is no emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not represented as in a mirror.

Or rather the Holy Spirit has here brought to life
all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities,
in short all the distressing emotions
with which the minds of people can be agitated."²

¹ *Reformed Worship*, Issue 104, June 2012.

² John Calvin on the psalms, slight paraphrase, taken from Tremper Longman III, p.76.

Psalm 96

Thanksgiving Service: A Bouquet of Thanksgiving

- Welcome, opening songs
- Opening litany etc.

God Answers Prayer (1& 2)

Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.
You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.

- *Prayers of the People*

God Forgives (3 & 4)

When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.
Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

- *Prayer of Thanksgiving*
- *Service of Reconciliation*
- *Song of Praise*
- *Communion*

God rules! (5-8)

You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior,
the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas,
who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength,
who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the
nations. The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy.

- *Song: "Let All Things Now Living"*

God Blesses the Earth (9-13)

You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.

- *Joyful song of Response*
- *Offering as we give back to God*
- *While offering was being taken (after the basket passed them) people could come up front and participate in creating a Bouquet of Thanksgiving. There were two mikes set up at the front and after they had added their flower, people were invited to say briefly what they were thankful for.*
- *Song, Benediction, Closing song....*

Psalm 126 *A song of ascents.*

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Psalm 13 *For the director of music. A psalm of David.*

1 How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

3 Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

6 I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

Psalm 95

1 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

3 For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.

4 In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.

5 The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

6 Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

7 for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Today, if only you would hear his voice,

8 "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,

as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,

9 where your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

10 For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said,

'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.'

11 So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

Other Texts

This also works for other kinds of texts or special focus services. For example, 2017 is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Central to the Reformation are the “Five Solas”

- Scripture Alone (Sola Scriptura); Grace Alone (Sola Gratia); Christ Alone (Solus Christus); Faith Alone (Sola Fide); To God Alone Be the Glory (Soli Deo Gloria)

These could each be paired with a scripture and form one part of the service with an appropriate prayer/song/response to each one. The elements of the service then (confession and assurance, a creed, the offering, the prayers of the people, communion, songs, benediction, etc) would be thoughtfully woven together around these 5 elements to create a seamless service.

GRACE ALONE

Call to Confession: Romans 3:23 *...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Words of Assurance: Romans 3:24 *and all are justified freely by his **grace** through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Holy Living: 2 Timothy 1:9 *[God] saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time....*

SCRIPTURE ALONE

Prayer for Understanding in song: *Thy Word* Sing a New Creation # 86

Meditation on **2 Timothy 3:14-17** *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

FAITH ALONE

Meditation on **Ephesians 2:8,9** *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.*

CHRIST ALONE

John 14:6 *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me...."*

TO GOD ALONE BE THE GLORY

*Benediction

*Closing Song of Praise: *To God Be the Glory*
