

## Scripture: Praying the Psalms

The psalms are poetry. Meant to be song lyrics, we don't have the original music, and we're reading them in translation. Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. For example, the Hebrew poetry of the psalms includes words that appear nowhere else in the Bible. But they are poetry and poetry benefits from being read aloud.

"Metrical" psalms are psalms translated with a poetic/musical meter. They can be sung to standard hymn tunes. Our prayer book translation is not metrical, but you can find metrical psalms in the English musical tradition. Singing psalms is one way of praying them that perhaps hits close to the mark of how the original composers imagined them. Instead of singing psalms with a meter, there are a few methods of chanting psalms regardless of meter. There is a "reciting tone" that most of the verse is sung on, at the pace of regular speech, and then a fancy bit at the end of the verse, or at natural phrase breaks. A single voice/note is "plainchant" or "plainsong" and multiple voices (soprano, alto, etc.) becomes the "Anglican chant" often heard in Episcopal churches. But praying a psalm does not require singing! Speaking, or even silently reading, a psalm can also be a prayerful experience. The psalms contain the full range of human emotions and

### Some ideas for praying the psalms

- Reading the psalm "antiphonally" (one side of the room reads the odd verses, the other side reads the even verses) allows for both listening and speaking during prayer
- Pausing at the asterisk/half verse is an ancient monastic practice that allows for moments of meditation on the spoken words before moving onto the next line. A good pause length would be one breath or a couple of heartbeats.
- If a verse particularly strikes you: engage in a time of contemplation or lectio divina (see below)
- One of the common poetic devices in Biblical poetry is parallelism: the two lines in a verse correspond in meaning or form. If one line of a psalm is meaningful to you: how does the corresponding line deepen or expand your understanding?
- If a psalm feels unintelligible, try thinking about how the psalm uses "disorientation" and "reorientation" towards the divine. How does the psalm speak to an experience of the world and of the divine? How does the psalm shift your perspective or reorient you towards a new experience of God? (cf. Walter Brueggemann)

### Lectio Divina

"Lectio divina" is the Latin phrase for "divine/holy reading". It is a contemplative prayer practice where we focus on a scripture passage to focus our prayers. "Visio divina" is the same idea, but with a picture of a Bible passage instead of a written text.

#### *Steps of lectio divina (or visio divina, with an image)*

Read the scripture verses, or think about the picture. Do this slowly. This is prayer, not homework. Read through the verse, or concentrate on the picture, four times:

- 1st time: what is the story/picture about? Are there any words or details that jump out at you or call to you?
- 2nd time: focus on the words or details that called to you: what do you notice? What might God be telling you?
- 3rd time: what questions do you have for God? What do you want to say to God?
- 4th time: think quietly for a few moments: what might God be calling you to do?