

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“Lost in Translation: Psalms of the Hebrew Writings”**

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## **Lost in Translation: Psalms of the Hebrew Writings**

Happy National Poetry Month to you!

One of the greatest Unitarian Universalist ministers of the twentieth century, John Haynes Holmes, wrote, "...when I say 'God', it is poetry and not theology. Nothing that any theologian ever wrote about God has helped me much, but everything that the poets have written about flowers, and birds, and skies, and seas, and the saviors of the race, and God – whoever he may be – has at one time or another reached my soul! More and more, as I grow older, I live in the lovely thought of these seers and prophets. The theologians gather dust upon the shelves of my library, but the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears. I never seem so near truth as when I care not what I think or believe, but only that those matters of inner vision would live forever."

Today I want to lift up for you some of the greatest poets of all time, the psalm writers; the psalmists of the Hebrew Writings in the Bible. The psalms are not just poetry, they are songs – they were a hymnal, but we lost the music. Many have been put to new music in our more modern hymns and even popular songs, including everything we are singing today.

Poetry often loses something in the translation between languages, but I have to admit, this is not true for the psalms so much – they did not rhyme, and only vaguely had some rhythm, but mostly, they were poetry because of their stunning images, strong phrases evocative of deepest emotion, parallelisms that pull the verses together into a whole, and soul-filled meaning.

As I take you on a journey through the words of these poets, the psalmists, that have brought tears and joy, hope and faith to many people throughout the ages, I will

warn you that there are some problems of basic translation – we don't always know what they meant. But do not fear, I am not going to labor over these poem-songs, translating word by word, but give you the flavor of the psalms. I am using several translations today, some traditional, some ultra modern, like Stephen Mitchell's, and some from our own hymnal. They'll feel different from each other, some like an old comfortable T-shirt, other ones more like a Maya Angelou poem. Some translations make more sense to our lives, catching the eternal in these ancient words of wisdom.

However, there is one way that the psalms are in general “lost in translation” for many of us, and that is in their use of “God” and “the Lord” – words, concepts, that are rejected by some, and understood in many different ways by others. If these words are stumbling blocks for you, then think of them as place-savers, remembering what John Haynes Holmes said, that the word God itself is poetry – it is about reaching the soul and truth and inner vision. May the psalms open our hearts to the Holy, and enlarge our spirits.

I believe that when we read the words for and about the sacred by people who are removed in time from us by millennia, we may assume that they had a static, simplistic, even childish understanding of God, whereas we modern ones are so beyond that – so much more wise and educated and questioning. And maybe there's *some* truth to that, but I've long believed that the ancients also struggled to understand the holy, and at least some of them used words like God in a more metaphoric, mythic, and poetic way than we can know.

One amazing thing about the psalms is that they are filled with multiple understandings about God and about our relationship with the divine, including doubt and

anger and distrust, as well as praise, thanksgiving and love. The psalmists are trying to figure out how to live faithfully, in spite of all the pain and suffering and awful stuff we have to go through. And not just faithfully – the psalmists speak of how to live gratefully, joyfully, no matter what. The psalms are wonderful poetry for accompaniment on life's journeys. So let's explore this poetry, these sacred songs for the living of a good life.

First, where are the psalms? Right in the center of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: the middle, 'the heart'. They are part of several books collected loosely as the Hebrew Writings, all of which are poetry, wisdom writings, and together make up about 1/3 of the Hebrew Scriptures. (So much of the Bible is poetry – imagine that!) You might have heard that the psalms were written by King David, but actually they were written by many authors over hundreds of years, in different places, and David wrote some of them, and we don't know who wrote many of them. Traditionally, there are 150 psalms, although a 151<sup>st</sup> was in Greek translations all along and found more recently in Hebrew in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is the longest book in the Bible, and it is not that long – you could read it in 2 or 3 hours. The Psalms are the most quoted Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian Scriptures, and they are commonly referred to in literature, and well known by many. The psalms are among the most memorized poetry of all time, beloved through the centuries.

The language of the psalms is very real, without pretense. The psalms are true to life and can get quite rough. They take you where you are at, whether feeling abandoned, misused, betrayed, beset with problems, ashamed, or, grateful, joyful, righteous, hopeful, ... and they accompany you. To enter into the psalms is to no longer be alone, and to no

longer be in the same situation – they can alter your reality. You interact with the Holy, with God, with the depth of life, through the voice of the psalmist, and that can change the very circumstances of your life.

This is not unlike listening to the blues when you're sad, and feeling restored. When my brother died I was corresponding with a wonderful friend and amazing writer who sent me the most incredible letter with words that stood by me in my grief in a unique way, and he also suggested that I listen to Bessie Smith, the Queen of the Blues – that she had always rearranged his sadness. Well, I went straight out and bought a 2 CD Bessie Smith collection, but it turned out that listening to the blues did not work for me. Throughout my life, though, I have gone to the psalms in difficult times and they have led me out of the darkness, and into the light. In good times, the psalms have amplified my joy. Poetry, songs, the psalms – they all accompany you, they are their own memory bridges, they remind you of swelling hearts, heartbreaks, breakout moments, and how you always have made it through – they bring you through it all again and again.

Many psalms have quite familiar words, even if you've never cracked open a Bible – “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want...yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”. (Psalm 23) This psalm is a staple of funerals and memorial services because it is where those who grieve find themselves to be – wanting help, in the shadows, fearing and wanting not to fear, and longing for goodness and mercy and to know that someplace, sometime, they will dwell in peace, forever. The God part is there in a metaphor – God as the shepherd who cares for the sheep – not God as King or

Warrior, but as the one who camps out with you in the wilderness, keeping you safe.

You may not believe in God, but when you grieve, you do long to be cared for, to have accompaniment in the wilderness, and the psalms do this.

The psalms begin with the simple moral compass of Psalm 1: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, [sometimes you know you need to hear that] ... but their delight is in the law of the Lord...They are like trees planted by streams of water...” Plant yourself with an ethical center and this psalm says you will be happy and prosper, whereas, it says about the wicked that they “are like chaff that the wind drives away.”

Most of us think we are doing a fairly good job of being good, but *other* people aren't. They annoy us, they insult us, and sometimes they are enemies. The psalms do much to describe the enemies: “there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves.” (Ps 5:9) Even friends betray us: “It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me- I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.” (Ps 55: 12-13) Oh, betrayal – we've all felt it, and if you can't find a country song, or a pop one to name your pain, just look up Psalm 55. Sometimes it seems like everyone fails you and then you can turn to Psalm 53: “there is no one who does good, no not one.” (vs. 3)

The psalms are merciless when it comes to enemies – they say what folks sometimes feel, but would probably never voice out loud. From Psalm 28, “Repay them according to their work, and according to the evil of their deeds;” (v. 4) and in Psalm 35, “Let ruin come on them unawares. And let the net that they hid ensnare them; let them

fall in it – to their ruin.” (v.8) Most of the words about enemies are asking for justice – Jose Miranda writes, “the Psalter presents a struggle of the just against the unjust”, in his book *Communism in the Bible*. Sometimes, though, the psalmist is terribly vengeful. There is one psalm that goes way beyond acceptable and it is mostly censored – Psalm 137 asks for God to act totally despicably toward the Babylonians, and that part is left out of the song, “Rivers of Babylon” and of every church reading I’ve ever heard of it. Go look it up – the last verse of Psalm 137 – it is shameful, and yet it says truthfully that sometimes your pain is so great that you ‘*go there*’. The worst stuff that you can imagine is in the Holy book – well, that’s extreme accompaniment, isn’t it?

The psalms allow us to wallow a bit in the taste of bitter revenge, but they turn from this – they don’t let you stay in the mud. Often they acknowledge the enemies and simply ask for deliverance, or demand deliverance. “You have seen, O Lord; do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me! Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defense, for my cause, my God and my Lord!” (Ps 35: 22-23)

Most of the passages about enemies remind God of what’s expected, and of how God is being a disappointment: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps 13: 1-2) (Hyperbole was not a problem for the ancient psalmists.) And “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps 10: 1) So, it’s not just the enemy who is in trouble, or the psalmist, but God, Justice Personified, who has to be chastised and woken up.

The psalms express pain and suffering in a way that we often deny. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has written, “As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience.” By understanding the psalms, he explains that we are given “the honest recognition that there is an untamed darkness in our life that must be embraced – all of that is fundamental to the gift of new life.”

Before the end of the psalm, no matter how much desolation, anger and lament has been expressed, there is almost always a change. The psalmist rests assured again that God is going to be God and “Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.” (Ps 44: 26) “For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” (Ps 33: 4-5) The universe is ultimately good and just and loving. And therefore, “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” (Ps 22: 22) “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge” (Ps 18: 2) Words of comfort and assurance abound. Therefore, “O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;” (Ps 95: 1-2a). Often, the psalms begin with enemies, injustice and anger, and end in gratitude, praise and joy.

Sometimes the enemy is not only out there – it is also within. We feel despair, shame, betrayal, abandonment, and the psalms cry this forth. “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.” (Ps 6: 6) The psalm that Jesus is said to have quoted on the cross on Good Friday begins,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22: 1) and then later cries out, “But I am a worm and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.” (Ps 22: 6) (“I am a worm” – I love that – don’t we all just need to say that sometimes in our lives? I know I do.) Another psalm declares, “My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness;” (Ps 38:5). The movement is from despair and self-loathing to reconciliation and forgiveness, as in Psalm 51: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” (vss. 2-3) and later “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (vs. 10) Often the psalms begin with despair and abandonment and end in the spirit of Beloved Belonging.

Woven throughout the psalms is also the great sense of the wonder and sacredness of humanity: “you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.” (Ps 8: 5) “My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.” (Ps 49: 3) “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” (Ps 85: 10) “Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn!” (Ps 57: 8) The psalms are clear that we are awesome, and so is creation.

And God is described as awesome in some of the psalms. (66: 5 and 76: 7) (“Awesome” is not just a trendy word – it is in the Bible.) God is my light and “so whom shall I fear?” Psalm 27 asks. (vs. 1) God heals and restores in Psalm 30. (vss. 2,3) In Psalm 139, the one that reminds me of the children’s book, *The Runaway Bunny*, God is seen as caring and present, always coming to the person wherever you flee, even, it says,

“if I make my bed in Hell, you are there.” (Ps 139: 8) So, “joy comes with the morning” (Ps 30: 5) and “You have turned my mourning into dancing.” (Ps 30: 11)

Some of the words of the psalms are just so right. There are times when I know that I will “make a joyful noise”, like in Psalm 98. Now remember, this is a hymn, like we’d find in our gray hymnal, and it’s not saying to sing piously, but to go ahead and make a joyful noise – permission granted – you’re happy, excited, and it’s so good that it seems like the whole world is joyful with you, “the floods clap their hands;... the hills sing together for joy.” The psalms are filled with rejoicing.

I’d like to end with this translation of Psalm 16 by Stephen Mitchell:

Unnamable God, I feel you  
with me at every moment.  
You are my food, my drink,  
my sunlight, and the air I breathe.  
You are the ground I have built on  
and the beauty that rejoices my heart.  
I give thanks to you at all times  
for lifting me from my confusion,  
for teaching me in the dark  
and showing me the path of life.  
I have come to the center of the universe;  
I rest in your perfect love.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy  
and blessedness forever and ever.

As Psalm 106 finishes, “And let the people say, ‘Amen.’”