

Today we begin a five-week series on the Psalms, the hymnal of the Old Testament. We don't often talk about the psalms, we just sing them or use their words in the liturgy. But for five weeks we will focus on psalms as sacred texts.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has argued that the psalms can be understood as functioning within the life pattern of moving from "orientation" through "disorientation" and then to "new orientation." There's a psalm for every life experience; in fact, one pastoral counselor advises clients to read the psalms until they come to a psalm or a line in a psalm that resonates, and then to pray that psalm. There are psalms of lament and of praise, psalms that cry out for help and psalms that review how God has seen the writer through great difficulties. So if I understand Brueggemann correctly, he's saying that *we* move in our lives from orientation, or a kind of comfortable stasis, to disorientation, when we experience disruption and distress, to new orientation, in which we've found a way to incorporate the disruption. He's saying that the psalms reflect that human condition. In a way it's like the hymnal, where we look to find songs that speak to our situations.

Brueggemann's argument reminds me of the poet William Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience." The songs of innocence portray a kind of childlike purity that isn't aware of its danger from the sinful world. The songs of experience reflects the loss of childhood innocence by fear and inhibition, by social and political corruption, and by the manifold oppression of Church, state, and the ruling classes. The innocence is very appealing, sweet and lively—but the innocence is also partly ignorance, which makes the innocent one vulnerable.

So, for instance, the poem “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* includes imagery that symbolizes purity. Tom Dacre’s white hair that “curl’d like a lambs back” is shaved off, but the speaker comforts him by saying now the soot cannot spoil it. The mention of a lamb and the use of adjectives like “white” and “bright” connote holiness and virtue. Tom has a dream that an Angel frees all the chimney-sweeps from their toil and soot and takes them up to the clouds to play. The Angel tells Tom “if he’d be a good boy, / He’d have God for his father & never want joy”. The children awake comforted and happy, and go back to work, for they have learned “if all do their duty they need not fear harm”.

This naivety and childlike hope is another aspect of the sweeps’ innocence. The chimney-sweeps are vulnerable to disease, abuse, and death; clearly, doing their job is not the key to happiness. The speaker’s father sold him into the profession “while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep”. This cry is both his advertising his trade and an expression of his misery. In Tom’s dream the Angel frees them from “coffins of black,” an apt description of their fate. While innocence describes the purity of the boys’ souls and their faith in God, it also makes them blind to the dark truths of the world that will exploit them.

<https://hubpages.com/literature/William-Blake-on-Innocence-and-Experience>

There is a poignancy, maybe even a foreshadowing of misery, in the *Songs of Innocence*.

The *Songs of Experience* also includes a poem called “The Chimney Sweeper,” which has a much more grim tone. This chimney sweep has lost his innocence and his hope. His parents are responsible for clothing him “in the clothes of death” and

teaching him “to sing the notes of woe” (7-8). The sweep recognizes the oppressive forces in society, not just the parents, but “God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery” (11-12). He recognizes the complicity of kings and priests who claim that his misery is God’s will because they benefit from his work. One question that arises is whether the sweep himself is oppressed only by these external forces, or whether his own compliance with his situation also makes himself responsible.

The Songs of Innocence and Experience sort of correspond to Brueggemann’s schema of orientation and disorientation, but Blake doesn’t have a slot for new orientation. It’s not at all clear whether those who have entered the world of experience can ever find joy again. It’s as if innocence is *only* a state of ignorance, and once you know the rottenness and misery of the world, that’s all there is to know and you will forever live in darkness. But wisdom teaches us that although we cannot un-know the dark things we learn as we mature, we can hold that knowledge *and* be able to experience joy as well. This is what Parker Palmer calls “standing in the tragic gap.” We do know the way things are, but we also know the way things might be. We do not resign ourselves to the current evil, and we don’t give up and withdraw when we find the perfect to be too hard to achieve. Living in the tragic gap is new orientation.

So Psalm 100 is not innocent. It does not sugarcoat adversity. It’s a call to celebration for what is, which is our relationship to God. That relationship is a constant in orientation and disorientation; it’s maybe the gyroscope that gets us to new orientation time and time again. “Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made

us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” It doesn’t say everything is perfect and that we’ll always live trouble-free; it says that God made us and we belong to God. In the tragic gap between tragedy and the ideal, where we stand, beauty is evident. It’s possible to be curious, to wonder and explore. There is mystery and grace in this unsettling place, and so we are thankful.

The Sufi poet Rumi imagined Joseph—he of the many-colored coat—talking with a childhood friend about the time his brothers threw him in a well before selling him to slave traders. In the poem, the friend asks Joseph what it felt like in the well, and he says,

“Like the moon when it’s getting
smaller, yet knowing the fullness to
come. Like a seed pearl ground in the
mortar for medicine, that knows it will
now be the light of the human eye.

Like a wheat grain that breaks open in
the ground, then grows, then gets
harvested, then crushed in the mill for
flour, then baked, then crushed again
between teeth to become a person’s
deepest understanding.

Lost in Love, like songs the planters
sing the night after they sow the seed.”

And then a little later in the poem, Rumi says,

Don't turn your head. Keep looking at
the bandaged place your wound. That's where the
light enters you.

[That's where the light enters you.]

And don't believe for a moment
that you're healing yourself.

The Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all
generations. Let us pray:

God of forever, give us grateful hearts. Nurture in us awe at beauty and an abiding
curiosity, so that we always remember how the light gets in. Amen.