

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

THIRD MEETING: DECEMBER 20
PROPHECY AND SONG

CONFIRMATION 2009-2010

This is the second of our two meetings covering the Old Testament, and we will discuss prophecy and song. Our discussion of prophecy will necessitate the briefest of surveys of Biblical history, for prophecy develops out of particular political and cultural situations. The historical outline below is exceedingly general, but will have to suffice. In our discussion of song we will discuss the biblical book of Psalms. Though hardly the only occurrence of song in the Bible, Psalms is particularly prominent in scripture and our Anglican tradition.¹

Opening Prayer:

Come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.

For the Lord is a great God,
and a great king above all gods.
In his hand are the caverns of the earth,
and the heights of the hills are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands have molded the dry land.

Come let us bow down, and bend the knee,
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.
Oh that today you would hearken to his voice. *Amen.*

(Venite [Psalm 95:1–7], *Book of Common Prayer*)

¹ In the original calendar for this curriculum, we were also supposed to discuss the Wisdom texts of the Bible, such as Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. To try to cover that material here would simply overwhelm our brief time together. We may try to incorporate material from the wisdom literature later in the program.

PROPHECY

How would you define prophecy? What does it mean to say that someone is a prophet?

The most obvious answer is the prophecy involves foretelling the future; but there is much more to prophecy than that. Should anyone mention those other aspects of prophecy: speaking out against injustices, offering hope for the downtrodden, etc., those points should be particularly emphasized.

Pass out cards with the following prophetic verses written on them: Isaiah 2:2-3, Isaiah 35:10, Joel 2:28-29, Micah 5:2-4, Isaiah 40:4-5, Jeremiah 4:16-18, Micah 7:2-3, Amos 7:12-15, Hosea 4:2-3, Zephaniah 3:3-5.

Take your card with the verse(s) from one of the prophets, and look up that verse in the Bible. What is the prophet saying? If you were to define prophecy based on this verse, what would you say prophecy is? Write down that definition on the card.

Everyone should take turns, reading their verse out loud, and then sharing their definition of prophecy based on that verse.

Hopefully this exercise helped you realize that there is more to prophecy than just predicting the future. At its most basic level, one might say that Biblical prophecy is the method by which God communicates God's will in the political sphere. It is the froth of political and religious interaction.

Brief Overview of Israelite History

To understand all this, and even to understand an important part of who Christ is, it helps to have the briefest of overviews of Israelite history according to the Biblical record.

The Exodus, Conquest of Canaan, and Period of the Judges:

The Exodus was the Israelite's escape from the power of Pharaoh, a despotic king. Given the horrors they experienced living under a human king, it makes sense that God and Israel would agree that there should be no king in Israel. Instead, *God would rule over them directly*. This is reflected in the response of the judge Gideon when the people offered to make him king: "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:7, cf. also 1 Samuel 8:23).

To the extent we can know about Israelite government during this period, they appear to have been governed as loose tribal associations with occasional, temporary charismatic leaders called '*judges*.' The judges were political rulers ordained by God for a time--religious and political authorities were bound together.

Saul, David, and Solomon:

Eventually though, the Israelites wanted a king to rule over them, so that they would be “like the other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5, 20). The judge Samuel gravely warned them that if they had a king, bad things would happen: he would tax them oppressively, take their best animals, put their children in his armies, and, as Samuel summarizes, “you shall be his slaves.” Still the people insisted, and so the Lord, through Samuel, first chose Saul and then David as king.

Initially, under King *David*, the Israelite kingdom was strong and prosperous. But even then the dangers of kingship reared their head (David and Bathsheba!). Under *Solomon*, the kingdom reached the height of its political power, stretching from the Euphrates River in the north to Red Sea in the south. But the downsides of kingdom became even more apparent: Solomon had many wives from foreign countries and they convinced him to worship other gods (1 Kings 11:1–8), the most egregious of sins. He and his son Rehoboam also strongly taxed and oppressed the Israelite peoples living in the northern part of the kingdom (David and Solomon were from the southern part of the kingdom).

The Divided Monarchy:

Solomon was the last king to rule over all of Israel; after his death the kingdom divided into a Northern half and a Southern half. The Northern kingdom was known as *Israel*, and the southern kingdom as *Judah*. It is from this period that most of the prophetic books in the Bible come (as well as those prophets, like Elijah and Elisha who do not have their own books).

Selected Prophets in Judah	Selected Prophets in Israel
Obadiah	Elijah
Elijah	Elisha
Joel	Micaiah
Zechariah	Amos
Isaiah	Hosea
Micah	
Nahum	
Zephaniah	
Habakkuk	
Jeremiah	
Daniel	
Ezekiel	

The Place of the Prophets:

These prophets spoke out in the name of God against the religious failings and injustices of the monarchy. These included worshipping pagan Gods, making

alliances with other nations (to hedge their bets if God failed to come through), and oppressing the poor.

The prophets were not part of the king's court; they were outside figures through whom God spoke. Political power (the kingship) and religious authority (the prophets) had slowly separated from one another.² Notice how different this model is from that prevailing when the Israelites first left Egypt: in the original conception, God was the people's king; in the later model, the people's king often disobeyed God, who had to send the prophets to warn the king (who did not always listen).

The prophetic books contain a great deal of critique of unjust social structures and the oppression of the weak and innocent, and a good deal of warnings about what is going to happen if people don't shape up. People today sometimes refer to speaking out in this way as "speaking prophetically."

Our Role as Prophets:

From the prophets we learn that we cannot simply stand by while the will of God is replaced by the will of the powerful. We must speak out against the injustice; like the prophets, we may be called upon to speak prophetically. And, also like the prophets, we probably won't want to. It is hard, dangerous, work; and oftentimes goes entirely unappreciated.

Can you think of any issues about which you have felt a need to speak prophetically? Are there any issues today about which you feel a need to speak out? What do you think God's will is in those issues?

Messianic Prophecy:

The prophets did not only criticize; they also provided words of consolation and hope to God's people, who often suffered greatly. Eventually both kingdoms fell to foreign armies, the Northern kingdom of Israel several hundred years earlier than the Southern kingdom of Judah. The Israelites found themselves exiled in Babylon, far away from the land God had promised them and Temple in which they worshipped. These Israelites kept alive the hope of God's promise of the restoration of their kingdom, the promise of an anointed king who would bring God's peace to the people of Israel and to the world at large, the promise of the Messiah.

These are the passages we often think of as 'prophecy;' the parts that speak of the future. As Christians, we these passages speak about the coming of Christ. Next time,

² Our modern notion of separation of church and state is not really applicable here; religious practice, particularly its cultic dimension, remained under the control of the king. The prophets should be considered as God's form of external critique when the political or religious establishment got out of line.

when we talk about the New Testament accounts of Jesus, we will consider the ways in which Jesus fulfills these prophecies.

SONGS

Open with "Love Rescue Me" by U2 (written by Bono and Bob Dylan). Start around 2.48, mute by 3.26. Then play "Gangsta's Paradise" by Coolio. Mute by 0.26 - 0.28.

Praying the Psalms

If you've ever flipped through the Book of Common Prayer, you may have noticed that over 220 pages (22% of the entire book) are taken up by 'The Psalter,' which is the same as Psalms in your Bible. In the Anglican tradition, the Psalms have always had a special role. Anglican chant developed in large part as a way of singing the Psalms in the language of the people—English. We read or sing a Psalm, or at least a portion of one, at every worship service. A great many of our hymns and prayers are based upon Psalms. The shout of 'Alleluia' with which Christians acclaim God's great power and glory is the Latin form of the Hebrew 'Hallelujah', found throughout the Psalms. Quite simply, Psalms are everywhere in our Christian practice--often without our even being consciously aware of them.

And yet this is somewhat paradoxical, for many people find the Psalms extremely challenging as forms of prayer. Many of them seem distant, difficult, and, quite frankly, there are a lot of them; they have a tendency to run together.

To be totally honest, I have a hard time with the Psalms sometimes. I find their presentation in church mindnumbingly boring and hard to follow; I have a hard time keeping them straight in my head; and often find that they do not match my emotions when pray them.

What Are The Psalms

First and foremost, the Psalms are prayers to God. Many of them are traditionally ascribed to David, but by no means is the biblical book of Psalms the written work of a single person. The Psalter contains both individual and corporate prayers, many of which were composed for specific occasions, such as a royal wedding or a great victory in battle. The specific details of these occasions have been lost,³ and the Psalms were gradually collected together and put into the single book we have today.

³ There is at least one significant exception: Psalm 51, a well-known Psalm asking for forgiveness, preserves a note that it was composed by David after the prophet Nathan had confronted him about his affair with Bathsheba.

As a loose analogy, the Psalms functioned for ancient Israel like The Book of Common Prayer functions for us as Episcopalians—the Psalms comprise the original prayer book. They were likely sung or chanted at public services of worship, as well as being an important part of the spiritual practice of individual Jews.

Organization of the Psalms

The Psalms are subdivided into 5 “books”: I: 1–41; II: 42–72; III: 73–89; IV: 90–106; V: 107–150. These divisions are at the level of the organization of the Hebrew text, but there are other ways of organizing the Psalms. One way is to talk about various types of Psalms:

- Hymns of Praise
- Laments
- Royal Psalms
- Wisdom Psalms
- Liturgical Psalms
- Historical Psalms

Challenges

Distant:

One of the challenges of the Psalms can be their apparent distance from our everyday lives. There is a lot of language about God’s interaction with Israel; references to Egypt; and metaphors involving vineyards, wild beasts, clay pots and arrows. I don’t imagine that many of us have day-to-day interactions with vineyards, wild beasts, clay pots or arrows. It is unlikely that any of us have hewn a cistern.

To a certain extent this a challenge for most of the Bible; the Bible was written in an agricultural society far different than ours. But in the Psalms, perhaps, the challenge is particularly severe, as we’re not reading the Psalms but praying the Psalms.

Not feeling the way you do today:

There are 150 Psalms—so how do you pray them? Many people have a few favorite Psalms, ones they pray when feeling abandoned by God, when fearing for their life, when needing God’s strength, or when rejoicing.

But what about all those other Psalms—how do you pray them? How do you even know what’s in them! The most common way is to pray through all the Psalms in a set order. The ancient monks who used to live in the desert used to recite every Psalm every day! In monastic communities today they generally pray through all the Psalms in a one or two-week cycle. In The Book of Common Prayer, the Psalms can be recited with Morning and Evening Prayer, either in a one-month cycle or in a seven-week cycle. (You’ll be doing a portion of this in your devotional times over the next several weeks).

There are many wonderful things about incorporating the Psalms into your daily rhythm of prayer, but one of the downsides is that the Psalm might not match the

way you feel that day (this is also a downside you might notice on Sunday morning). You might be having a wonderful day, and the Psalm might be praying for vengeance on one's enemies.

Judgment and Cursing

C.S. Lewis, in his excellent and very helpful book on the Psalms, writes that the vindictive, cursing Psalms are the most problematic. "It is these that have made the Psalter largely a closed book to many modern church-goers. Vicars, not unnaturally, are afraid to set before their congregations poems so full of that passion to which Our Lord's teaching allows no quarter" (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 19).

Let's see an example. Read Psalm 143 together. What do you think of this Psalm?

The first 11 verses of the Psalm are quite beautiful and heartfelt. But notice what happens at v. 12; the Psalmist adds a brief coda to the end of this Psalm praying for the destruction of all his enemies. For another, perhaps the most egregious example, see Psalm 137:9.

What to do with all this?

The Psalms have proved an ever-flowing spring nourishing the Christian tradition, and have figured particularly prominently in the Anglican tradition. They contain some of the most beautiful and heartfelt expressions of God's love and the human being's love for God that have ever been written. They have taught thousands of years of Christians to pray, and they are, ultimately scripture. So, how can we approach the challenges outlined above?

Not read the offensive parts:

This is effectively what happens often on Sunday morning, and at certain places the lectionaries make room for certain passages to be left out. But is there anything else we can do with them besides just ignoring them?

*You can see this on pg. 948 of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Look at the Psalms assigned to *Evening Prayer for Friday of Week 7 of Epiphany*. It reads '141, 143:1-11(12).' That means v. 12, the one wishing for the destruction of all one's enemies, is optional.*

See the bad parts from another angle:

C.S. Lewis, I think, does a wonderful job of recognizing the core of truth deep within human cries for vengeance or destruction.

For we can still see, in the worst of their maledictions, how these old poets were, in a sense, near to God. Though hideously distorted by the human instrument, something of the Divine can be heard in these passages. Not, of course, that God looks upon their enemies as they do: He "desireth not the death of a sinner." But doubtless He has for the sin of those enemies just the implacable hostility which the poets express. Implacable? Yes, not to the sinner but to the sin. It will not be tolerated nor condoned, no treaty will be

made with it. That tooth must come out, that right hand must be amputated, if the man is to be saved. (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 32)

See the Psalms as Expressions of Real Human Emotion

One of the great qualities of the Psalter is that it presents a recognizable spectrum of human emotions. The Psalms do not all sound like they were written by saints, patiently bearing any burden with which they were afflicted and never thinking an ill thought about anyone. No, the Psalms sound like they were written by real people—they have real emotions: anger, pride, fear, jealousy, doubt, awe, wonder, joy, pain, and thankfulness. The Psalms teach us that when we pray we can pray as real people. There is no reason to feel like when we pray we have to silence all the parts of us that we know to be less than godly (there is not point anyway, God knows all those parts of us whether we admit to them in prayer or not).

Watch this clip from the Clint Eastwood movie *Pale Rider*. In this scene, Megan, whose family is being driven off their land by a corporate mining boss. She is burying her dog, knowing she or other members of her family may well be next.⁴ Can you imagine praying the Psalter like that? Can you imagine being that real with God?

CLOSING

Choose a confirmand to lead the closing prayer. She or he should ask for any particular prayers of joy, concern or thanksgiving and be sure to write them down to be inserted into the prayer below.

Closing Prayer (*from Psalm 130, 138*)

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear our voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. We especially ask you for (*group's concerns*). I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. We especially thank you for (*group's thanksgiving*). We pray these things in Christ's name, and pray the prayer he taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

⁴ For a more scholarly analysis of the role of Psalm 23 in contemporary culture, see Karl Jacobson, "Through the Pistol Smoke Dimly: Psalm 23 in Contemporary Film and Song," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited Jan 2009]. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=796>.