

FROM LAMENTATION TO JUBILATION (and in the in-between) Praying the Psalms in Daily Life

By JANE REDMONT

DULL' IS RARELY THE LOT of most people I know, whatever their age, occupation, religion or socio-economic class. Ennui does not stalk us in this end-of-millennium era so much as exhaustion, discouragement, hopelessness or despair – 'desolation' of various kinds in the Ignatian sense.¹ So too, in most of our lives, there is 'consolation', in daily rather than grand, rare manifestations: the Spirit is revealed in the sacredness of friendship, in communion with nature, in a word of forgiveness, a moment of quiet, or the intuitive certainty of a decision well lived. These two poles of desolation and consolation coexist in most of our lives, in more or less extreme forms, sometimes in the space of one day. The authors of the psalms knew this well. Theirs are not the words of people living on the surface of life, but of persons who have engaged life with passion, or upon whom life has visited both strife and bliss.

Desolation, consolation, one after the other, sometimes interwoven. And always, there is the in-between, neither best nor worst of times, in which we also work, commute, love, care for self and for others, and try to make time to pray. I speak of commuting advisedly. The drive, walk, or ride to work has become the main time and space of prayer for many today. I found this to be true of the American Catholic women I interviewed a decade ago for my book *Generous lives*. I read of the same phenomenon at the beginning of a book on praying the psalms, one of the best I have found, a contemporary reading by ten rabbis (women and men from the four major US Jewish denominational movements) of the ten 'healing psalms' of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov:²

On a Manhattan-bound rush-hour subway train in Brooklyn recently, two women – one, a 30-year-old Orthodox Jew, and the other, a 55-year-old African-American [Christian] – each clutched editions

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of the Book of Psalms and each uttered its ancient words, quietly, one in Hebrew and the other in English.

These women are on to something.³

The psalms are indeed for all ages. I began praying them in the pre-adolescent or early adolescent years, when both the world and my insides were becoming more complex. My family did not pray the psalms regularly, nor were they part of any worship I attended. There was a Bible at home, I picked it up, they were there. I read them, mostly, when my spirits were low. That is all I remember. They have stayed with me ever since.

I loved, still love, their dense humanity and their utter turn toward God, never one apart from the other. They must have reassured me, at the awkward age when I began to read them, that inner and outer turmoil were not my private lot but rather shared, common – *connected*. Even before I knew that the psalms are communal prayer in their very intimacy, I sensed that they linked me with other human beings in space and time. They brought me, in the same moment, face to face with the Holy One. The ‘you’ in the psalms always stands out, engages us, plunges us into relationship with God. We do not need to leave ourselves behind in this encounter. The marvel and relief of this truth moves commentators to alliteration. ‘The Psalter’, writes one, ‘teaches us that we may and must bring all of life to our prayer. Delight, dailiness and distress can all be brought to God.’⁴ Another notes the psalms’ reflection of the width and depth of human experience and emotion: ‘despair and delight, horror and hope, fatigue and faith, rejection and renewal’.⁵

I have prayed the psalms in the dark of night and early in the day, in my bed and in church, silently and aloud, alone and in community. These personal reflections on praying the psalms in times of both ‘despair and delight’ – and in the in-between – are merely one witness. All Christian commitment costs; how we sustain it in prayer varies. My ‘rule of no rule’, as a Christian who prays and as a spiritual director, is that there is no one way, no ‘right’ way to pray. So much depends on temperament, circumstance and time of life. How could the prayer schedule of a married working mother with three young children be the same as that of a retired celibate academic who does not do his own cooking or cleaning? Or the prayer of a twenty-year-old be similar to that of a fifty- or ninety-year-old? So too with praying the psalms. They are there for us in a wealth of modes, of which the Liturgy of the Hours is only one.

The psalms, writes Gabe Huck in the Foreword of the new *ICEL* translation of the Psalms,

are the river of the synagogue's prayer, of the church's prayer. Whatever else is said and done, it is said and done to the flowing of this river. Through the generations, the thanking, praising, cursing, and lamenting of the psalms have shaped the vocabulary of synagogue and church. This chanting is joined in the public times and echoed in the households and the private spaces. Daybreak and awakening are marked with psalms as are day's end and night's rest. For Christians, the singing of the church – in every sort of rhythm from Byzantine chanting to the spirituals to the chorales – has drawn abundantly from these psalms.⁶

Around the world, believers have read the psalms in private, or in groups of family and friends, grandmother to grandchild, suburban prayer group, ecclesial base community. In English-speaking countries the psalms have been associated for generations with the language and rhythms of the King James Version. I am one of the few English-speaking Christians I know who does not have at least one psalm memorized in those familiar cadences. Every Sunday, Catholics and other members of churches using the lectionary in worship speak or sing a psalm. We do not choose it. Psalms form the major part of the Liturgy of the Hours. We do not choose them. We thus pray psalms that do not necessarily correspond to our mood of the moment. The psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours speak to, and of, the One who is holy. They also place us, precisely because we pray words and emotions not our own, squarely in the broader Church, indeed within the sufferings and joys of all humanity – a reminder of where we are not, which is as important as a confirmation of where we are.

I have, as they say in the US, had it both ways: the Psalter set out for me, and the Psalter *ad hoc*. I have not recently prayed the Liturgy of the Hours; I used to. I do sing the Sunday psalms. In my private prayer I pick and choose. Yet even there – as in prepared worship – one can encounter tired routine. Often it is music that breathes life into the words again. The written word comes to life when chanted, the spoken word when sung. When I cannot sit still with a book, I can sway to the sound of a recording, or go to a community where the song will carry me and bring me back to the message of trust, struggle and hope.

The psalms took on another dimension for me earlier this year when, with prayer difficult and on the dry side, I decided to read them in another language. Not all people have a second language at their command, but if one does there is no refresher for prayer like using this other tongue. The words are suddenly new. I read the psalms in French this winter, out loud as is often my custom. Although I am fluent in

French, the change in language made me slow down. I paused over the words, savoured them, received them in a new way. I suspect this would have been true as well for the languages in which I am less fluent: I have read other passages from Scripture, as part of liturgies in which I have participated, or of study in which I have engaged, in Spanish and German, and again I have found that the change in language refreshes, even if one stumbles a bit. One can also read the psalms the way Americans read the poems of Pablo Neruda in a popular paperbound edition that has the Spanish on one side and the English on the other. My Spanish is inadequate to read Neruda in Spanish alone, without the English at my side, but I never read him in English alone if I can help it: the music of his heart's language is as eloquent as the meaning of the words. Setting psalms to new music, whether the music of chant and song or the music of another language – including the silent and eloquent music of sign language – will breathe spirit into them again. The change in music can even be as simple as a different English version from the one with which one usually prays.

Underlying all the psalms is trust, and in some there is magnificent rejoicing. But the fact remains: there are more laments in the Psalter than any other genre. Lament is perhaps the most useful of psalms, if one can dare use the word 'useful' to describe a prayer. 'Perhaps', Irene Nowell writes,

this indicates the real suffering of human life. The laments teach us to bring everything in our lives to God, even what seems not to be proper. The laments portray anger, hatred, sorrow, humiliation, sufferings, and death. God is not spared the range of human emotion. Nothing is too raw to be brought to prayer.

The laments teach us in fact what to do with these emotions: take them to God.⁷

'Have pity, for I am spent', Psalm 6 groans, and then wails, and cries, 'Heal me, hurt to the bone,/ wracked to the limit./ Lord, how long? How long?'⁸ (Ps 6: 3–4).

I have noticed more and more people speaking to me and to each other about the usefulness, the aid to life and prayer, of what many of us call in the vernacular 'the angry psalms' – the ones that used to embarrass us, that we glossed over, excised from our 'Bible of choice', dismissed as primitive, an early stage of faith, not a mature, *prayerful* prayer.

Rise up, Lord,
 rescue me, my God.
 Break their evil jaws! Smash their teeth!
 Favour your people, Lord,
 for the victory is yours.

(Ps 3: 8–9)

For me, praying the angry psalms was part of a renewed reliance on the Bible during a difficult time. They helped me to live with depression and to move through it.

Depression is the common cold of mental illness. Too often viewed as simply sadness or a bad case of ‘the blues’, sometimes even as a character disorder, it is a condition we now know to be biochemical as much as emotional. Sadness is a feeling; depression is a state. These blues do not go away on their own, and character has nothing to do with this. Depression, anxiety or panic conditions and other mood disorders affect millions of people. They are profoundly debilitating. They are also treatable.⁹

I fell prey to a major depression three years ago, following a sojourn in what I now call ‘the killer job’. The convergence of a stressful and eventually traumatic work situation and a moderate mood disorder I may well have had all my life left me first stricken with massive attacks of anxiety, then haunted by suicidal ideations. Depression is treatable: thanks to a combination of therapy and medication, a brief hospitalization, and the love and presence of my friends, I survived the crisis and was able to heal. By the grace of God the time of my acute illness was not one of spiritual dryness, though it was a walk ‘in the valley of the shadow of death’ (Ps 23). I knew I did not walk alone, though often I had to call upon the deepest of laments and the most desperate of petitions to remember.

The psalms are by no means the only prayer that has helped me in times of depression, whether mild or overwhelming, but they were, in the worst of times, both anchor and vessel in the storm. I clung to them, but also rode on or inside them, when I knew well how little strength I had to move ahead on my own.

In the early days of acute depression, I suffered from massive anxiety attacks, which I did not recognize at first as such: their symptoms often mimicked heart trouble. Dizziness, rapid heartbeat, lightheadedness and violent trembling took me to hospital emergency rooms wondering whether I was in danger of death. Only after lengthy medical tests did I know this was not the case, and only later did I learn that one of the major symptoms of panic attacks is the unshakable

feeling or fear that one is going to die. For nearly two months – both before and after I knew what they were – the attacks continued, coming and going at all hours of the day and night.

One night the panic attack came at bedtime, a terrible shaking and fear, causing me to tremble so hard that my steady evening companion, a large black and white cat named Alyosha, jumped off the bed from fright. I breathed as deeply as I could, calmed down enough to open the Bible I keep at the bedside and began reading psalms out loud. I read aloud to steady myself, to make the words more real and hold them in my mouth. At last I was able to cry – a release of deep sorrow at a time when I had lost the ability to weep and was painfully dry-eyed. The psalms gave words to my heart, and even to my body. ‘O Lord, heal me,’ says Psalm 6, ‘for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord – how long?’¹⁰ (Ps 6:2b–3). They may not have called them ‘anxiety disorders’ thirty centuries ago, but the symptoms sounded suspiciously familiar.

In the weeks before my hospitalization, I hung onto the psalms for dear life. As I wrestled with the aftermath of what I experienced as a harmful, even evil work situation, it helped that the psalms were blunt in their language about good and evil, faithfulness and struggle, enmity and vindication. I knew I had dealt with both individual and institutional evil in the killer job, but always as the polite, well-bred ‘good girl’. I had sought not to think ill of anyone nor to turn my anger into anything but talk. Depression is anger turned inward, they say, especially in women. The psalms gave me back my anger, took me beyond gentility into the wrath of God for the unjust. ‘Smite my enemies, Lord’, I would read aloud with tears rolling down my cheeks, and it felt healing. ‘O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me . . . But you, O God, are a shield around me . . . Deliver me, O my God!’ (Ps 3: 1, 3a, 7b). I rediscovered the low-number psalms, at the beginning of the book, and was amazed at the way they spoke of my own life. Gone were the discomfort and guilt so many of us have felt at the harsh tone of the text. ‘If you begin to feel suicidal,’ a physician friend advised me when I called her on one of the worst days, ‘think homicidal thoughts.’

Psalm 23 is a natural psalm to read, recite, remember or sing in such times. I know of countless men and women who have prayed it in difficult professional situations, during radiation treatments and chemotherapy, upon the death of a loved one, and in times of spiritual emptiness and bereavement. It is one of the psalms that speaks most to my heart today, particularly in one of its contemporary musical settings, but during the deep depression it was Psalm 121 that came into

my life and stayed with me for months, Long after my stay in hospital, I was still reading it each night before turning off the light. 'The One who watches Israel', says the Psalm, 'will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper . . . The Lord will keep you from all evil; – God will keep your life . . . from this time on and for evermore' (Ps 121: 4, 5a, 7, 8b).¹¹ I listened to the promise, night after night.

Later, I discovered that my best friend, living in another city and wrestling with his own inner turmoil, had been praying the same psalm, and that he too relied on its steadfastness. A year or so after my illness, when a local church leader committed suicide, I heard Psalm 121 read at his funeral. It acquires levels of meaning each time I hear or read it. Although it does not mention death by name – though the threat is there in other, unmistakable words – it is one of the psalms that both acknowledges death and keeps death at bay.

In the book on prayer which I am writing, after chapters on praying with depression and anger, I have placed one titled 'Daring to sing the Alleluia song'. It is often harder, it seems, for us to exult than for us to lament. Of course we call on God in times of trouble – at least when we are willing to admit to being in trouble! We may cry 'Help!' with great regularity but often neglect to say 'Thank you!' in times of abundance and joy. I wonder sometimes whether our fear of pain is matched only by our fear of joy. It can be hard for us to let go and celebrate – our old sorrows, our Puritan or Victorian heritage, our old or, alas, more recent religious education can get in the way. The psalms, however, will not let us sit forever inside our lament. Even the psalms of lamentation are bathed in trust. Trust, healing, victory are the final message of the psalms of lament. Even more, the psalms of thanksgiving challenge our prayer, challenge us to look around at creation and inside at our soul and express our jubilation.

Praise! Praise God with trumpet blasts,
with lute and harp.

Praise! Praise God with timbrel and dance, with strings and pipes.

Praise! Praise God with crashing cymbals,
with ringing cymbals.

All that is alive, praise. Praise the Lord,
Hallelujah!

(Ps 150: 3–6)¹²

Psalms can be expressions of joy, but they can also bring us into joy, or highlight the joy that had remained submerged or unspoken. During the composition of this essay, I immersed myself musically in the

psalms as an aid to writing. One day, on impulse, as I was setting out on a walking errand, I decided to take my portable tape-player with me and listen through the earphones to a recording of recent musical settings of the psalms¹³ – a tape I know almost by heart because I have sung so many of the psalms in church. I walked down the street where I live, quiet and full of slightly unkempt gardens bright with flowering trees. The air was soft and clear. I was happy to be alive. I had taught earlier in the day and was in the tired but elated state that for me follows a good class, where the students and I have been present to each other and to the subject matter, and we all know learning has taken place and we have left the classroom changed. Walking down the street, hearing the words of Psalm 98 and feeling the music reverberate inside my body, I entered, or was given, a kinesthetic experience of the creation around me. ‘All the ends of the earth have seen the power of God . . . Sing to the Lord a new song, for [God] has done wonderful deeds . . . Sing to the Lord with harp and song, with trumpet and with voice, singing your joy . . .’ As I admired the visual beauty around me with the music and words in my ears, creation and the work of human hands – shrubs, blossoms, architecture, sky – stood in greater relief, not less. It is true that in our culture we suffer from doing too much at once: reading while eating and watching television, talking on the telephone while stirring the soup; and more often than not I try to hold myself to one activity at a time, to pare down the sensory input rather than layer it on. This was a time when the multiplicity of messages converged with grace, the psalm in my ear teaching my eye to see.

I will never take being alive for granted again. I was predisposed to this outlook by my upbringing. My parents had fallen on hard times economically and professionally in the two years before my birth, in the ugliest years of the McCarthy era, and the difficulties continued – mostly unbeknownst to me – through my early childhood, but my brother and I never felt deprived. We were fortunate to have shelter and food, and our family time and leisure hours were filled with gifts that cost little or nothing and that our parents shared with an affection and wonder equal to ours: a walk by the Seine (we lived in Paris), a visit to a monument or a museum, and countless picnics in public parks. Hard times, sweet gifts. Once the depression and anxiety had come and (mostly) gone, the simplest pleasures were precious, even the fact of waking up without dread. I can concentrate again. I can write. I can sing. There was a time, briefly, when I could not. I am alive. There was a time when I lived in the shadow of death. ‘Taste and see the goodness of the Lord,’ the psalm’s antiphon sang in my ears during that walk on my street. ‘Look to me that you might be radiant with joy.’

NOTES

¹ Ignatius of Loyola's description of consolation and desolation are contained in the first set of rules for the discernment of spirits (those more appropriate for the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises). 'I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its creator and Lord . . . every movement of faith, hope and love and all interior joy . . . filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord. I call desolation what is entirely the opposite . . . darkness of soul, turmoil of Spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly . . .' (Exx 316–7).

² In the late eighteenth century, the Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Bratslav) designated ten of the 150 psalms as healing psalms, or, as he named them, the *Tikkun haklali*, the 'Complete Remedy'. For Rabbi Nachman, who viewed prayer as critical to the repair of the world, these ten psalms embodied the concentrated power of the entire Book of Psalms. He believed in their power to bring about true and complete healing of body and spirit. Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub (ed), *Healing of soul, healing of body: spiritual leaders unfold the strength and solace in psalms* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), Introduction, pp 17–25.

³ Weintraub, *Healing*, p 11.

⁴ Irene Nowell OSB, 'Praying the Psalms', Appendix, *The revised Psalms of the New American Bible* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1992), p 277.

⁵ Weintraub, *Healing*, p 17.

⁶ *The Psalter*, English translation of the *Liturgical Psalter*, International Committee on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), p viii.

⁷ Nowell, 'Praying', p 268.

⁸ ICEL translation.

⁹ This abbreviated description – though it will, I hope, be of help to readers – is not an adequate description of clinical depression and other mood disorders. For further reading, see *Depression is a treatable illness: a patient's guide* [pamphlet/booklet] (Rockville, Maryland: Department of Health and Human Services, Pub. No. AHCPR 93–0553, April 1993); Demetri Papolos MD and Janice Papolos, *Overcoming depression*, revised edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Colette Dowling, *You mean I don't have to feel this way? new help for depression, anxiety and addiction* (New York, Bantam Books, 1993); Dana Crowley Jack, *Silencing the self: women and depression* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991). These are only a few of the available books on depression. If you think you may be depressed, please seek help from a mental health professional.

¹⁰ *The New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989). This is the translation I read during my illness. The recently published ICEL translation, more poetic and contemporary and with largely gender-inclusive language, renders this passage as I quoted it earlier in this essay: 'Have pity, for I am spent;/ heal me, hurt to the bone,/ wracked to the limit./ Lord, how long? How long?'

¹¹ Adapted translation – partially NRSV, partially mine.

¹² ICEL translation.

¹³ Marty Haugen and David Haas, *Psalms for the church year: twenty-four seasonal psalms* (Chicago: IGA, 1994).