

# Practicing Prayer on Our Resurrection Walk

## Session 6 – Praying the Psalms

**The Psalter.** Approximately 40% of the Book of Common Prayer is comprised of the Psalter, or Book of Psalms. We know some of these psalms, or portions of them, from their use as responses to the Old Testament reading in the Eucharist, where they echo the theme of what has just been read. But because the Eucharist is a liturgy of praise and thanksgiving, the psalms used in it are mostly limited to those genres. When we actually turn to the full Psalter, we encounter the vast landscape of unfiltered human emotion, including anger, lament, calls for vengeance, cries of despair – as well as joy, consolation, thanksgiving, praise and much more. Traditionally the whole of the Psalter was prayed in Daily Morning and Evening Prayer in the course of a month. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer is set up for praying the psalms on either a monthly or seven-week cycle.

**History of the Psalter.** The 150 psalms in the Psalter are collections of songs (the meaning of the word psalm: for the psalms are meant to be sung) composed between 1000-500 BCE. Hebrew poetry generally follows a pattern in which a first line is echoed by a second line: in the Psalter these lines are separated by an asterisk at which a pause is to be observed. The English translation of the psalms in the Prayer Book has been up-dated countless times, but traces back to the 1535 translation by Miles Coverdale. The cadences of the Coverdale translation have an honored place in Anglican piety.

**Some things to note as we pray the psalms.** Whether or not we end up including psalms in our personal prayer routine, there is great value in experiencing what they offer. The Reformer John Calvin called them “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.” Praying them teaches us that true prayer is not about “neatening up” what is on our hearts, but exposing it in all its fullness and rawness to God. The psalms, writes the great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “in their boldness and passion, are out beyond our conventional liturgical and devotional practices.” The psalms remind us that prayer is dialectical: a passionate back and forth between us and God. A frequent pattern begins with the prayer smugly expressing a secure orientation in life, then having this security painfully disrupted, and finally having the disruption yielding to a surprising new reorientation – a deeper connection with God.

**The matter of vengeance.** If we are used to thinking of God in terms of niceness, the frequent “bloodiness” of the psalms, their cries for vengeance against enemies, can be disturbing. But they remind us that the struggle between good and evil, with the primitive desire for revenge, lies in all hearts. What helps in praying vengeance psalms is to note that, as with the Bible as a whole, vengeance is left to God’s justice, not to be taken into our own hands. In other words, we are to lay down our AK47s and take out our anger in appeals to God’s ultimate justice!