

***Preaching the Psalms to the Contemporary Community—  
Inviting the Listeners to Experience the Psalms.***

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**The Psalms contain rich resources for people, and preaching them in ways that are honest to the text, consistent with the genre and relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century worshipers should characterize our quest. Helping worshipers to “experience” a psalm represents a model of preaching that can be both accurate and engaging for listeners. This paper offers five examples of providing an experience for a psalm, and five general encouragements for the experiential communication of these timeless biblical treasures.**

Think about it. In them you find:

- Impassioned celebration of God for all His greatness and goodness;
- Heartfelt shame for sin that had been ignored too long;
- Anguished cries arising out of great personal pain;
- Fervent encouragements to acknowledge the Lord and His ways as right;
- Agitated calls for God to crush enemies who are on the attack;
- Emotional complaints that at times find resolution in recalling the Lord, but not always;
- Ecstatic praises for God in light of recent and miraculous deliverance.

The Psalms teem with real life situations, emotions and reactions. Life in the Lord includes a kaleidoscope of experiences, a cornucopia of pressures and releases which render our days anything but mundane. The Psalms speak to these kinds of issues, and they speak through very unique and textured channels. “As we read the Psalms, we are entering into the sanctuary, the place where God meets men and women in a special way. [T]he conversation between God and his people is direct, intense, intimate and, above all, honest” (Longman, 1988, pp.11-12).

The Psalms add such richness to believers’ lives that it would be hard to imagine the Scriptures without them. We go to them to gain a clearer image of God, to gain guidance on how to live life before God, to gain greater insight in how to relate to God. We go to them for encouragement, for solace, for celebration and challenge, not to mention pure enjoyment. Thus, they stand as a precious resource for preachers to use in communicating essential truths about life.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to plumb their depths, as Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann, 1984, p. 9) admits:

The Psalms are a strange literature to study. They appear to be straightforward and obvious. They are not obscure, technical, or complicated. Yet, when one leaves off study of them, one is aware that the unresolved fascination endures. Any comment upon them is inevitably partial and provisional.

As a result, many preachers commonly feel frustrated about their finished efforts when delivering a sermon on one of the Psalms. We want to be excited about preaching a psalm. We want to capture its fullness and communicate not only the psalm's *logos* but also its *pathos*. Unfortunately, all too often, standard sermonic forms do not seem to do justice to a psalm. Jeff Arthurs says it plainly: "You can see why some preachers avoid the psalms. Their intuition tells them that we murder when we dissect" (Arthurs, 2007, p. 39).

We find in a great majority of the times that common linear presentations—where cognitions comprise the majority of a preacher's focus and emotions are often highlighted only in passing, if mentioned at all—just do not achieve all the Psalms are intended to accomplish. When preachers are brutally honest after preaching a psalm, many admit that there was a definite flatness to the content they communicated.

And yet, a simple meandering of the mind while using a psalm to suggest the flow of thoughts does not seem to transfer well from one person to another. What is lost by not using sermon points and transitional sentences (intended to help listeners' thoughts move readily with the preacher's thoughts) all too often means the listener is unable to track smoothly with the speaker. This is especially true when many of the thoughts communicated are abstract versus concrete. Experience has shown that when listeners become confused by trying but failing to mentally track with the speaker, attentiveness wanes (Ehninger, et al, 1984, p.119).

Thus, questions arise. Are there sermon forms that will help the preacher capture as much of the richness of a psalm as possible, and aid in conveying that richness to listeners who haven't spent hours contemplating it? Can a preacher set aside sermon forms that work well for epistolary passages and take up instead forms more suited to poetry, and thereby not only help the listener to attend to all that is being said, but to embrace cognitively and emotionally the richness of the psalm as well? I think so.

Perhaps the Psalms were originally intended only to be read or heard or sung. Still, given that God intended for all of His revealed Word to stand as timeless truth, I conclude that it is fitting for preachers today to proclaim sermons based on the Psalms. And I believe that those proclamations can both communicate truths embedded in the Psalms and communicate as well the passions and rhetorical impulses by which those truths were delivered.

Further, I believe that God has given no specified form(s) for sermons which can and should be used regardless of the passage's genre or content. I agree with Haddon Robinson who declares: "I prefer to say that any form you can use that really communicates the idea and development of this text is perfectly legitimate" (Robinson, 2005, p. 325). Accordingly, I wish to submit some suggestions for sermonic forms appropriate to the Psalms that do not necessarily fit the standard understanding of "a sermon."

### *Seeking to Convey an Experience*

I think that the pathway to a meaningful proclamation of the Psalms is to be found in the word “experience.” Jeff Arthurs (Arthurs, 2006, Part One) says:

Poetry makes the abstract concrete by embodying the universal in the particular. Like narrative, poetry incarnates its ideas so that knowledge is obtained vicariously through the author’s experience. The subject matter of psalms is human experience, not propositions.

I propose that preachers who seek to communicate a psalm by means of a sermon should take intentional steps to help listeners experience that psalm to the greatest extent possible. As Brent Sandy says in the first chapter of a yet-to-be published volume: “If this is the way poetry works, we must learn to see the psalms, hear them, and feel them. We must read with imagination and put ourselves into the psalmists’ experiences” (Sandy and Rata, forthcoming, chapter 1). Good advice intended for those studying a psalm extends naturally to those receiving a sermon focused on a psalm. Listeners, I believe, will gain the most when the preacher can help them experience the psalm.

I use the word “experience” here to describe a situation where hearers not only observe a preaching event, where they not only hear words and ponder their intended meanings, where they not only see the preacher’s movements and gestures, but where they enter into a deeper encounter and interaction with stimuli suggested by the psalm.

To create an experience for listeners the preacher sometimes must offer them **intensive stimuli**, so that what they encounter during the sermon could be described as compelling, captivating, or gripping. Further, creating an experience includes communication which **evokes** not only cognitive reactions within listeners but also **emotional reactions**, with the understanding that the more emotional is the reaction, the more rich will be the experience. Additionally, creating an experience for listeners might well include that which is **multi-sensory**, so that listeners will not only hear words and vocal variety, as well as see the normal movements of a preacher, but they might also smell, feel, and taste portions of the psalm (even if only in their imaginations.) Finally, an experience might well involve **listener participation** of one kind or another.

### *Beginning with Prayer and Personal Reaction*

The passageway leading to a sermon that helps listeners experience the communicative event begins with preachers taking the time to experience the psalm themselves.\* Of course, they must study to gain insight into the purpose for and the context of the psalm (whenever possible), in order to approach an understanding of the meaning(s) intended by the author. Further, they must work to gain insight into word meanings, metaphor meanings, even structural meanings. However, beyond that, they should also seek to gain a sense of the emotional tone(s) of the psalm, of the movement that takes place within the psalm, of the authenticity and vulnerability

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\* Since this paper does not intend to focus on the interpretive process, my comments on this stage of the sermonic journey will be brief.

disclosed in the psalm. These pursuits call for preachers to spend time allowing the images presented in the psalm to stimulate their imaginations so that ideas and insights might expand and flow as the Spirit leads (McCann and Howell, 2001, p. 51). These pursuits also call for preachers to open themselves up to whatever feelings the psalm might evoke; to allow themselves to feel what the psalmist might have been feeling.

Seeking to experience the psalm in this way is a perfect time to appeal to the Lord in prayer that He might help in the process. Praying for wisdom is always wise. Why would it not also be wise to pray for Spirit-led imagination and Spirit-induced emotional responses as study and meditation and imagination proceed?

Having spent time in studying, in imagining, in emoting, in meditating and in praying, the time comes then for preachers to ponder how their experiencing of the psalm might be communicated in turn to listeners. I would suggest that anytime this process can occur as a result of a team effort, the richer will be the sermonic experience. Using a sermon team composed of differently gifted but spiritually unified individuals can only expand the possibilities for how the impact of the psalm might be conveyed more meaningfully to contemporary audiences. I have personally participated in sermon team events and can attest to the great benefit they are for homiletics who might be right-brain challenged.

### *Helping the Audience Experience a Psalm*

I would offer the following suggestions for helping participants in the sermonic event to experience the impact of a psalm.<sup>1</sup> Minimally developed examples will be offered in order to make the suggestions concrete.

#### ***Help participants experience the psalms through the delivery of a series of images suggested by the psalm.***

Suppose you want to communicate Psalm 139. Consider the possibility of communicating the words and feelings expressed by an individual (known to most of those present) who had recently undergone the kind of MRI where the individual's entire body is exceedingly confined. Use mental pictures and vibrant language to convey what it must have been like both to be hemmed in to the extreme and to be examined physically in intricate detail. Imagine, then, if such a procedure could be used to discern not merely the physical characteristics of the one under scrutiny but to disclose fully the person's thoughts, intentions, preferences and motives. Surely, anyone subjected to such an examination would be asking questions like, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

Then consider mental (and emotional) journeys to towering mountains that lead perilously and gaspingly up into the heavens, as well as descents into deep and dark caverns under the earth that can squeeze the heart and lungs with terror. Pictures delivered via PowerPoint® might well add

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the design of developing an experience for those present for the sermonic event, listeners will hereinafter be referred to as participants.

to the effect, as will concrete words that help participants feel the cold and hear the furious winds of the mountain peaks, and then smell the dank, stale air of the subterranean caverns.

Then consider a dialogue (accompanied by appropriate pictures or diagrams) that describes vividly the complexity of the human body (or even one small part of the human body, the eye for example) as a contemporary way to express what David is getting at in verses 13 and following.

The discourse on Psalm 139 could be closed by introducing an image of an individual lying on the MRI table, joyfully inviting, no requesting, that God would examine her inward self with great scrutiny, so that appropriate life-changes might be made and that she might more fully pursue the path of eternal life.

Images as teaching tools were powerful in David's day; they are no less powerful today. McCann and Howell assert, "You may trust that people sitting in the congregation are fascinated by images, given the explosion of symbolism in our media culture" (McCann and Howell, 2001, p. 53). Since there is biblical precedent provided, since it connects well with cultural influences and since the form of the psalm under consideration sets the example, it seems entirely appropriate to use a series of images suggested by the psalm to help participants experience impact of the psalm (Langley, 1997, Appendix A, p.1).

***Help participants experience the message of a psalm by viewing it as a personal testimony.***

Perhaps you would like to convey the message of Psalm 73. How many of us couldn't compose some genuine paragraphs that represent internal dialogues we have had as we've looked out on life, internal dialogues that mirror the black doubts that begin this psalm. Even if you didn't want to be that vulnerable (and that would be a pity), there are undoubtedly many in our churches who would be willing to let you represent their thoughts, which you could communicate with anonymity.

We should be grateful that our Holy Spirit led a man of God to pen words of such bold authenticity. We should assume that there are many in our pews (or padded chairs) who would be grateful if we preachers would be willing to allow a psalm like Psalm 73 to guide us to give a paralleling kind of testimony, accompanied by the truth that brings resolution to such thoughts.

We could also use a personal testimony to communicate the messages of Psalms 32 and 51. We would need to be very wise about disclosing the kind of sin that might precipitate such confessions and appeals for mercy but, given our age's desire for authenticity, this approach might accomplish more than simply conveying both the *logos* and the *pathos* of each of these psalms.

Consider one last example: Psalm 88. To present this as the testimony of a genuine Christian who is gripped by depression, to provide no immediate resolution (as the psalm does not), then to allow the participants to spend 10 minutes or so in group deliberations where they discuss their reactions to the psalm could be a very powerful time. Such methodology would be very much

out of the ordinary for many Sunday worship services, but it would indeed provide an opportunity to experience the psalm more personally (and more powerfully).

***Help participants experience the psalm through identifying with it.***

Think about Psalm 42, for example. You could ask participants to do their very best to be brutally honest, and then answer a question with full candor. Just how often in life do their souls really pant for the Lord the way a deer might pant for streams of water in a dry and arid land?

You're not seeking to be cynical. You just want them to be honest. Even after singing the well-known chorus, or a more contemporary chorus that might express the same sentiment, can they authentically admit that they deeply thirst for the Lord?

That kind of sincerity might well lead to an honest encounter with Psalm 42 and thereby help participants to experience the context and passion of the psalm more fully. Verses 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11 declare that the psalmist is tearful, downcast, mournful, and distressed. Perhaps it is in those realms of life when the believer is in the best position to thirst and pant after God.

Since pain and discouragement is common to all the participants, it might be profitable to seek to move them mentally (and hopefully emotionally) to recall such times in their lives. Or, better yet, perhaps Psalm 42 represents the kind of passage to preach when a congregation is experiencing a shared tragedy.

We don't normally think of using a sermon to move people into greater sadness or despondency, but isn't that the point? Many Christians will do their best to not let fellow believers see their sadness or despondency, but then don't they miss one of the possible blessings that can come from a season of life where great pain is being encountered? It is during those times, if we have a heart for God, when we can actually experience what it means to pant and thirst for God.

There is a need to be clear about this desire to help participants experience the psalm through identifying with it. We're talking about more than simply asking participants to ponder these thoughts. We're referring to giving participants permission to hurt and grieve and weep and be dejected, but with a purpose. The purpose is to enable participants to taste a bit of what it means to really need God in order to go on. Believers really do need God in order to live life to the fullest, but they don't always remember that until they hurt enough. Perhaps experiencing a sermon on Psalm 42 could help them remember.

***Help participants experience the psalm throughout the entire worship service.***

Think about taking the opportunity to communicate Psalm 2 where you wish to point participants toward the reality that the Lord has all authority, and is in control. Therefore, efforts to deny that authority and to defy His will are foolish and will ultimately fail. He will have His way.

It could be a powerful experience if you (and the others who plan your worship) dedicated the entire service to repeated reminders of these realities that would lead to a celebration of His kingship and to appropriate submission of His people. For example:

- Psalm 2 could be read at the outset by someone gifted in the dramatic reading of Scripture.
- Hymns and contemporary Christian songs that point to Him as King of kings and Lord of lords could be sung. Verbal promptings that key people's thoughts toward His dominion could be offered at strategic times before, during and after the songs as they are being sung.
- An individual gifted in story telling could speak of a historical time when a godless group (e.g., Nazis, Stalinists) was seeking to rise to power so that their malicious ideas and activities might prevail. But, the final chapter of the group's story proved that the movement failed utterly. The storyteller could then invite the participants to ponder and affirm that God really was present during those dark days, that He really does exercise authority over the movements of history when He deems the time to be right, and that no one or no group can defy Him longer than He chooses to allow them to do so.
- A member of the church body could then give a testimony of a time in his or her life where things seemed to be spiraling out of control but where, in the end, it became apparent that circumstances which seemed to be meant for evil, God used for good.
- At that time, a few more songs, hymns and spiritual songs could be sung which point toward the same theme—the Lord's authority and control over the circumstances of life.
- At the normal time for the sermon, Psalm 2 could be read again, this time from a different version of the Bible, read by a good reader but with the words of the text being projected for all to see and follow.
- Then, excerpts from the early chapters of Exodus could be read (with some appropriate observational comments inserted) where the text describes Pharaoh arrogantly resisting the Lord. Of course, in the end, Pharaoh lost—his firstborn son, his army and his life.
- Following that, an individual of the church body could describe how he or she fought against God's will for a season but how (after running into many roadblocks) finally yielded to God and His way.
- Psalm 2 could be read then again, this time by all the participants present. Then, with some illustrations being projected for all to see, the following passages could be read dramatically: Revelation 4, 5:11-14, Rev. 19:11-21.
- The "sermon time" could be closed with a brief challenge to recognize, remember and embrace the certainty that the Lord is in control, and that is very good, and it calls for fitting responses from His people.
- The service could then be closed with a pastoral prayer focusing on the Lord and the help the participants need from the Lord in order to live day by day in light of the clear message of Psalm 2.

The uniqueness of such a service by the very virtue of its distinctiveness would surely create a memorable event. But the desire goes beyond that. Hopefully, structuring an entire service designed to repeat in a variety of ways the core truths of Psalm 2 and their implications for

believers' lives could create an experience that could press upon participants with the kind of impact intended by that genre.

***Help participants experience the psalm by involving as many of the participants as possible.***

The kind of service proposed in the segment above involves participation by more than the average number of individuals who might play an active role in the worship service. What is being suggested in the category presently under focus offers the potential of encouraging even larger numbers of participants. Consider the following possible example.

You want to focus on Psalm 1 during the sermon time. Begin by calling the participants' attention to the psalm, and then read verses 1-2. At that point, choose an individual from among the participants to come up on the platform and sit in a stool placed in its center. Give him an opened Bible and ask him to act like he is reading it. Then ask four other individuals to come up on the platform. Give each of them a slip of paper with a statement printed on it. The first slip of paper will read: "With money you can get whatever you want in life!" The second will read: "The one who dies with the most stuff wins!" The third will read: "Do unto others before they can do unto you!" The final one will read: "You only go around once, so do whatever feels good!"

Position the four volunteers around the individual seated on the stool and ask each of them, in turn, to read the statement they are holding (with a clear, strong voice)! Following that, have another volunteer sit in the front row of the auditorium and with a microphone read the following passages (to simulate the impression that the individual sitting on the stool is reading from the Bible): 1 Tim. 6:9-10; Matt. 6:19-21; 1 Cor. 13:1-3; and Eph. 4:17-19. While the person in the front row is reading these Bible passages have the four surrounding the individual on the stool simultaneously read their printed statements, again with clear, strong voices.

When that has gone long enough to make the point, the preacher can then ask the participants in the audience to verbalize what is the meaning of the demonstration. If people are reluctant to answer out loud (because it is so out of the ordinary for people of that assembly to do so), the preacher could ask individuals directly to respond (ideally those who would not be greatly intimidated by being asked to answer such a question).

Once it has been established clearly that while the wicked of the world are "shouting" their beliefs at us, it's very hard to meditate meaningfully on the truths of the Scriptures, then the preacher could ask individuals of the audience to suggest the ways by which the wicked actually do shout at us in real life. More questions and answers along this line of thinking can be voiced as deemed appropriate by those planning the sermonic event.

I'm tempted to continue on, suggesting ways in which audience participants could be used to demonstrate the stability and longevity of those who embrace and live by the Lord's instructions versus the fragility and vulnerability of the wicked. But the preceding suggestions are probably sufficient to make the point.

Again, the point is not to entertain. Let that be clearly understood. The point is to offer an experience that is dramatic enough so that the main teachings of the psalm are imprinted in the long term memory of the participants. The Old Testament prophets understood the principle—powerful demonstrations allow those who are present to experience the point, and that creates impact! And I’ve been contending this all along—that is a main purpose of poetic genre.

### *Some General Encouragements When Preaching the Psalms*

#### *Use Word Pictures*

“Metaphor and simile offer many entries into the psyche, which is why they are considered the tools of the poets” (Denison, 2006, p. 52). The Psalms are filled with metaphors and similes, herein referred to collectively as word pictures. As the genre is characterized by the frequent use of word pictures, so it is appropriate that sermons focusing on psalms might be filled with word pictures. “The Psalms are both models and permits. We stand under their discipline, and we are authorized by their freedom” (McCann and Howell, 2001, p. 51). Therefore, do not be content with abstract explanations and applications. Use word pictures to put flesh on concepts and emotions into the insights found in the Psalms.

#### *Use Vibrant Language*

“We want the same rhetorical effects in our sermons that the psalms produce: imagination, identification, concretizing” (Arthurs, 2006, Part One). This calls for preachers to use specific versus general nouns and to use strong, interesting verbs versus weak, insipid verbs (for example, instead of “the man went down the street” describe “the grandfather who shuffled” or “the CEO who strutted”) (Arthurs, 2007, p.50). “The sermon’s words should also evoke bodily sensations as it seeks to invite a response of the whole person to the experience mediated by the psalm” (Langley, 1997, Appendix A, p.7).

#### *Highlight the Movements of the Psalm*

A meaningful and appropriate commitment when communicating a psalm is to “capture its inner dynamic,” (McCann and Howell, 2001, p. 69) that is, the movements to be found in the psalm. In some psalms there is movement from one setting to another (e.g., Psalm 23). In some psalms there is movement from one addressee to another (e.g., Psalm 27). In some psalms there is movement from one mood to another (e.g., Psalm 52). A faithful communicator of a psalm will be sensitive to the importance of these movements and include in the sermon indications of when they and why they are important.

### *Use Emotions*

“[Psalms are] intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking, and to stimulate a response on the part of the individual that goes beyond mere cognitive understanding of certain facts” (Fee and Stuart, 2003, p.207). If preachers are going to be true to the genre they are preaching, it is entirely appropriate for them to display the emotion being conveyed in the psalm (if indeed they can genuinely feel it during the sermon), or at least to describe it with sufficient vividness that listeners might not just hear about the emotion, but perhaps sense it themselves.

### *Use Music*

“The psalmists used music; why shouldn’t we?” (Arthurs, 2006, Part Two). Music carries a unique ability to influence people emotionally (filmmakers certainly understand this and use that knowledge with great sophistication). Especially when a spiritual song captures both the content and the emotion conveyed in a psalm, what a perfect time to stop and sing it together, or to allow a gifted singer to perform it.

### *Closing Encouragements*

Poetry is a medium that seeks to influence the human experience. For that reason, I believe that the preaching of the Psalms should seek to help listeners experience the intended message as fully as possible. The Psalms deserve to have preachers use their imaginations and gifts and skills as dramatically as circumstances allow in order to impact listeners in ways that approach the content and character of the psalm being proclaimed.

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