Opinion
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



Psalms function as a prism helping us to see the many colorful manifestations of the divine presence, sometimes hidden in the depths of our own lives. (Unsplash/Benoumechiara)



by Peter Gilmour

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 24, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When I was growing up in the early 1950s on the far South Side of the very Catholic city of Chicago, one of our neighbors scoffed at Lent.

"I always give up watermelon and large curd cottage cheese," he proclaimed every year as Lent rolled around. He was a faithful churchgoer, a member of the Holy Name Society and always attended the annual parish mission. But for him, Lent was a loser.

I, too, didn't sacrifice anything of significance for Lent, even though the sisters at St. Cajetan's School never failed to ask us what we were giving up for Lent. I knew better than to repeat my neighbor's mantra and tell the nuns it was watermelon and large curd cottage cheese I would be doing without in Lent. But I thought about it every year when the perennial giving up question was posed in religion class.

The nuns might have missed the mark on Lenten practices. Yet, these valiant women, sometimes minimally educated and often struggling with oversized classes back then, did teach generations of children, myself included, how to read, write and communicate, and laid the groundwork for us to think critically and reflectively as adults. So, I'll give them a pass on their Lenten penchant for doing without.

Today, I am fed spiritually by the poetry of belief much more than Lenten pieties. Right before Lent began several years ago, I received the book, *The Abbey Psalter*, a gift from Jim Wilbur, a now deceased friend. The texts of all 150 Psalms in this book are transcribed in striking calligraphy by one of the monks of the Abbey of the Genesee. Abbot John Eudes Bambeger writes a foreword contextualizing the Psalms in the prayer tradition of the church. Fine arts professor Meredith Parsons Lillich at Syracuse University writes an epilogue, "A Note on Cistercian Art," explaining some of the other artwork that appears in the book.

Advertisement

But it is the words of the Psalms themselves encapsulated in the beautiful calligraphic artistry that are the heart and soul of this book. The calligraphy helps

this reader slow down, consider each word and phrase, reflect on the profound insights presented in the poetry of the Psalms, and then relate it to today's complex and often troubled world. One doesn't necessarily need an artistic presentation of the Psalms to mine their meanings, but I have found this calligraphic text particularly helpful in elucidating and illuminating their wisdom.

This Lent, I plan to reread the Psalms. I still hear Psalm 12 reverberating in my consciousness: *truth has gone from the sons of men.*

> Falsehood they speak one to another,
>
> with lying lips, with a false heart.

In America today, we long for statesmen and women of integrity. The Psalm continues:

> May the Lord destroy all lying lips,
>
> the tongue that speaks high-sounding words,
>
> Those who say: "Our tongue is our strength;
>
> our lips are our own, who is our master?"

We have come through too many years now of political rhetoric filled with egotistical lies. Now, like the poet of Psalm 12, we look forward to its obliteration. We long for "words without alloy, silver from the furnace, seven times refined."

We also long for a planet that is living, not dying. Global warming caused by human folly threatens much of life we hold so dear. Psalm 148 reminds us with celebratory glee the vast treasures of the world that reflect God's glory.

> Praise the Lord from the earth,
>
> Sea creatures and all oceans,
>
> Fire and hail, snow and mist,

Stormy winds that obey his word;

All mountains and hills,

All fruit trees and cedars.,

Beasts, wild and tame, reptiles and birds on the wing;

… Let them praise the name of the Lord



Detail of manuscript leaf with King David in an initial I, from an early 15th-century North Italian Psalter, made of tempera, gold and ink on parchment (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This psalm, reflecting a creation-centered spirituality, vividly illuminates the revelatory nature of the natural world we are called to care for. John Kerry's appointment as special envoy for climate with cabinet level status holds promise to make this psalm come alive in our fragile planet.

The relevance of Psalms written, some perhaps set to musical accompaniment thousands of years ago, is a contemporary miracle. This poetic collection of human and divine insight provides us both with a reflection of and a prism for our lives today. Psalms function as a reflection of our own many and varied life experiences so similar to the faithful people of Yahweh. They also function as a prism helping us to see the many colorful manifestations of the divine presence, sometimes hidden in the depths of our own lives.

Maybe it's time to give up what you were planning to do without this Lent. Instead, let the Psalms reverberate through your experiences, illuminate your life, and come into greater contact with your soulness.

So much better than doing without watermelon and large curd cottage cheese.

This story appears in the **Soul Seeing for Lent** feature series. View the full series.