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"Kathleen Harmon has given us a look at the psalms that is simultaneously inspiring and informative. She shows us from several perspectives how the psalms shape who we are, both individually and communally, and we are led to realize how we need both lament and praise. Her book makes us want to steep ourselves in the spirituality of these prayer-poems and truly 'become the psalms.' The last chapter alone makes the book worth having."

Irene Nowell, OSB, Adjunct Professor of Theology,
St. John's University School of Theology

"In *Becoming the Psalms: A Spirituality of Singing and Praying the Psalms*, Kathleen Harmon, SNDdeN, artfully combines solid scriptural scholarship about the psalter with a theological-liturgical grounding, and pragmatic insight drawn from years of experience as a teacher and singing liturgical minister. The book delves deeply into the psalter in a number of ways, though always through a language that will be accessible to most readers. In particular, she is to be congratulated for taking on texts from the psalter that may be difficult for those who have to proclaim or hear them; for addressing the need to keep praying even when God seems silent; and—most importantly—for concluding with our need to live out these rich, ancient texts daily, as disciples. This volume will be a first-rate addition to the bookshelf of anyone involved in liturgical music ministry, scripture study, preaching, or spirituality."

Alan J. Hommerding
Senior Liturgy Publications Editor
World Library Publications

Becoming the Psalms

A Spirituality of Singing
and Praying the Psalms

Kathleen Harmon



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Introduction

Joseph Gelineau, the influential Scripture scholar, liturgist, and musician, once wrote that a person who prays the psalms “becomes for God one of God’s own psalms.”¹ His statement implies that a psalm has ontological import: it *effects* who we are, bringing us into being in some way. We can never exhaust the significance this insight carries for the community of the church who prays psalms on a daily basis. Why do we pray these texts composed so many years ago over the course of another faith tradition’s long history? What is the power these texts carry, even today for a church alive in another time, another culture, another historical situation? The answer, of course, is that Israel’s story is the church’s story. The psalms are a poetic, prayer-filled form of telling this story. Each time we tell it, each time we hear it, each time we sing it, we enter anew into its drama and recognize it as our own. We recognize that this is a story of faith arrived at only haltingly by a people who wrestled tirelessly and tiresomely with a God whose every intervention was directed toward their salvation. We enter the drama’s twists and turns, its painful self-confrontation and its hope-filled orientation, in order to surrender ourselves to its transforming process.

We all know the power of praying a particular psalm when caught up in a spiritual, psychological, or physical crisis. In the midst of grief, for example, praying Psalm 23 reassures us of God’s tender and attentive care for us, even in the face of death. When uncertain

¹ Joseph Gelineau, “The Concrete Forms of Common Prayer,” *Studia Liturgica* 10 (1974): 144.

of our personal value, praying Psalm 139 reinstates our sense of worth as one intimately known and knit together by God in our mother's womb. But the praying of the psalms also calls for a wider "reading." We must pray the psalms in the context of the whole story of Israel's faith journey, in the context of the church's faith journey, and in the context of the journey of all of humankind to salvation. As these "readings" interact, new meanings emerge within the psalms, new faith possibilities arise, and we tap into the extraordinary and limitless theological depths of these prayers.

This book, an edited and expanded collection of several of my Music Notes columns from *Liturgical Ministry*, delves into the phenomenon of what it means for us as the church to pray the psalms, why we must pray these texts, and who we become as we do so. My hope in sharing these essays is that readers will come to recognize what these texts, inspired by God and derived from human suffering and human joy, *do* to us when we pray them.

Whether our praying of a psalm is private or communal, spoken or sung, the psalm is not a neutral text, but a profoundly formative one. What is being formed? How is it being formed? What does it mean to *become* the psalm? Part of the answer lies in knowing that the psalms are the story of salvation told in the form of poetic prayers. Another part lies in recognizing that this story, these prayers are ours. A final part lies in letting the story of salvation mold our everyday thinking and living.

That is what this present book is about.

PART I

The Psalms, the Story of Salvation

The psalms are a poetic version of the story of salvation, a nutshell retelling of the entire content of the Scriptures. In the following chapters, we examine how the Hebrew Psalter was edited and structured to tell this story, to point where it leads, and to reveal the hills and valleys God's people would traverse as they moved along its path. We reflect on the role Psalm 1 plays in the Psalter, on its language and imagery, its relationship to Psalm 150, and its significance for us today as we choose to walk faithfully in the way of God.

The story of salvation is the narrative of God's ongoing work to bring humanity "to its senses," so to speak, to lead us to see who we truly are and how we are to act. It is the ongoing story of our slipping and sliding away from the truth, and God acting to nudge us back, sometimes gently, other times with a mighty kick. It is the story of a Love that chooses death so we might live. And it is finally the story of our choosing to love in that same way. When we pray the psalms, whether alone or with the church gathered for liturgy, we enter into the story of salvation as it is unfolding here and now, in this day and age, at this very moment. The story becomes ours, and we become its participants. Even more, we become its song.

The Story Told by the Psalms

The Content of the Psalms

The collection of 150 psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures is divided into five books (scholars speculate this division is deliberately patterned after the Pentateuch): Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–50. The concluding psalm of each book closes with some form of the acclamation “Blessed be God!” (variably rendered “Praise the Lord!” or “Alleluia!”).

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from all eternity and forever.
Amen. Amen. (Ps 41:14)¹

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wonderful deeds.
Blessed be [God’s] glorious name forever;
may all the earth be filled with the LORD’s glory.
Amen and amen. (Ps 72:18-19)

Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and amen! (Ps 89:53)
Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Let all the people say, Amen!
Hallelujah! (Ps 106:48)

¹ Psalm verses in this chapter are taken from the NAB, with adaptations by the author for inclusive language.

The conclusion of the fifth book is actually a series of five psalms (146–50), each beginning and ending with “Praise the Lord!” The grand finale, Psalm 150, is built completely around this shout of praise:

Hallelujah!

Praise God in his holy sanctuary,
 give praise in the mighty dome of heaven.
 Give praise for [God’s] mighty deeds,
 praise [God] for his great majesty.
 Give praise with blasts upon the horn,
 praise [God] with harp and lyre.
 Give praise with tambourines and dance,
 praise [God] with flutes and strings.
 Give praise with crashing cymbals,
 praise [God] with sounding cymbals.
 Let everything that has breath
 give praise to the LORD!
 Hallelujah!

The Hebrew Psalter is, then, a series of five books each ending with “Praise the Lord!,” with a concluding “chapter” of five psalms each framed by “Praise the Lord!,” and a grand finale of crescendoing Alleluias in Psalm 150. Between Psalm 1 and Psalms 146–50, the Psalter relates the entire story of salvation in all its ups and downs: lament, grief, revenge, anger, joy, restoration, thanksgiving, praise, sin, forgiveness, suffering, release, loss, defeat, victory, sorrow, danger, despair, hope. Every possible human experience, human emotion, human outcry is expressed, all of it moving ineluctably toward praise of the God who saves.

What the psalms do is express in terms of human experience the nature of the interaction between us and God. From the human side this is a continual movement between lament and praise, sin and forgiveness, suffering and release. From the divine side it is a story of steadfast love, enduring compassion, and rectifying justice. It is the ongoing story of our wailing to be saved and our rejoicing when we are, and of our discovery that God is at the bottom of both the wailing and the rejoicing.

This brings us to a second point about the nature of the psalms: they are at one and the same time human cries and divine word. All of Scripture is the word of God, but the psalms—alone of Scripture—are also human prayers. They are different from all other scriptural texts. Though they include historical references, they are not historical records; though they include a great deal of theology and teaching, they are not theological treatises; though they speak of the law and the consequences of following or not following it, they are not legal documents. The psalms are prayers, individual and communal.² They are human cries that are God's word, and in praying them we become who we are: the people molded by the story begun and completed by God.

The Psalms as Our Story

The more we pray the psalms, the more we discover that they are a communal diary with intimately personal footnotes. As Scripture scholar and musician Irene Nowell, OSB, once noted, "There's nothing in the psalms that's not in my own journal. The only difference is that in my journal there are names attached."

To pray the psalms with understanding, then, we must be aware of what our own story of salvation is. For example, there are ways that God has acted in us to change fear into freedom, coldness into warmth, sin into reconciliation. There are ways that God has acted to nudge us from doubt to deeper faith, from defensiveness to openness, from hesitation to willingness to run risks for the kingdom. There are ways that God has transformed our interpersonal conflicts into experiences of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness. There are ways that God has moved us from isolation and self-centeredness to a sense of community with others—with

²"The key to using psalms is to remember that they are first person speech to God. . . . The most frequent misuse of the Psalms is to treat their secondary uses—as history, theology, wisdom—as primary. The psalms are primarily prayer, speech to God" (Terry Muck, "Psalm, *Bhajan*, and *Kirtan*: Songs of the Soul in Comparative Perspective," in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid, 9 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001]).

the church, with the stranger on the street, with the whole world community.

All of these experiences are movements initiated and supported by the God who acts always on behalf of our redemption. They are the ways that God reaches down into the painful stuff of our lives—the angers and fears, the losses and griefs, the sins and rebellions—and pulls us out. They are real-life, everyday fulfillments of God’s promise of salvation. The more consciously we can name these experiences of God’s saving activity, the more sense the psalms will make to us, for we begin to see that they are a chronicle of the action taking place in our lives, and of Who it is that is acting.

Furthermore, we discover that the chronicle is a communal one. Many psalms were written for communal use in Jewish liturgical celebrations. But even the psalms written in first person singular and prayed alone were never individualized in the Jewish mind. The very capacity to pray them arose from the individual’s sense of being a member of God’s chosen people. For the Jewish community, all of life was worship, and worship entailed acknowledging their relatedness to one another and living accordingly. The psalms arose out of the context of the salvation story of the whole people. We, too, march toward redemption as a community, our stories part and parcel of one another. Praying the psalms leads us to see more and more clearly that every person’s suffering, every person’s cry of lament, every person’s release, every person’s cry of praise, is our own.