



meditations on the Psalms

teacher's guide

introduction

While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I was introduced to Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar who offers a unique way of dividing the Psalms. His approach resonates with me, particularly because it makes the Psalms feel more real. It reminds me of how quickly life can change and how my communication with God shifts depending on the season I'm in. In other words, his division helps me (and, I believe, will help our congregation) to understand the different seasons and realities of our lives.

In the Psalms, we find songs of praise and worship when all seems right, cries for help and deep lament when the world is falling apart, and songs celebrating victory after overcoming struggles. Brueggemann categorizes them into three types: 1. Psalms of orientation, 2. Psalms of disorientation, and 3. Psalms of new orientation.

Inspired by this approach, the title of this sermon series will be, "*Wavering World, Steadfast God: Meditations on the Psalms*." I chose this name because, when looking at the Psalms, I see the "inconsistency of the world"—sometimes everything is going well, and at other times, things are falling apart—but I also see God's steadfast love, truth, and faithfulness. When everything is great, He reigns. When everything crumbles, He reigns.

With that in mind, my goal here is to briefly introduce Brueggemann's framework, so we can become more familiar with it. While you don't necessarily need to quote him in your sermons, I believe understanding his perspective can aid in our sermon development.

Following this, I will share the Psalms selected for the series and briefly explain the reasons behind their choice.

According to Brueggemann,

Human life consists of satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing. Matching this we will consider "**psalms of orientation**," which in a variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God's creation, God's governing law. (Brueggemann, 1984)

Human life consists of anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. Matching this, we will consider "**psalms of disorientation**," poems and speech forms that match the season in its ragged, painful disarray. This speech, the lament, has a recognizable shape that permits the extravagance, hyperbole, and abrasiveness needed for the experience. (Brueggemann, 1984)

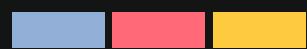
Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through despair. Where there has been only darkness, there is light. Corresponding to this surprise of the gospel, we will consider "**psalms of new-orientation**," which speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new. These psalms affirm a sovereign God who puts humankind in a new situation. In this way, it is proposed that psalm forms correspond to seasons of human life and bring those seasons to speech. The move of the seasons is transformational and not developmental; that is, the move is never obvious, easy, or "natural." It is always in pain and surprise, and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been. (Brueggemann, 1984)



It is important to note that the move through the grid of orientation - disorientation - new orientation is not a once-for-all experience. Due to the complexity of life, it would be unwise to say that life follows the cycle presented above.

With that in mind, let's dig a little deeper into each kind of psalm.

Blessings,
Abner.



psalms of orientation

These psalms were created, transmitted, valued, and relied upon by a community of faithful people. To these people, their faith was both important and satisfying. A beginning theological point for the Psalms are those psalms that express a confident, serene settlement of faith issues. Some things are settled and beyond doubt so that one does not live and believe in the midst of overwhelming anxiety. Such a happy settlement of life's issues occurs because God is known to be reliable and trustworthy. This community has decided to trust in this particular God. Many of the Psalms give expression to that happy settlement, to the reality that God is trustworthy and reliable, and to the decision to stake life on this particular God (Brueggemann, 1984).

Psalms of orientation teach that life is not simply a task to be achieved or an endless construction of a viable world through human effort and ingenuity. There is a "givenness" to life that can be relied on, guaranteed by none other than God. That "givenness" is here before us, stands over us, endures beyond us, and surrounds us behind and before. The poetic speech of the Psalms is our best language for expressing this "givenness," which is not initiated by us but waits for us (Brueggemann, 1984).

psalms of disorientation

Life is also savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry. It is curious that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented. Perhaps that is a bold act of faith in the midst of distress; perhaps it's probably dissolution; or maybe it is fear once, according to some doctrine of men, chaos in life only happens when one is not fully obeying God.

Brueggemann wisely says that maybe churches avoid Psalms of lament because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. In his words, "We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God's 'loss of control.'" (Brueggemann, 1984)

Brueggemann brings up a very interesting and powerful line of thought by saying that the psalms of disorientation make it clear to the readers that everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.

psalms of new orientation

Those are the psalms that come after a season of disorientation (such as suffering, confusion, or lament) and express a renewed sense of trust, hope, and joy in God. These psalms reflect the experience of having gone through a difficult or destabilizing period and emerging on the other side with a new, often deeper, understanding of God's presence, goodness, and faithfulness.

The movement of new orientation is not a return to the previous state of innocence or simplicity (orientation), but rather a shift to a new place of stability and gratitude, marked by deeper wisdom and more mature faith. This transformation is often seen as the result of God's intervention in a time of crisis, bringing about deliverance or renewal. (Brueggemann, 1984)

selected Psalms



Are you listening? (Psalm 19)

I love the Psalms where the psalmist uses nature to express his appreciation for the Lord's kindness, and Psalm 19 is one of my favorites. What I love about this psalm is that, in his moment of deep orientation, David recognizes that all of the good in his life was possible because YHWH is the perfect Creator (vv. 1-6), the perfect Lawgiver (vv. 7-11), and the perfect Redeemer (vv. 12-14).

When we have attentive ears, open eyes, and a willing heart, we can see God's glory everywhere. After all, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Are you listening?

*Both of the Psalms above are bold statements that true orientation is only possible because YHWH is faithful and good. Even unconsciously, I believe that we may have the tendency to sort of ignore God in times of blessing in our lives. In theory, we know that every good thing comes from the Lord; however, the way we relate and react to those very blessings says otherwise. Psalms of orientation are convicting to me because, in the moments of greatest joy, the psalmist's first action was to turn to YHWH and recognize that He is the author of order in the world.

Perfect God from A to Z (Psalm 145)

One of the most fascinating aspects of this Psalm is that it is an acrostic, with each line beginning with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. Although this feature is lost in translation, it beautifully illustrates David's intent to convey the fullness and comprehensiveness of creation, praising God for a world that is well-ordered and oriented from A to Z (Normal Gottward, 1954).

Because of me (Psalm 38)

Often, when we talk about psalms of disorientation, we think of situations beyond our control—like the death of a loved one or illness. But Psalm 38 presents a different cause for disorientation: our own sin.

In church circles, there's often an unspoken hesitancy to truly grieve our sin. We rush so quickly to talk about forgiveness and resolution that we skip over the hard truth of acknowledging what we've done and who we've hurt. We're all guilty of that.

Psalm 38 invites us to take a deep look within and confess our sins, showing us that sometimes, the source of our disorientation isn't external—it's within us.

Doubting soul, believing heart (Psalm 42)

In my walk with the Lord, I've often experienced an internal struggle during times of distress—a part of me believes, while another part doubts. As I read the Scriptures and talked with others about this, I realized I'm not alone in this battle. Psalm 42 beautifully illustrates this tension between a believing heart and a doubting soul.

Even though we know in our hearts that God is sovereign and in complete control, moments of instability can make us forget the very truths we hold dear. In those times, we cry out just as the psalmist does: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

Testimony time (Psalm 116)

I really miss testimony times in Sunday services. While they could be a bit unpredictable—since you never quite knew what someone might say—hearing about what the Lord has done in the lives of our brothers and sisters was always beautiful. Growing up, it was common for every testimony to end with an encouragement to believe and trust in the Lord.

Honestly, that's how I perceive Psalm 116. In this psalm, the psalmist recounts how YHWH delivered him from death and how, in times of complete desperation, YHWH heard his voice and pleas for mercy. Because of what YHWH has done for him in the past, he can rely on Him for whatever may come in the future. More importantly, he commits to declaring what YHWH has done “in the presence of all His people” (v. 18).

To me, this sounds just like testimony time!

When our victory becomes my song (Psalm 66)

I find it incredibly beautiful when what God has done for His people is truly and deeply appreciated on an intimate level. We see this in Psalm 66.

Throughout the psalm, God reveals Himself in powerful ways and continually delivers His people. From verses 1 to 15, we see how the Lord has tested, refined, and brought His people to a place of abundance.

However, in verse 16, there's a notable shift. The psalmist moves from speaking about what God has done for the collective (the people of Israel) to expressing his personal trust, praise, and worship. As Brueggemann puts it, “This psalm shows the move from communal affirmation to individual appreciation, which is what we always do in biblical faith” (Brueggemann, 1984).

This transition highlights the deep connection between shared faith and personal experience, reminding us that individual appreciation flows from the collective testimony of God's faithfulness.