

Approachable God

Psalm 138

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At first glance Psalm 138 looks like a Psalm of thanksgiving and gratitude worthy of a Thanksgiving meal. I recommend you consider this Psalm a foundational prayer rather than putting it in a box for an annual prayer. This Psalm offers a guide for giving thanks through thick and thin, through trial and triumph, and through failure and disappointment. While the Psalms were used for liturgical purposes, in the sanctuary, in group gatherings, they are also windows into the variety of ways the community talked with God.

The Psalms present God as approachable. This Psalm uses YOU for God and speaks from the first personal singular “I”, undesignated for any of us to use. I am grateful that Martha just read the text and did not include the superscription you would find in most English Bibles, I will speak to that momentarily. A teaching point in the Psalms is that they represent all aspects of being human, praise and anger, gratitude and grudge, generous acceptance and harsh rejection. The Psalms witness to your prayer of sorrow and swearing being heard by an approachable God.

As you know, have read, and will continue to read, the Church, all varieties of being Church are reconsidering our messaging given that people want a connection to the Divine but Church is losing its significance. The recent Washington Post opinion piece by Perry Bacon, Jr is enlightening: ‘Why I Left the ‘Church’ – and now long for a ‘church of the nones.’

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/21/leaving-christianity-religion-church-community/> I do not share the author’s experiences but understand them. Practices of the Church, in every century, have alienated parishioners and communities, yet the Church reforms and survives.

Last week Pat Kinney shared a possible book club discussion book, which I immediately purchased: *The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*, Sarah Augustine. For some the sins of the Church (every church somewhere) exceed the perceived benefits. Every generation of the Church wants the golden calf of growth, success, notoriety, and live with the ever present ‘if only’. If only those who split from the church would come back, then we would be okay. If only those donors had left more, then we would be okay. If only more people came to our church, then more people would come to our church. Few of us are willing to look at our present, today August 27, 2023, accepting our now as our hoped for ‘then we would be okay.’ This simple act would replace anxiety over what we cannot control with gratitude for God being with us.

I ride the ‘if only’ train too. If only you would see and appreciate the active participants in this congregation who tirelessly work through the ministry of their lives (volunteering here

and elsewhere, caring for neighbors within and outside of the church, caring for families, theirs, and others', connecting with community with kindness as their witness. My personal 'if only' is if only you would see how approachable God is, always, then perhaps the security of Psalm 23:1 would settle in: The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

I chose Psalm 138 for today's lesson for a couple of reasons. First, the Psalmist speaks my favorite words – I, the intimate 'me' as well as the Psalmist, as well as my neighbor, as well as people in every time and place (rather like receiving a banquet from God, which includes my enemies – not that I have any, of course.) This all inclusive 'I' is partnered with 'You/Your.' The psalm witnesses a relationship with the Divine. 'On the day I called, You answered me.' Vs. 1 vs. "I give You thanks, not just thanks, but directed thanks, I and You. The Psalmist adds 'with my whole heart', "that is from the deepest center of the poet's being"¹

"This motif of calling and being heard represents"² an approachable God based on Yahweh's steadfast love and faithfulness. Have a quick look at Psalm 136, every line has an antiphony, a response: *God's steadfast love endures forever*, repeated 26 times in case we are not paying attention. In classes on Psalms 136, I make sure we repeat the response every time, no short cuts, to write this reality into hearts and minds.

Now for the heading before each Psalm in many Bibles. The italic heading is a modern editor's comment for those of us who are looking for something specific. *The Common English Bible* does not have imposed italic headings, nor does *The Message*. *The Message* transliteration does not have either the italics or the headings in most Bibles. With apologies to those in the Wednesday Psalms study who have heard this before, the assumed assignment of the Psalm is misleading. Ancient manuscripts have names or people listed above many of the Psalms. 34 Psalms, including 136 I just mentioned, do not have name or community listed.

Our English translations imply the title as a possible author by using our word 'Of', a Psalm of David, or by someone. In Hebrew a preposition is signified with a *lamda*, in the Psalm headings the *lamda* is a prefix to a name (such as David, Solomon, Asaph, etc.) The possible translations for the preposition *lamda* would be: for, by, to, about. There are other options and uses, and I made copies of an article about this for the Psalms class, and you may have one too. In short, the subscription before each Psalm "almost certainly does not imply authorship."³

My passion is not about proper use of Hebrew prepositions. My theory and teaching point is that by removing any imposed authorship, royalty from any nation group, or assigned purpose based on the wrong use of a preposition, the Psalms may be read with your voice, or

¹ Raymond Van Leeuwen, Van Harn and Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, p. 354-355.

² Ibid

³ Peter Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Psalms 1-50, 33-35

the voice of trauma experienced by someone, anywhere, represented in our scriptures as heard by God and therefore must also be heard by us.

God is approachable, so much so that angry, mean Psalms are included. Rather than filtered they are present to demonstrate that our relationship with the Divine does not need to be filtered. What hasn't God seen? The limits put upon God are human constructs, many of which have indirectly taught against an approachable Church and an approachable God. May we teach and live that God hears our sighs and groans with steadfast love, and may we give thanks. Perhaps Psalm 138 could help us address what Perry Bacon, Jr ("Why I Left the Church") calls "Church size hole in American life." Amen.