

Dear People of St. John's,

I volunteered to lead a workshop on the Upstate New York Synod Assembly this year. I've done workshops other years. One year the workshop I did was on crafting alternative worship services that were both spiritually enriching and had liturgical integrity. The other one I did was on yoga. Or maybe I'm mis-remembering the yoga workshop since I don't honestly think I'd want colleagues all across the state to see me in my yoga duds. (Although keep in mind that I helped a colleague open a yoga studio at Grace Lutheran Church in Niskayuna and I was one of the yoga teachers, so folks regularly came in to see me standing on my head!)

In any case, whether that yoga worship was real or a figment of my imagination, this year the workshop is entitled: Writing from the Psalms: Constructing a Sacred Diary. Now everybody has a favorite Psalm (but I hope not everybody's favorite is the 23rd since there are so many, many good ones), but not everybody has read every Psalm. In fact, I'd guess we're mostly unfamiliar with some of the more violent and vindictive of the Psalms since even when we sing portions of those in church, generally the offensive verses are omitted. For example, when we sing the well-known Psalm 137 ("By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...") we don't include the last two verses because they're just not, well, nice. Not at all. Go look them up and see.

The Psalms are an anomalous part of the Bible. They're personal; they're emotional. They function as a sort of sacred diary and provide a release for the Psalmist's feelings, even when those feelings are raw or violent. Some of our hymns are based on Psalms and these tend to be very moving hymns. "When Morning Gilds the Skies" is based on Psalm 5. "My Life Flows on in Endless Song" is based on, among other scripture passages, some verses from Psalm 46. "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" is based on portions of Psalm 36. And of course, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" is a virtual re-write of that most famous of Psalms, Psalm 23.

One of the things I've always enjoyed doing with a Psalm I like (or one whose negative emotions may mirror my state of mind at a given time) is to re-write them. Sometimes I've re-written them to be read liturgically as a kind of group poem read in sections. Several of you may remember a Wednesday Lenten service where we read a version of Psalm 84. And I like, as well, a collection of poetry by singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen which he entitled the *A Book of Mercy* and it is nothing less than a series of powerful contemporary Psalms.

It's a common wisecrack among lectionary preachers that, when the lessons for that week are difficult, boring, upsetting, confusing or anti-Judaic, to say, "Well, this week I'm gonna preach the Psalm." But you know, maybe that's not a bad idea from time to time. The Psalms can be unwieldy, angry, violent, encrusted with male pronouns for God. But they are also treasures of visual imagery, honest emotion and direct "from-my-mouth-to-God's ear" cries of the heart. As I spend more time looking at the Psalms in preparation for the upcoming workshop, I'll keep you posted on what I find. And maybe, over the summer, we can spend an evening doing a Psalm workshop together!

"Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!
Lift up your hands to the holy place
and bless the Lord!"

In Christ's grace,
Pastor Jo Page