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Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts, Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome to "He'brew", the *Project Zion Podcast* series that reduces Old Testament bitterness, and good Lord, we've gotten so many comments on that, "Yes, this has really helped me understand the Old Testament," and we do that through explanation, exploration and experiencing the Old Testament texts. Our guides through this are Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, and I'm your host, Karin Peter. Now, in today's episode, we're looking at Psalms and Psalms is a little bit different, and we look at it differently than how we look at other parts of the Old Testament in that there's, for me at least, a lot of emotional attachment to some of the psalms, and even, we might say, sentimentality associated with some of the psalms. And a really good example is Psalm 23, which, in some parts of the world, is traditionally used in funeral and memorial services. And so, there's a lot of emotional connection with that particular psalm. So, let's take a look at Psalms and see what we can discover together. So, Tony and Charmaine.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:39

I'm really glad that you mentioned those things at the beginning, about the emotional connection that people have with Psalms, because that means that these writings are doing what they were intended to do, which is to help people connect at an emotional, spiritual, even physical level, with their experience of God. And so, that means these psalms have been very effective at wending their way into our hearts and minds and memories, and the words we use, "the dark valleys", you know, "the valley of death", the idea of "lying down in green pastures", those kinds of things. It's woven its way through our cultural understandings of what "rest" and "peace" mean. So, that, it's, this is the wonder of the psalms.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:30

Right, and you mentioned Psalm 23, I mean, how many cards have you gotten at a funeral that have Psalm 23 printed on them? It may be the single most printed funeral text, which is, it, which is an interesting use of the text. And people have given associations to the text connected to death that perhaps the song didn't originally have, but that's the way we use text sometimes, so. So, when we, start with the Psalms, we're now in the third unit of the Hebrew Bible, so, in our series so far, we have followed the order of the Hebrew Bible. First, we did sessions on Torah, which sometimes is translated "law", but the word torah means more than that, and that's the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. And then we did some sessions on the prophets, the law, the prophets, and the prophets have, former prophets, latter prophets, former prophets being, sometimes we call them the historical books, they're narratives, and...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:32

Samuels and Kings.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:33

...right, and Joshua and Judges. And then, the latter prophets, then, are the prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and so on. And so, now we enter the third unit, the Ketuvim, it's called in Hebrew, meaning writings. It's kind of a prosaic, sort of, title for, I mean, 'cause it's all written, right? But it's a...

Karin Peter 03:51

Is it, like, just leftovers? Does that what it means?

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:54

No, no, it was...

Karin Peter 03:54

...that it's... fits the other category?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:57

Yeah, we'll have to call it the miscellaneous department.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:00

It is. It's a miscellaneous collection of things that have, like Psalms, and Proverbs and Job, but also Ruth, and Chronicles, and Daniel fit into this. So, it's a, kind of a, mixed bag, in terms of literary forms. But there's really one thing, I think, that ties them all together, and that's, in these books you tend to see authors, in some way, reflecting self-consciously on Israel's faith and identity and their experience of God. And so, that is really important because the Psalms, the Book of Psalms is a large collection of poems or hymns that are all about people's experience with God. And so, that's a nice connecting point for us, since in our spiritual reality today, experience is quite important, what it means to experience something really counts for a lot. So, that's what, that's what's going on as we start unit three.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:00

So, I appreciated what you were saying earlier about people's response to the idea of taking the bitterness out of the Old Testament. And I just want to thank everyone who's been listening to these, because the way to do that is like you would with a cold brew, is take time, to spend some time with the text, to find out what's really there, and not take just the provocative pieces, and then assume, and then project that onto the whole Old Testament. And Psalms is a particularly good book to spend some time in, because if you look below the surface, behind the poetic language, behind the rhythm, behind the repetitions, you will find almost every kind of human emotion being poured out to God. This, as Tony was saying, this is a, this collection of songs, hymns, poetry, are about how do we connect with God? or what do we do when we can't connect with God? What can it, what is it that we expect from God? And so, in these texts we'll see what the cultural expectations of the time were about what God's job was supposed to be, and that they were upset 'cause God wasn't doing what they thought God should be doing, also what they, what did they keep going back to as foundational about who God is. And so, this is a book that tells us again, and again, and again, and again, that God welcomes all of who we are, our ugly emotions, the vengeance and anger, and the, you know, we're gonna get them back and the paranoia, and the longing, and the fear of being rejected, and the uncertainty about whether my enemies will overcome me or not, joy, great joy at recognizing, oh my gosh, my heart and mind know

that God is here with me, the elation that comes with that. That new sense of, I know who I am in a way I never could because God knows me. And there's a lot of other emotions that are all in there; guilt, and shame, and trying to work that through in the presence of God, anger, anger at God for not doing what we want. Which, you know, lots of these things we can still identify with, and so, taking some time to dig deep. There's the one, you know, if you start looking at the different sides; there's the vengeful side, there's the defeated side, there's the whiny side, there's the suspicious side, there's the joyous side, there's the thankful side. You know, it's starting to sound like the one of the dice from D&D and all these multi-sided things. But that's who we are emotionally, spiritually. We have all those sides, and this collection of prayer songs, hymns, says that's known by God, acceptable by God, and invited by God. So, I think it's this great big, wide door in the middle of the Old Testament to say, God already knows all of our tendencies, and our self-centeredness, and our fearfulness, and our desire to have joy and hope, and our willingness to trust, and our willingness to not trust, and our doubt. It's there for us. And, so, fun to, kind of, explore.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:50

So, it's a pretty rich book, and lots of scholars refer to it as the hymnbook of the Hebrew Bible. And that's, that, I think that's an apt description. It's a hymnbook, but it's often more raw than our, than some of the hymns we usually sing, so. So, I think that is often shocking to readers. But we can figure out what's going on in these psalms, and I think that's something we want to try and do today with the help of some different forms of scholarship, and some different approaches to the psalms. So, it's a great, great, great book, so.

Karin Peter 09:31

So, this is really helpful because I think a lot of listeners are probably like me, where I grew up learning that we did the rejoicing psalms in worship when we went to church, and then, if there were psalms that were used, that were, expressed negative emotion, their whole purpose was to help us remain faithful. And those are pretty much the only two reasons that we use psalms in church, or that we encounter the psalms. So, what you're talking about is letting, is a different way of opening them up, to help us connect with this whole broad reality of what it is to be human and in relationship with God. So, I'm excited. Let's go for that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:12

Well, as we found in some other Old Testament books, these authors, these composers, are not trying to pretend that people who are faithful to God, or people who are trying to be faithful to God, are perfect, or happy all the time, or righteous, or holy, that no, they're, we're who we are, and we don't need to pretend. I think that's the piece. We don't need to pretend to be anything else. That unrefined part of ourself is welcome in God's sight.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:52

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a really good observation about it. And why would we not be authentically ourselves before God? Well, there's lots of reasons. Often it has to do with traditions that have been imposed on what worship is and what Christians should be...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:11

Cultural shame.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:12

Right, and...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:13

Religious shame.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:14

And so, the psalmists say, screw that, we're letting it all hang out.

Karin Peter 11:20

Excellent, I can get on board with that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:23

We thought you might like this book, Karin.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:28

So, one of the things we want to do is, first of all, since we had suggested when we started this, the book, *Introduction to the Bible*, by Fant, we just want to say, tip our hat there and say, take a look there. He does a very good job of giving a nice overview, giving you some dates, but also very good job, I think, about saying what Psalms is and what they aren't, because this is, this goes back to, our premise is that these books are written by people. And that's one of the things that Fant keeps illustrating, that, of course these are written by people. You know, some of them even have an author's name or group of people's names. These aren't dictated by God. These are very much coming from lived experience of people, lived experience with God, lived experience in community. And so, that whole thing that we keep trying to lift up, which is that these are human authors whose writings have become valuable over time, and so valuable that they keep helping people connect to God. And so, they've been passed on and passed on, and eventually had the status of scripture. And that was one of the things too, that Fant does a good job of, which is to talk about where they fit in that canonization process. So, I'm just going to go ahead and pull up our timeline again.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:06

In case you didn't recognize by now, Charmaine and I love timelines.

Karin Peter 13:12

I think that has become apparent, yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:16

Tony, because he's a linear person, me, because I'm a visual person. I'm not linear. This helps. So, we already talked about, see my cursor, but around 400, that's when those first five books that had been pulled together during the exile became considered scripture, authoritative for all of Judaism.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:42

And it's important when we give you these dates, we recognize that it doesn't mean that on, you know, July 5, 400 BCE, all of a sudden, the Torah's canon. It means roughly around the year 400, by that time, Judaism, and we can really legitimately speak of Judaism and not the religion of ancient Israel now, is using Genesis to Deuteronomy as sacred text.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:06

Right. And then, we talked about this before as well, 200 BCE is when the prophets are considered canon or scripture, and authoritative for all of Judaism.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:21

For most of Judaism, we know that there were some, there was, there were one or two Jewish groups who said, "No, no, no. We want the old stuff. We don't, this prophet stuff is new stuff. We don't want it." But, generally, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:30

Right? Even in Jesus' time, there were a few people, the Sadducee, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:34

Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:34

Who said, "This prophet stuff...", this is to 300 years later, "...it's newfangled stuff. Give us the old-time religion."

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:42

It's true.

Karin Peter 14:44

You don't hear that anymore at all, no.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:46

I find that amazing.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:48

So, the writings, typically we see them as being written roughly between 200 BCE and, where? The 6th...

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:01

That's the...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:02

The latest one is...

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:04

Let's see. The latest book in the writings is Daniel, around 165 BCE, but the dates for the books in the writings can, you can back them up into the 500s.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:17

There's, so there's isolated bits and pieces. That's why we're calling it miscellaneous.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:21

So, for example, the book of Job may, in its current form, is from after the exile, but there's parts of it that are probably preexilic.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:28

Thank you for the clarity there. So, yes, 165 is the latest of the writings but it, then, that's 165 BCE. It's not till 100 CE that the writings have all come together as this miscellaneous department. But the Psalms are unique, because some of them probably existed far, far earlier, probably over to the time of David, around 1000. Some of these psalms, though not most of them, and I think that's one of the things people have to, kind of, unlearn about the psalms, they have a sense, because in some Bibles that indicates that these were written by David, and it's assumed that all of them were, but there, they weren't. Some of them may date back to David's time, and then of his creation, but probably, only a few of them date back that far. But it's kind of cool that they were passed on during all that time. And then they started being compiled, particularly in what's called the Second Temple era, which would have been from about 538 to...

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:43

Yeah, the Second Temple, they begin around the year 520. And so, this, that Second Temple is 520 to 515, is when it's constructed, completed. So, the Second Temple period in Judaism, I mean, you can roughly say from 520 all the way down to 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed it. That's, historians sometimes refer to that as Second Temple Judaism...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:07

Right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:08

So, it's a long period.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:09

But in that early part of it, when, would be when many of these songs are being created, again, the temple is the center of their worship life, and the festivals and all of that, and so many of the psalms are being created during that time after the exile, and in the Second Temple period.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:31

And you can, if you read psalms carefully, you can tell that some come from the exile, or after, just by the language, the phrasing that they use, that they refer back to the cataclysm of the destruction of Jerusalem. And even, you know, even for example, that psalm you started us off with, Karin, Psalm 23,

the superscription says, "A Psalm of David", right? And you read it, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." so on and so forth. And you're thinking, "Oh, David, David, you're so poetic. You're so wonderful." You get to the end of the psalm, and it says, "...and I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh forever." And you think, wait a second, David couldn't have written this because there was not yet a temple. That's what House of Yahweh means in the Hebrew Bible. So, that psalm, or at least that part of it, is an add on, or it indicates that that psalm came after the time of David. So, you just have to read them closely. You can figure out often, where, you know, where they are, roughly, on this timeline?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:38

And then, do you want to say something about...how they're divided?

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:41

Sure, yeah. So, and it's good to have that this time line up too. So, the book of Psalms is actually a compilation of five books. You read it carefully, you'll discover that book one, book two, book three, book four, book five, and that's a pretty good indication of when the psalter, which is shorthand for a book of psalms, when the psalter came together in its current form, there had to have been, in other words, the five books of Psalms is intended to parallel the five books of Torah, and so that is a good indication that the psalter, as we're using it now, came together 400-ish or after, once there was a sacred number five, or the so-called Books of Moses, right? So that you have the Torah and then the hymnbook that is, kind of, the accompanying text to go with it. So, the hymnbook then says, alright, this is what living by the covenant God made with Moses, this is what it actually feels like. And it's pretty roller coastery ride, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:57

So that's true to life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:58

Yeah, yeah. So, another thing we can talk about then is the psalm types. So, this is something that scholarship, I think, is really helpful on, that is that psalms are of different genres or types. And genre is important because once you know about genre, it gives us clues as to how to read a psalm. So, for example, and this goes back to the German scholar, Hermann Gunkel, who was the first one to categorize psalms into genres or types. And so, and typically, we think of psalms in terms of laments, or hymns, or thanksgivings. There's a collection of psalms in the book of Psalms that are called Songs of Ascent, which are pilgrim songs, that people sang on their way up to Jerusalem. There are Torah psalms, a couple that celebrate the law. There are royal psalms that celebrate the Davidic monarchy, which, kind of, sounds strange when I say it out loud, to celebrate the Davidic monarchy, but there are psalms that do that. And then there are psalms, there's a few that are the, I think, the most difficult psalms for us to get our minds and hearts around.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:10

They have a fancy name. They're called imprecatory psalms.

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:14

Which means curses. They're psalms in which you...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:18

Curse your enemies.

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:19

Exactly. The most famous of these is Psalm 137, which is obviously written after Jerusalem is destroyed and, you know, that it's, it starts off, you know, "By the water, rivers of Babylon, there, we sat down and wept." And it's, it just wrenches your heart out. By the time we get to the end of that short psalm, the psalmist is saying, you know, happy are those who will take your children and dash them against the stone. It's calling for the lex talionis, a law of retaliation, just as the Babylonians and the Edomites, who cheered them on, did to us. We want this to happen to you, too. So, those are difficult, very difficult to figure out how to manage.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:12

Or use in worship.

Karin Peter 22:15

So, we have that tradition in Restoration hymnody. If you look at all the original verses of "The Spirit of God, Like a Fire, is Burning", you've got some, what did you call it, imprecatory verses.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:26

Yes, some of them are.

Karin Peter 22:27

Yes, were written for that hymn.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:29

Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:29

Right.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:30

Those people who don't believe us and who have tried to stop us, they're going to get theirs. Yeah. Indeed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:39

So, before, for those who want to take Jesus seriously as the center of their faith, spirituality and devotion, and to take Jesus' message as something like a lens, the imprecatory psalms are quite difficult to make sense of. But again, to go back to what Charmaine said, we can pretend to hide, but we all have these feelings, right? We, the psalms flesh out our desires to call down fire on our enemies sometimes. So, that's, kind of, a tour of what's going on in the Psalms. Maybe just a little about authorship.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:22

Sure.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:22

So, Charmaine mentioned, you know, that lots of people will just start off thinking the psalms were written by David. Well, actually, no. There's blocks of psalms which indicate other authors, Psalms of Korah, Psalms of Asaph, and there's one psalm called the Song of Moses, it's Psalm 90. And then there's tons of them that are just, like, anonymous. So, that phrase, a Psalm of David, in Hebrew, is ambiguous. It doesn't necessarily mean he was the author, right? It could mean in the style of David or in memory of David, something like that. So, many, many hands and voices and minds contributed to this giant hymnbook over literally centuries. This is a hymnbook that took centuries to compile. I know for Community of Christ people who were involved in the creation of our current hymnal, *Community of Christ Sings*, which came out in 2013, it took a long time, but they should rejoice that it didn't literally take hundreds of years to create.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:29

So, that's, kind of, giving a little bit of background and explanation of what the Psalms are and what you might find in them. Now, we would want to, kind of, explore what are, you know, what's the purpose? You know, why are they there? What are they doing? How have they worked? When have they been blessings or impediments? So, we'll kind of take a look at that now.

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:58

Sure. And, I mean, one place to start with our exploration is with the pretty clear concept of divine presence and absence, in the Psalms. The laments, and laments are the most common type of psalm, which, I find that, at long last in Community of Christ, in our current hymnal, we have a section on lamentation, not common in Christian hymnals to do that. But the majority, a majority of psalms fit in the category of laments, and scholars, including Fant, like to refer to laments as something like the blues. And so, one of the things that psalmists, whether individually or corp-, or representing a body of people do in laments, is they mourn what feels like the absence of God, and the sense that God is not coming through for us, or not being faithful to the covenant or...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:59

Or not present at all.

Karin Peter 26:01

Or have been abandoned by God...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:03

Absolutely.

Karin Peter 26:04

...kind of imagery.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:06

And this reinforces the idea that the writers of the Old Testament knew that life was hard. You know, there's not any hiding from the fact that sometimes the questions are bigger than the answers. The struggle is bigger than the hope. I think it's a clear acknowledgment that there's no reason we should expect everything to be good all the time.

Karin Peter 26:36

What?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:37

I know, I'm so sorry.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:40

Yeah, yeah. And those can be difficult. You know, Psalm 130, "Out of the depths, have I cried to you, O Yahweh. Lord, hear my voice!" You know, where are you? And not surprisingly, at least in two of the four gospels, when Jesus is dying on the cross, he has a lament psalm on his lips, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's Psalm 22. It's a really powerful and poignant, personal lament, so. The psalmists don't theorize: If God is omnipresent, how is it that God could be absent? No, God is, God can't be absent because God is omnipresent. They don't theorize like that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:26

Or, if God loves us, why is God letting us suffer? They're saying, no, life, in its very nature, has growth and suffering, and death. And these are not easy feelings, and doesn't, but because they're not easy feelings, doesn't mean that God isn't there. That, even when I'm blind, I'm pretty sure God is out there somewhere. I can almost feel God. I remember what God feels like. I can, I will keep stretching my soul out to sense God. I mean, I think, in our own deepest times of uncertainty, hurt, grief, we understand that, at a whole different level. And the psalmists did too.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:16

It seems to me that the genius of the psalms of lament, in that regard, in terms of divine absence, is that they voice the fear of divine, that God is simply on vacation. They voice that fear, and in voicing it, voicing it puts you into communication, right, with each other.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:43

And it lessens the power of that fear.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:47

And if you read through psalms of lament, you'll see that often what happens in the psalm of lament is, at some point, the more the psalmist expresses the sense of absence, eventually the psalmist gets to a point where they pull, they start to pull from their memory, but you were there once. I know, you were there once for me, for us. And that becomes a, kind of, turning point in the psalm of lament where I'm gonna at least cling to the memory that you were there once and, you know. You know, I would like you to end your vacation and respond to my email to you, please. And so, often in the psalms of lament, you'll find a, kind of, turn somewhere in the psalm, or multiple turns, where the psalmist is trying to wake God up.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:45

And one of the foundational descriptions or attributes of God, that you will find through the Psalms and even when it's not sad, it's assumed it's foundational, is God's steadfast love. And that, in spite of my trials, and my failures, or my hopes, I still assume that God's steadfast love is there somewhere. And there's a harking back to that. I think if you look up the term steadfast love, you'll find that it's, I forget, I counted once, how many times it's used in Psalms, but it's, it is the, it's the repetition. It's the, kind of like, a chant, that you keep coming back to, this thing, that some level inside yourself, you know, and so you keep coming back to that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:50

Yeah, there's a few psalms where there is a repetition, "For your steadfast love abides forever." Some of the, some of those psalms you can tell they were intended to be, like, we'll say, chanted back and forth. There's a call and response in them, and the people are supposed to say. "For your, for your steadfast love abides forever", or something like that. So, yeah, that's a, that cool Hebrew word, hesed is translated, "steadfast love", really hard for translators to get. It's not, you want to be careful not to sentimentalize it. It's love that has turned towards us with staying power, and will not, you know, will let us fume as long as we need to, but will not let us go. And so, and that's a characteristic of God in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh's steadfast love.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:39

There is some pouting going on in there, too. I hadn't thought about using that word, but...

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:44

Yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:44

Yes. In some of the laments, there's...

Karin Peter 31:46

Well, there's a little bit of emotional blackmail towards God too, because it seems to me, some of them I've read, it's like, you're not here. I can't believe you've done this to me, but your steadfast love is there, almost like, I'm reminding you, God, of this. And I'm holding you to it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:01

Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:02

Yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:02

This is not unlike Moses, arguing with God, and assuming that it matters, that it's going to change God in some way. So yeah, it's reminding God, "Wait, didn't you say..." Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:16

But, you know, there's a theological truth in that, that I think is really profound, and that is, the psalmist and the Hebrew Bible generally, think of the divine-human relationship as give and take, as responsive, that, and so, there's the assumption that we can argue back and forth with God and that God is in this responsive relationship with us. So, that, that's a truth worth hanging on to even if we, ourselves, wouldn't phrase it that way. Black, blackmailing God is...

Karin Peter 32:46

Well, it was just a random example.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:49

No, I mean, it's, there are plenty of psalms that sound like that. God, remember your steadfast love, remember, you know. But this is how psalmist poets are trying to express this sense that the divine-human encounter has real back and forth in it. God is not a static, sort of, blob out there somewhere, but, kind of, right here in our face, and we get to argue with this God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:20

It's a real God, and these are real feelings, and these are real emotions, and these are our realities, and that whole wide range of feelings, sometimes really raw. I mean, if you think about the psalm writers as being writers, and that they are digging down to those deep places, and finding the words that people can identify with, that they may not often talk about, but when somebody else reads that word, or that phrase, it's like, yes, that's, I've been there or I am there. I think of, I don't know if we've mentioned Moltmann before in this series, but Moltmann, who was a young man in the second...

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:16

He's in this German army. He said, he's drafted into the German army, and Jürgen Moltmann, by the way is still alive. He's a famous theologian, very brilliant theologian, but, yeah, he's taken prisoner by the allies. You know, the short version of the story is he's sent to a prison, prisoner of war camp in Scotland, and among the things, and once he and other prisoners, at the end of the war, discovered what his, what he'd been fighting for, because they didn't always know, pictures of the concentration camps that were liberated, and the bodies and so on. And, in his grief, and guilt, and shame, at all that, it was the psalter and especially the Psalms of lament in a Bible that a chaplain had given him, those psalms helped, kind of, begin...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:08

Speaking...to speak his agony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:09

Yeah, it helped him... I mean, this is, the psalm of, the psalms is, think of the psalms as sixth century BCE therapy, right. You got, you gotta bring it to speech. Somehow, you've got to get it out in front of you. And, then those texts, a 20th century horror became a vehicle for doing that for a German prisoner of war, who was utterly appalled and shocked at what had been going on, as far as he knew, behind the scenes in his country. So.

Karin Peter 35:45

So, I don't want to go on a huge tangent here, but as you've talked about this, and how the psalms expressed this whole myriad of human emotion, the darkness of who we are, as well as the light, and that, in Judaism, that was acceptable, this give and take relationship with God, this bickering at God, and that being acceptable, we lose all that when we get to Jesus, at least for contemporary Christians. We lose that whole idea of Jesus experiencing humanity and acceptance of our humanity. It's like, no, we have to be good to believe in Jesus. We have to, anything we do bad, we have to immediately repent to be acceptable Christians, and Jesus is perfect and would never harbor a dark human thought. And what happened?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:38

Well, it's partly how we read it. It's part-

Karin Peter 36:41

Well, you got 30 seconds, by the way.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:43

I would say the Syro-, go to the Syrophenician woman in the gospels.

Karin Peter 36:47

Yes, yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:48

I mean, there's a debating and a winning with God. So, it's still there to some extent. I think we've projected back on Jesus, this, you know, because Jesus was perfect and had no sin, then anyone who follows him has to look that way too. And I think that that's not been helpful, because that rules out grace, which is, wait, the reason Jesus came? So, I think, that's how people have used the Bible to control other people.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:26

And some of it, too, is cultural, Karin. I mean, I think, I have to be careful. I don't want to generalize too much. But, Anglo-Saxon Protestant-ish people, like me, have been finetuned not to express certain kinds of emotions. But, hey, you know what? Charmaine and I have been in worship services in various African countries, where the service is just explosive with emotion, in a way that would be difficult for, you know, for a white North American Community of Christ congregation to know how to manage. And so, there's, there are cultural layers on top of that. I mean, Jesus did pray a lament. He wondered where God was, when he's dying.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:12

And in the garden. It's there. I think we've gloss that over in this self-righteous kind of saying, Okay, now you all have to be good, 'cause that's the only way Jesus will love you. And it's like, wait, Jesus reached out to the marginalized, and those who were seen that were under the law, or against the law. You know, so it's the misuse, again, maybe another misuse. And that actually takes me to a point I

wanted to bring up in this too, and that is that, what happens when we want to pretend that we're perfect? You know, what is it that happens? And,

Karin Peter 38:54

Well, I don't read the crappy psalms. That's what happens.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:57

Well, not out loud in public anyhow. Because what we're doing then, is we're hiding, we're hiding from our own self-knowledge. We're also trying to hide from acknowledging that God knows. And so, what kind of a relationship do you build, if you're hiding what's really happening in you from God? So that you look good to the people around you, or so that you can pretend to yourself that you're perfect. You don't need God then, right? And so, I think, the Psalms help us, hopefully, strip that away and say, no, God is infinitely curious and compassionate about what's happening inside of you, and wants you to become self-aware, wants you to not be driven and drawn by unseen fears and desires. Make it visible, make it useful.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:58

I mean, hiding from the truth is the opposite of seeking justice. And so, this phenomenon of trying to maintain a certain religious posture, a certain religious image, a certain religious persona, you know, patient and kind and always nice, and did I say nice, always nice? And that this is what a Christian is. It's like, well, no, this is overlay, and it's, it keeps, it has sadly kept a lot of American Christianity from actually facing up to the evils that we have been complicit in; racism, genocide of First Nations people sexism, heterosexism. We're complicit in all this. And somehow, we're not supposed to talk about, we want to hide it and pretend to be religious instead. The psalmists say, no, that's not integrity before God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:01

They knew that you can't grow. You can't change and grow, if you don't face what's there. And you can't ask for God's help, if you're not willing to change and grow, because God's all into that. So, as you know, it's a, kind of, realism and honesty, that we can learn from, I think.

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:21

And, nobody wants to hear this, but we, I, totally need to have my ugly sides exposed, right, because this, just following up on what the spiritual director just said, there's no significant spiritual growth without getting into your ugly sides too. By the way, God's already there, so it's no surprise to God, but we need to confront that. And gosh, the psalms, right and left, are all into confronting that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:00

And so, in some ways, another way for Christians to read psalms, I think it would have been assumed by Old Testament readers, but something that we need to add in as we're reading the psalms, is that the Spirit is at work all throughout them. When people are calling on God, in many, many ways, they're calling on the Spirit that moves and changes and stirs within us, as well as affecting things around us. So, just to, if you're finding yourself stuck in the psalms, not sure what to do, say, "where are they

requesting the Spirit's help here?" Some will actually use that kind of language. But it's assumed that it's that, kind of, that part of God, that is at work here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:49

I think it's important too, to recognize, psalms are poetry, and in poetry, metaphor, hyperbole or, kind of, over speak, jarring imagery, that's part of being poetic, and that's part of what gives the Psalms their emotional power, too, I think.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:09

So, one more piece that we want to include in the, in the exploration part is some things from Walter Brueggemann, who is an Old Testament scholar. And he has a wonderful little book.

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:22

I'll hold it up here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:24

And it's called...

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:26

"*Message of the Psalms*", written in 1984. But this book is so powerful. This is a classic. And so, I hope, the date 1984 doesn't throw anybody off. It's...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:38

'cause the Psalms are way, much older than that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:40

Right, right. And even we are way much older than that, but Brueggemann is literally the Dean of American Hebrew Bible scholars. He's written, like, dozens and dozens of fabulous books and articles and...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:54

And he just naturally weaves in the spiritual formation part, and the social justice part. He's phenomenal. So, I'm going to just bring up, let's see. So, he has a way of approaching the Psalms that, I think, is really, really helpful.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:14

He says, you can generally classify psalms into three types; psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. That's his language. And he says, you know, I don't want to be hard and fast about this, not all psalms fit, and some have more than one of these, but generally this works. And so, the psalms of orientation are psalms that's, kind of, celebrate the stability and faithfulness of God in life. Everything's, everything is really, really going great. It's wonderful. Creation's good and solid and God's faithful and I'm doing great. And so, there's a lot of psalms like that. So, you know, this, Psalm 15, you know, one and following is a great example. "Oh Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, who do what is right, and speak

the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath, even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.” In other words, this psalm is, like, you know, that, kind of, idea that’s frequent in the Old Testament, in that if you do good, you get good, and the world is a stable, trustworthy place, there’s psalms like that, psalms that say, ain’t life wonderful. So, but Brueggemann says actually a majority of psalms are psalms of disorientation, and psalms of disorientation connect to, and come from, when our lives and our structures are falling apart, all around us and in us; chaos, God’s apparent absence. The laments typically fit in this category of psalms of disorientation. And one of the things Brueggemann says in this book is that Christian churches generally have avoided these, and in times of disorientation, they’ve just gone on giving psalms of orientation, talking about how wonderful everything is, and we just have to hang in there and trust, it’s all good...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:25

Which is, kind of, what you were talking about, Karin, earlier about how, oh, if we’re all just good and perfect, and just do things right, then everything will be fine, and let’s just forget that there’s some people who are struggling right now.

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:37

And Brueggemann uses this phrase, something like, he says something like, you know, in periods when, like, everything is burning down, the church wants to sometimes just go on singing happy songs. He says, that is false. That is being false to the actual reality, and the psalms of disorientation give voice to when everything is coming apart. Psalm 130, “Out of the depths, I cried to you, O, Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” Or Psalm 22, mentioned earlier. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? Oh, my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” If you read all of Psalm 22, it’s gut wrenching. And so, these psalms of disorientation speak to those times in our life and in history, when everything we trusted is simply disintegrating around us. We may or may not have complicity in the disintegration, doesn’t matter. We are in a time of disorientation. And in some respects, I think one could say, our current experience in the world is, like, a colossal time of disorientation because of the pandemic, because of the increasingly rapid evidence of climate change, and because of massive economic injustice, that doesn’t seem to get better. So, psalms of disorientation, Brueggemann would say, could be our friend right now. And then, that, the third one is psalms of new orientation. And these are psalms where we’ve been surprised, surprise and joy that God is renewingly active in the world. God’s, has just...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:34

Doing something new.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:35

Yeah. So, in Psalm 40 is one of his examples. “I waited patiently for Yahweh; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see

and fear, and put their trust in Yahweh. Happy are those who make Yahweh their trust, who do not turn to the proud, for those who go astray after false gods.” God is, in the Hebrew Bible, is the God does a new thing and so there are psalms that celebrate. I, you know, it's like, I thought I was gonna endlessly be in this miry bog, and all of the sudden, I find myself on the other side of it, in a brand new place, and it's like...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:27

How did this happen?

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:28

God, you are so amazing. I'm not sure how it all happened, but you do amazing new things. And so, we, kind of, like his approach to the psalms. It's very pastorally and theologically useful to think of psalms in those, sort of, three categories, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:49

So, we're, now we're going to go into the experience part and, as we always try to say, you know, as we're trying to help you see and experience the scripture at a personal level, understanding more about who it is that wrote it, what their situation is, and how it might be useful to us personally. But not everybody's at that point where they want to start applying it to their own life, or where it feels safe to start doing that. So, no guilt, no shame. And, but if you find yourself wanting to dig in a little bit deeper, and see if scripture can speak to you in some new ways, or in some safer ways, or in some ways that let God be loving and present, then join right in. So, we're going to be approaching a psalm as a prayer, and so, we'll be reading a psalm. Tony is going to be reading the psalm. And then we'll have several statements afterwards that can be used for journaling. And, you know, we tried to capture something of that, those raw feelings and the kinds of ways that we might want to pray a psalm in our own lives. So, that's, kind of, how we're going to use the experiencing the scripture part for today. Let's go on back here and scroll down a little bit.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:26

So, appropriately and unsurprisingly, we've chosen a psalm of disorientation, or at least part of one, Psalm 13, verses 1-6. So, let's enter into the words of this psalm. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” And now let me read it a second time. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’; my foes will rejoice because I'm shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:41

So, I would invite you to journal or pray. We've begun with, at different points in this prayer, this psalm, that is a prayer, and provided some statements that will give you a way to continue letting it be your prayer. So, choose any one or more of these statements as a time to enter into the kind of prayer that the psalmist began for us. God I am alarmed that I cannot sense you near me. I am afraid that... Let your prayer progress from there. How long before I will feel hope for...? And another possibility; answer me God. Without your light and love, I don't know if I can face... God, I am subsisting on my memories of your loving, powerful presence in the past. When I recall those times, my heart begins to remember... So, I will try to trust you here, God, because already, you have... We hope those will be helpful in joining into the Spirit of the psalmists' prayers, and the God who can hear them and wants to.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:43

So, welcome to the world of the spirituality of the psalter.

Karin Peter 55:48

That's a wonderful way to pray and offer those contemporary questions that are reflected in those ancient questions. So, thank you, Tony and Charmaine. Do you have any last comments you want to make on Psalms before we close up our episode?

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:08

One contextual piece, I think it's important to remember, that is, the period in which the Psalms came together was not a period in which Israelites and Judeans believed in life after death. There was no concept of an afterlife. And so, the urgency to experience God's deliverance, God's salvation in the here and now, is connected to, this is what we've got. And it may be helpful for us, even those of us, like me, who believe in eternal life, to learn from them, to have their image inform my spirituality. This is what we've got. And so, here and now is where...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:53

Justice, and peace, and...

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:55

...justice, peace, righteousness and steadfast love, need to be lived out, shared and experienced.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:02

And I think the piece that I would add is that typically, we don't encourage people to go to the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and just open it and start reading somewhere, without some sense of the context. But Psalms is a great place to do that, is to go to Psalms, open it up, and, and see what the author, how the author's trying to connect with God. It's almost always informative, and sometimes it's really helpful.

Karin Peter 57:31

This has been such a wonderful episode, especially for people who are looking for ways to use the Old Testament in spiritual formation. And considering our next episode is on the book of Job, I'm thinking this was, probably, really important to do first before we do that. So, in closing, I want to take us back to

the 23rd Psalm that we, kind of, opened with. The New Testament writers used imagery from the Psalms in different ways to make their point. Mark 6, I think, it's Mark 6, comes to mind, where the images from the 23rd Psalm are interspaced in the small stories that are told in chapter 6. Jesus has the people sit on, down on green grass, and then it goes on and there's, like, four of them in a row that come right from 23rd, from the 23rd Psalm. And so, we're going to end with another writer who uses images from the 23rd Psalm, and this writer's name is Toki Miyashina, and this is from theologyofwork.org and this is the "Psalm 23 for Busy People", and we'll close with it today. "The Lord is my pace-setter, I shall not rush; He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals; He provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity. He leads me in the way of efficiency, through calmness of mind, and his guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for his presence is here. His timelessness, his all-importance will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of activity. By anointing my mind with the oils of tranquility, my cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours, for I walk in the pace of the Lord." So, with all of us trying to meet our schedules as we try to figure out what's happening in our lives, until next time, when we visit Job with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, I'm Karin Peter, thanks for listening.

Josh Mangelson 59:58

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