

# praying the psalms

BRINGING ALL OF LIFE BEFORE GOD



**H**istorically the Psalms form the prayer book of the Bible. By praying the Psalms, we join with Christians throughout the ages in expressing our trust in a God we do not always understand. By praying the Psalms, we can learn to pray.

**T**he Psalms are intentionally divided into five parts, providing a counterpoint to the Pentateuch. In the books of law God speaks; in the book of Psalms humanity responds. In this regard prayer is always answering speech, a response to the God who always takes the initiative. Also of note, the Psalms are recorded in poetic form, inviting us to a different rhythm than our technological world: "The most conspicuous immediate effect of this is to slow down our prayers; we cannot speed-read a poem." (Peterson)

## Psalms 40:5

Many, Lord my God,  
are the wonders you have done,  
the things you planned for us.  
None can compare with you;  
were I to speak and tell of your deeds  
they would be too many to declare.

The reason the darkness may be faced and lived in is that even in the darkness, there is One to address (Brueggemann)

**P**erhaps the most obvious feature of the Psalms is their brutal honesty. Included are prayers of doubt, confusion, complaint and even outright anger. These are not expressions of unbelief; rather, these Psalms function as "acts of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith... It is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing is precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God. Thus these Psalms make an important connection: 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." (Brueggemann) However, human experience is not the central focus of the Psalms; the unfailing love of God is. This shift in focus prompted one Franciscan to declare: "I used to keep the Psalms; now the Psalms keep me." (Br. Kevin)

**A**lthough we can pray individual Psalms that fit our situation, our prayers will expand when we pray the Psalms *seriatim*—when we pray them *in order*. So doing, inevitably we will find ourselves praying Psalms that do not match our experience. Who could pray this Psalm? By asking this question, we are drawn beyond our own experiences and into the world of another. As such, the Psalms teach us to pray *for* and *with* others—to lament with those who doubt (suffer) and to give thanks with those who trust. In short, the Psalms teach us to pray honestly for ourselves and for others, thereby entering into an honest relationship with God.

