

THE PSALMS OF COMMUNITY

An Order of Worship

[Note to worship leader: This service is designed to facilitate worship in light of the theme of community that features largely in the Psalter. It corresponds in this way to chapter two in my book, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020]. While I have created an order of worship (with a beginning, middle, and end) that hopefully makes sense to most denominations, you should feel free to amend it in a way that fits your worship tradition and to include songs that may be more familiar to your own community. The visual artworks are likewise substitutable if other resources are felt to be more suitable. Finally, because the psalms are ultimately meant to foster prayer and worship, not just to be read and studied, the hope is that this document will deepen the worship of your community in a way that reflects the prayer habits of Jesus and the worship life of the church throughout the centuries. Links to recordings and sources are included at the end of this document.]

CALL TO WORSHIP (Psalm 22:22)

[LEADER]: I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters!

[ALL]: In the midst of the congregation I will praise you!

SONGS OF WORSHIP

SONG: "The Church's One Foundation" (Samuel J. Stone)

SONG: "Break Dividing Walls" (David Ruis)

SONG: "Make Us One" (Jesus Culture)

COLLECT PRAYER

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

CONFESSION OF SIN

Oh Lord, we confess that... [insert your own words of confession here].

WORD OF PARDON

[LEADER]: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." (Psalm 80:3)

[ALL]: Amen.

OFFERING OF PEACE

[LEADER]: The peace of the Lord be always with you.

[ALL]: And also with you.

THE OFFERTORY

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Psalms 107 or 133

John 17:20-26

[Silence]

SERMON/REFLECTION

Life apart from deep communal life is bad for our health precisely because God did not mean for us to live apart from meaningful community. The Psalter reflects this. The psalms show us how the life of faith always takes place before the face of the community. This is the terrifyingly good news of the psalms. The community sees it all—it *gets* to see it all.

For the psalmist, the “assembly,” the “congregation,” the “people,” one’s “neighbors” and “friends” are always close at hand. There is no hiding from the community; there is in fact no *need* to hide, even if the temptation to hide is always close at hand. The community gets to bear witness to one’s praise and one’s protest. The community gets to hear one’s heartfelt petitions and full-throated thanksgivings.

More significantly, the community gets to hear the pleas of one’s heart far more often than it hears the words of trust or thanksgiving, not because the latter don’t matter—they do, very much so—but because the former, the petitions, is what we, like the Israelites, pray often. But we don’t always see the answers to our prayers. Yet we still pray and we pray knowing that the community is with us, around us, supporting us, bearing witness to us that we aren’t alone.

Said more generally, there is no such thing as a modern individualist in the psalms. It’s a fundamentally communal book where individuals find their place in the world of faithfulness and faithlessness within the context of the community. It’s “me” in the context of “us.” *Their* sins are *our* sins (so Psalm 85). It’s the “I” because of the “we.” *I* rejoice because *we* rejoice (so Psalm 106). It’s “my whole heart” with the community, not apart from it, not on the margins of it. *My* lot is bound up in *y’all’s* lot (so Psalm 111).

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

We often imagine, wrongly, that the psalms are private compositions prayed by a shepherd, traveler, or fugitive. Close study shows that all of them are corporate: all were prayed by and in the community.... It goes against the whole spirit of the psalms to take these communal laments, these congregational praises, these corporate intercessions and use them as cozy formulas for private solace.

For the psalmist there is no autonomous spirituality. There is only a faith that is lived in the company of God’s people. This includes those who have come before us as well as those who will follow after (Ps. 78). It’s a faith that we have “heard and known” and a faith that “we will tell to the coming generation.” Faith happens *with* people (Ps. 40), it happens *in presence of* the “nations” (Ps. 18), and it happens *in front of* all of creation (Ps. 89).

RESPONSE TO THE WORD:

EITHER: CONFESSION OF FAITH

OR: VISUAL MEDITATION

Option #1: North facade of the former Stranger's Home Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, with mural by William Walker, 1972, painted over in 2015.

Option #2: "The Forerunners of Christ with Saints and Martyrs," by Fra Angelico, 1423-1424, The National Gallery, London.

Option #3: "All Saints Day 1," by Wassily Kandinsky, 1911, Lenbachhaus, Munich.

[Silence]

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

[LEADER]: Gracious Father, we pray for your Church.

[ALL]: That we might be marked by faith, hope and love.

[LEADER]: Where we are corrupt.

[ALL]: Purify us.

[LEADER]: Where we are in error.

[ALL]: Direct us.

[LEADER]: Where anything is amiss in us.

[ALL]: Reform us.

[LEADER]: Where we are right.

[ALL]: Strengthen us.

[LEADER]: Where we are in want.

[ALL]: Provide for us.

[LEADER]: Where we are divided.

[ALL]: Reunite us.

[LEADER]: For the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior.

[ALL]: Amen.

THE CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

SONGS OF WORSHIP

SONG: "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" (John Fawcett)

SONG: "What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine" (E. A. Hoffman)

SONG: "All Creatures of our God and King" (W. H. Draper/St. Francis)

SONG: "Make Us One" (Twila Paris)

SONG: "He is Among Us (The Least of These)" (Zach Bolen)

SONG: "The Earth Shall Know" (Urban Doxology)

FINAL PASTORAL PRAYER

Good Shepherd, you who set the lonely in families, who provide care for the orphan and the widow, who give the refugee a habitation and make a home for the homeless, we pray that you would give us the gift of good community so that we might find our place there secure in the knowledge that we are deeply loved by others, and in turn generously welcome others, for the sake of the One who calls us brothers and sisters. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

[LEADER]: May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess. 3:12-13)

[ALL]: Amen!

DISMISSAL

[LEADER]: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

[ALL]: Thanks be to God!

SOURCES

Artwork:

- For a thoughtful review of William Walker's mural, see here: <https://artandtheology.org/2017/03/06/book-review-painting-the-gospel-black-public-art-and-religion-in-chicago-by-kymberly-n-pinder/>.
- On the artwork of Fra Angelico, see here: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/probably-by-fra-angelico-the-forerunners-of-christ-with-saints-and-martyrs>.
- For an image of Wassily Kandinsky's art, see here: <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-175.php>.

Books: The Eugene Peterson quote comes from his book, *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms That Summon You from Self to Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 10-11.

Songs: All songs can be found either on <https://www.praisecharts.com> or on <https://hymnary.org>.

ALTERNATIVE PASTORAL PRAYER

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.