

**Sermon - Proper 16, Year A**  
**Psalm 138**  
**8/27/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a college student, I had a small prayer card pinned to the bulletin board above my desk. On the card were the words from the final verse of the psalm appointed for today: Psalm 138, verse 9. “The Lord will make good his purpose for me; \*O Lord, your love endures for ever; do not abandon the works of your hands.” It is a good prayer for a student, all things considered. At a time when many of us are confused or lonely or uncertain about our vocation or the future of the world in general, the prayer unfolds in three movements. First, the assurance: the Lord will make good his purpose for me! Spoken in confidence, announced to the world at large. Insistent upon something that is true, but also seeming to call this truth itself into being: the Lord will make good his purpose for me!

Second, a shift into a direct address of God: “O Lord, your love endures forever.” Again, an insistence, but one that resonates beyond the speaker’s own pain. Your love, O Lord, is beyond this moment, beyond this singular life unfolding in my own breast. Your love, O Lord, is now, but more importantly, it is forever.

And third, the plea: “do not abandon the works of your hands.” Do not abandon me. That purpose you will make good, that enduring love – all will come to nothing if you forget me. I always imagined the speaker stretching out their arms and shaking God by the shoulders, like Jacob wrestling with the angel on the bank of the Jabbok, refusing to let go until the Lord has delivered his blessing.

The Psalms speak to God this way, sometimes. In the 150 psalms of the Bible, we find the breadth of human expression – we find every single way that the human spirit has met with

the unsearchable magnitude of God. There are abundant psalms of praise – “Hallelujah Praise the LORD, O my soul! \* I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.” There is also fear and lament: “O LORD, my God, my Savior, \* by day and night I cry to you...For I am full of trouble; \* my life is at the brink of the grave.” In the psalms we find uncertainty. We find unbridled joy. We find scholarly meditations and childlike exuberance.

Above all, we find *relationship*. The psalmist – however delighted or despondent – is in relationship with God. And this relationship is a part of a long, long story.

There is quite a bit of competing scholarship on the age of some of the parts of the Old Testament, but the history of the Psalms is the story of some of the most ancient texts in the Bible. The Psalms have traditionally been ascribed to the authorship of King David – and it is possible that some or even many of them were indeed his. But there are parts of the texts that predate the reign of King Solomon. They come to us from over three thousand years ago. It is important to remember that psalms are songs – they are meant to be sung. Before writing was common among most people, these prayers were learned and repeated in melody. It is believed that many of the psalms originated as liturgical songs, sung by priests and pilgrims on their way to worship God. But these were also songs of instruction, passed from parent to child. It is a breathtaking thing to imagine that the words we repeat in church today could have been sung by a mother, rocking her child to sleep over twenty-five hundred years ago.

It is also rather remarkable to remember that the Psalms as we know them were the established prayer book of the Jewish community by the time of Jesus. Jesus knew all of the psalms, likely by heart. The prayers we pray today are the same prayers that were on the lips of Christ.

It is a bold thing to make demands of God. “Lord, do not abandon the works of your hands.” There are times when this sort of prayer can be unsettling: we are supposed to trust God. We are supposed to obey God. So many of us, I think in particular in this country, grow up in churches that tell us to “follow God’s plan” and do not make much room for asking questions or expressing how we truly feel about things. But scripture actually teaches us otherwise.

Yes, it is important to think and pray about trust. Yes, it is important to think and pray about obedience. But before we can even do those things with any sort of wisdom, we must be in relationship with God. We must know him. We must wrestle on the banks of the river.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters are better at this wrestling than we are. A rabbi friend of mine likes to talk about his yearly practice of giving God a performance review: “How was this year, God? Hm, not your best...” Not in the sense that he is wiser than God or better than God. But in the recognition that the stakes are high for him as God’s creation. What God does *matters*, and it is okay – even good – to have opinions about that.

The psalms insist upon this urgent, raw, immediate sort of encounter. The psalms speak majestically of intimacy and intimately of majesty. They bring us right up against the presence of God and insist we meet him face to face. *Do not abandon the works of your hands.*

We are meant to bring the fullness of our lives before God in prayer. Jesus, the Son of God and our own savior, prayed with both praise and lament. We need not worry about perfect words or perfect worthiness – do not ever doubt for a minute that you are worthy of prayer. Begin with the relationship. Come before God just as you are, wherever you might be starting from. Even the desire to pray is the beginning of prayer. Before the throne of God, even heartache can become a song.

Amen.