

Midweek meditation # 4 ~ Praying the Psalms

"I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices; My body also rests secure." ~ Psalm 16:8,9 NRSV

One author describes this section of Psalm 16 as "**David practicing the presence of God**" ! Certainly the act of reciting these age-old, life tested and proven prayers has sustained the spiritual lives of many pilgrims throughout the years. The psalter is an invaluable treasure of our Judeo-Christian heritage which we can use **to thrust our lives into God's deeper currents of praise and trust.**

Basil Pennington, in a little book entitled Poetry As Prayer, The Psalms describes the benefits of praying these prayers in this way:

"The psalms have traditionally helped the faithful to raise minds and hearts to God, motivating us to give ourselves over to living completely the reality of who we are as men and women baptized into Christ, who share in the divine life of intimate love and communion. The psalms are meant to help us to understand and express who we are, both in hope and in reality. When we pray, all our words are little words, rooted in the Word who alone is the fulness of meaning. The sacred words invoke the Divine Presence and fill us with hope and joy. God's word makes God present. God's word becomes our word and speaking to God bonds us to God and God to us. The psalms give piercing voice to our deepest distress and they leap with the joy of our brightest moments. And always, **they can lead us into the serenity of a hope which knows the darkest hours will pass**, that passing joy is but an overture for the eternal joy that awaits us."

I have a painful but redeeming memory of the last time I visited my Dad before his death. He was an Alzheimer patient and had experienced several falls. In pain from a shoulder injury, and in a rare moment of lucid awareness of what was happening to him. Dad began to weep and repeat "Why, Lord? Why?." Without any conscious thought, I put my hand on his head and began to pray the 23rd Psalm from childhood memory:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff thy comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall

follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

I am convinced that the familiar words and images thrust us both into God's deep undercurrents of mercy and grace and brought a calmness to Dad's spirit. This same psalm, along with Psalm 130, which I had memorized later in life, were two "doorways" into God's presence for me during several difficult, dark nights at Beth Israel Hospital in April.

"Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord; Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

Having these two psalms to recite from memory really did lead me "into the serenity of a hope which knows the darkest hours will pass." They opened the way for deep moments of intercessory prayer and a rich time of knowing God's real presence in ways I had not often experienced before!

I would like to suggest that if you haven't "practiced the presence of God" this way before, that you try it now. Surely even the busiest activist christian can find the time to pray one psalm as the day begins. Even better, is to "carry one line or phrase from the chosen psalm with you through out the day as an "active prayer", to be repeated in those quiet moments between tasks and conversation: "I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me" or "I wait for the Lord." or "my soul waits and in God's word I put my hope."

May God lead you into His deeper currents as you, like King David did before us, practice His presence.

Under God's mercy, Howie