

# Pass the psalter

*All those generations of chanting monks knew the secret to spiritual serenity. Reading a psalm a day from Jesus' prayerbook is good for the modern-day soul, too.*

**E**VERY COUPLE YEARS, I DECIDE I'M GOING TO READ the entire Bible. Cover to cover. This resolution usually follows some experience that has left me feeling scripturally illiterate or inferior, but so far the guilt has not been strong enough to propel me past the Pentateuch. In all honesty, I have to admit I've never even made it to the end of Genesis.

One year, however, I attempted a less ambitious reading plan: I decided to read the entire Book of Psalms. The fact that I made it through all 150 of them probably had less to do with my own dedication and discipline than with the power of these poem-prayers to speak to the everyday concerns of life with an incredible intensity of emotion.

That first time I read the psalms, I was in the midst of grief and sensed that my friends and family were growing tired of hearing about my constant sadness. But every morning I found a fellow sufferer in the psalmist. "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" (Ps. 69:1-3). Although separated by centuries, I had found someone who could commiserate with me.

But my morning meditative reading of "a psalm a day" was more than a pity party. Because I was reading the psalms in order, I was exposed to the entire range of emotion expressed by the poet (or more likely, poets) who authored these hymns. The psalms of lament—filled with sadness, loneliness, desperation, and even anger—are balanced by psalms of praise—which exude ecstatic joy and gracious thanksgiving.

I think it is this emotional immediacy that has made the psalms some of the most frequently quoted passages from scripture. After all, who doesn't recognize "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." (Ps. 23:1)? For Catholics, most

of our familiarity with the psalms comes from their use in the Mass, following the first reading. When I read the psalms for the first time, I was surprised at how many of them I recognized from singing the responsorial psalm on Sundays. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord" (Ps. 34). "Lord, send out your spirit, and renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104). "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad" (Ps. 118).

Outside of Sunday liturgy, few lay Catholics may be aware of this powerful poetic legacy from the Hebrew scriptures. It took a Protestant—author Kathleen Norris—to teach me about the long history of chanting the psalms in the monastic tradition. And only recently have I discovered that a growing number of Catholics are joining clergy in the recitation of the "Liturgy of the Hours," which, if prayed daily, covers the entire psalter.

The psalms seem to be enjoying a resurgence in popularity among spiritual-seeker types these days, perhaps partially because their practical advice speaks meaningfully to individual experience. But any attempt to use the psalms to "discover oneself" will be defeated by the prayers themselves and by their long history as communal prayers in the church, Norris says. "When one sits alone with a psalm, one is sitting with and for the countless others who are praying them now, who have prayed them for thousands of years," she writes in an introduction to a Riverhead edition of the psalms.

I have only ever prayed the psalms in community, outside of Sunday Mass, once—at a Chicago monastery on New Year's Eve 1999. The quiet, prayerful chant provided a surreal backdrop to the fireworks and gunfire in the distance, and the timeless wisdom of the psalms a necessary antidote to the turn-of-the-millennium hoopla.

When I'm mad at God, I turn to the psalms. When I'm in awe of the splendor of the natural world, the psalms capture my gratitude. When I need someone who understands what it's like to be attacked by "enemies," the psalmist gets it. And during those dry times when scripture just doesn't seem to be speaking to me and I'm finding it hard to pray, I once again open my Bible and start with Psalm 1 . . . **USC**

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