

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**August 8, 2010**  
**Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23**

**“Love, hate, envy, anger, forgiveness, joy, grief, fear, gratitude...”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Bible is a messy book—full of drama and intrigue, loyalty and betrayal, violence and compassion, hope and despair, sin and righteousness. Every human emotion is found in the Bible: love, hate, envy, anger, forgiveness, joy, grief, fear, gratitude, and so on. And nowhere are these feelings more abundantly expressed than in the 150 Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Psalms are a diverse collection of devotional poetry, laments, hymns of praise, blessings and curses, songs of thanksgiving, and words of wisdom and instruction. John Calvin called the Psalms “the mirror of man” because the full range of feelings, hopes, imaginings, and experiences of the Israelite people is conveyed with raw honesty, vivid images, profound insights, and prophetic visions.

Praised by Martin Luther as “a Bible in miniature,” the Psalms lift up universal struggles with divine revelation, personal and collective identity, doubt and faithfulness, and reflect human beings’ deep longing for a sense of reverence for and closeness with God. It is no surprise that the Book of Psalms is read more often than any other book of the Bible—the Psalms speak to us in deeply personal ways about religious faith and struggle.

No one is certain when the Psalms were written. Scholars’ speculations range from the tenth to the second centuries B.C.E. Biblical historians believe that some of the Psalms date back to the time of David in the tenth century B.C.E., while others were composed in the time of the kings of Israel before the exile in 587–6 B.C.E., and still others may have been written several centuries after the exile.

WHEN the Psalms were written is still discussed, scholars have do not have a precise answer. And WHO wrote the Psalms is also debated, there is also some controversy about that.

Often called *The Psalms of David*, the Book of Psalms is actually a collection of writings by a variety of different authors. It is believed that King David wrote about 72 of the Psalms; the others are believed to have been written by a host of authors including Moses, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Solomon (David's son), Heman the Ezrahite, Ethan the Ezrahite, the Sons of Korah, and Asaph, a music leader in David's court and others. Biblical scholars are fairly certain that Psalm 50, our reading for today, was written by Asaph.

Psalm 50 paints a picture of God in a Court of Law. This majestic God shines a radiant light from beautiful Zion (a spiritual name for Jerusalem)—the center of God's presence with Israel. God summons heaven and earth (which means everything and everyone) to witness his bringing a firestorm of judgment against his wayward, covenant-breaking people. God orders these ironically called "faithful ones" ("Hasidim" in Hebrew) to appear in court. These supposedly "faithful ones" had previously made a covenant with God, by sacrifice (Exodus 24:3-8). In accepting God's covenant, they had agreed to become the Lord's people, to acknowledge him as their God and to be obedient to the stipulations of the covenant, namely God's laws. But had they kept God's laws? No, they had not. So God, the righteous Judge, testifies against them and declares he will bring judgment against them. Listen to verse 7, there is no mistaking God's intention:

*Hear, O my people, and I will speak,  
O Israel, I will testify against you.*

(Imagine being in court, hearing the prosecution call their next witness against you and it is God!)

God goes on to say in verse 8 that it is not for your lack of sacrifices that I rebuke you. Then God begins a several-verse indictment against his own people for making USELESS offerings and pious statements while they disobey God and speak evil of others. If they were genuinely to offer a "sacrifice of thanksgiving" (verses 14 and 23) with true obedience, then God would listen to them favorably. The Psalm offers a contrast between forgetting God and not receiving salvation, and honoring God—living true to one's covenant with God—and receiving salvation from God.

Although we only heard a portion of Psalm 50 today, the entire 23-verse Psalm is full of powerful language and vivid images. Listen to God speaking in these lines, which were not included in the Lectionary reading for today:

*You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
And your tongue frames deceit.  
You sit and speak against your kin;  
You slander your own mother's child.  
These things you have done and I have been silent;  
You thought that I was just like yourself.  
But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.*

God goes to warn those who forget God “I will tear you apart and there will be no one to deliver you.” AND YET, in the end, God offers redemption and salvation...verse 23 says....

*Those who bring **thanksgiving** as their sacrifice honor me;  
to those who go the right way  
I will show the salvation of God.*

And now I repeat the very words that began this sermon... The Bible is a messy book—full of drama and intrigue, loyalty and betrayal, violence and compassion, hope and despair, sin and righteousness. Every human emotion is found in the Bible: love, hate, envy, anger, forgiveness, joy, grief, fear, and gratitude. And nowhere are these feelings more abundantly expressed than in the Psalms.

Like the other 149 Psalms, Psalm 50 reflects a people deeply engaged with God. Asaph is writing about a God he has talked with and experienced, a God he imagines and knows, a God he wrestles with and loves. Asaph is not writing about a God who is distant or remote—his God sits in judgment in a court of law, his God chastises and condemns, his God forgives and offers salvation, his God is real, up close and personal.

I think we love the Psalms because they make God real and bring God up close and personal FOR US. The Psalms were written in ancient times by a disparate group of people who talked to, fought with, cried about, and lamented over a God they worshiped, feared, argued with and loved.

The Psalms represent God's people deeply involved with their faith and their God—and their level of involvement and engagement is something I want for you. I want God to be so real, important and present in your life that on a daily basis you talk to God, yell at God, fight with God, feel judged by God, feel comforted by God, feel held by God, and feel loved by God. I want for you what the Psalmists experienced: a God so significant that God is a part of every breath and experienced through every emotion.

I want for you what the Psalmists had: a relationship with God that is vibrant, powerful, passionate, and consuming.

Those ancient Psalm writers are our models...they wrote about a God they experienced in their daily lives in multiple ways. In the 150 Psalms, the Psalmists refer to God as their fortress, king, shield, rock, shepherd, warrior, keeper, parent, refuge, judge and other dramatic and vivid images.

Those ancient Psalm writers are our models; I think we should emulate them. Not only can we experience God in powerful ways in our daily lives, but we can put pen to paper and write about those experiences. Because we believe in a Still Speaking God—that God is still speaking to us and through us—we can rightfully claim the identity of being the Psalm writers of today. Years ago, I gave a sermon about how we are the continuing story of God moving through individual lives and through history. I held a Bible in one hand while I preached. At the close of the sermon, I ripped the back cover off the Bible to symbolize that the story is not finished; we are the current chapter, and there will be chapters that follow us.

In that same spirit I invite us to welcome God deeply into our daily lives, to feel all the emotions that arise in a relationship of profound closeness and intimacy and to write about those feelings. This is something I know you could do. Every one of us, from children to older adults can bring God in, up close and personal and express our feelings about being relationship with God.

Let me share a story.

Years ago, when my now-22 year old son Sasha was in the seventh grade, I was a Sunday School teacher, his Sunday School teacher, at the First Churches in Northampton. Each week I tried to find a story, activity, art project, or field trip that would make the stories in the Bible—distant and strange to these twelve year olds—relevant in the minds of those MTV-watching, computer-savvy, thoroughly trendy young people.

One Sunday, after we read several Psalms aloud, I asked these young people to tell me what they heard when I read some Psalms slowly line by line. Taking this assignment surprisingly seriously, the boys and girls reworded the Psalms with a depth and simplicity that brought me to the edge of tears. Realizing this moment should not be lost, I quickly distributed pencils and paper to everyone. They dutifully wrote their own interpretation of Psalm 23 as I read it slowly, stopping after every line.

Andrew Stone, a baseball player who sang in the children's choir, wrote:

The Lord is my keeper.

I will not want for He has provided.

He makes me rest in beautiful places, with water to refresh my soul.

He guides me to right decisions for He feels it is good.

Jonny Carbaugh, a quiet boy who liked to play soccer and poker, wrote:

The Lord guides me, I will not want.

I relax in His field.

He guides me to blue water.

He revives my spirit.

He takes me the right way in His name.

Andy Carbaugh, Jonny's twin brother, also an athlete and a sweet child, wrote:

The Lord is my leader

So I do not want anything I don't need.

He makes me rest peacefully in paradise.

He leads me to the peacefulness of still waters.

He restores my soul.

He points me in the right direction

For His sake and mine.

Those words are from twelve year olds who took Psalms from the Bible and rewrote them in their own words. Touching, moving, real.

We can also take any experience in our daily lives, any experience where we feel God is present or we wish God was present and write a Psalm from scratch about that. When I told my friend and colleague Caroline Meyers, Pastor of the South Amherst Congregational Church, that I was preaching on the Psalms and all of us as contemporary Psalm writers, she said, "Oh I should show you my Psalm about bowling." She did and listen:

### ***A PSALM FOR BOWLING***

*I am bad at bowling.*

*My feet never seem to be in the right place,  
and I always have a hard time letting go when I'm supposed to.*

*And even after it is out of my hands,  
I contort my body as if that will somehow re-direct the ball*

*As if I could, by the sheer force of my bent will, get it out of the gutter.  
I'm trying to get things perfect...and that never seems to work.  
Usually, if I play more than one game, I get worse as I go along.  
The harder I try to get things right, the more difficult it is.  
What if... I just enjoyed the game?  
Would you love me any less?*

What if we talked to God while we were bowling, or doing laundry, or driving the kids to soccer, or cleaning the basement, or loading the dishwasher, or helping with homework or canning peaches?

What if we put those words on paper...the questions, the longing, the frustration, the fatigue, the gratitude, the worry, the tedium, the hope, the simplicity, the honesty, the love. Maybe God would feel so present to us, so important to us, so close, so vital. Maybe we would journey into new territory in a familiar landscape and find anew the presence of God.

Today in your Bulletins you will find a sheet of fancy paper with a soft, lacy image as background. That paper is your invitation to experience an intimate and uncensored relationship with God and to write about it.

That fancy paper with its lacy background is meant to beckon you to feel God's presence while you are cooking, running to the bus, sitting in a meeting or watching TV and to write about it.

Put pen to paper and let your feelings flow.

There is no emotion you can express in your contemporary Psalm that is not found in the original Psalms in the Bible. Look again at those Psalms. There you will find love, hate, envy, anger, forgiveness, joy, grief, fear, gratitude and more.

Because there, in the Bible, you will find Psalmists deeply engaged with God.

They are our inspiration. They are our models. We want to be like them.

Think about that.

And start writing.

Amen.