Syllabus for Psalms

OT 3110 S2 – Fall 2008

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Objectives

By the conclusion of this course you will have:

1. Increased your knowledge of the content of the Psalms;
2. Articulated the significance of the Psalms for Christian ministry/witness;
3. Become familiar with selected literature about the Psalms in order to enhance your own reflections on the biblical text, all for the sake of Christian ministry/witness;
4. Had your own theological imagination shaped by the Psalms;
5. Developed a capacity to work with others in the class to form a community of interpreters engaged in study and reflection on the Psalms for the sake of Christian ministry/witness;
6. [Students’ additional objective(s)]...

Required Texts

1. E. Peterson, Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer (HarperCollins)
2. W. Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms (Augsburg)

Recommended Texts

1. P. Miller, Interpreting the Psalms (Fortress)

Beginning commentaries (Not requested for class in the bookstore):

1. R. Clifford, Psalms 1-72 and Psalms 73-150 (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries [Abingdon])
2. J. Limburg, Psalms (Westminster Bible Companion [Westminster/John Knox])

Requirements

The class requires full participation, including the following:

- Completion of individual work for individual learning and preparation for discussions
- Active participation in peer discussions
Final paper or project (see below)

Another version of stating the requirement for the course: to engage fully in "keeping company" with the Psalms through reading it in the company of others. The metaphor of visiting a close friend or relative is fitting. The course seeks a deep engagement with the biblical text in the company of others (students, commentators, and teacher). It seeks to occasion a group visit of deep intensity. It is a visit that is both public (you are not alone) and personal (you are invested). What you put into this course will directly impact what you take from it. Your full participation is vital to your learning.

Evaluation

The chief criterion of evaluation is the overall quality of your "visit" (see above), especially your contribution to the discussion of the Psalms. Quality includes:

- Careful attention to the details of biblical texts
- Contributing to class reflection through your learning from self-directed reading in the required books (including, of course, the Bible itself)
- Coherent articulation of your views
- Attentiveness to the views of others (students and commentators)

Final Paper/ Project

A final paper or project will address the following topic: "How My Christian Imagination and Goals for Christian Ministry Have Been Shaped By My Study of the Psalms."

If you choose to do a paper, it should be a reflective paper, not simply a journal. You should be taking notes for this paper throughout the semester. If you do keep a journal, the paper is to be a retrospective reflection on your journal. It need not state everything you learned or thought -- select the most significant for you and your present/future ministry. The paper will be judged for clarity and seriousness, and for evidence of engagement with the biblical text and the commentaries. It is a goal of this class to do more than gain information about the Psalms. As Scripture, the Psalms should influence the shape, goals, and themes of your Christian ministry. This paper should state how the Psalms influences your conception of ministry at the end of this course. The length should be six to ten pages. It should be submitted by email to the instructor.

If you choose to do a project, it should address the same topic by bringing the Psalms to "conversation" with our current world. What happens when the Psalms are read in current contexts? Through current media? What resonates? What is dissonant? Clear your proposal in advance with the instructor.
The Psalms: Honest Speech, Not Happy Talk

The Psalms provide diverse prayers for us to pray. It is a fitting time, nationally, to traverse the less familiar Psalms which speak from within both the darkness of human life and the continued embrace of God. Refuge in God provides no exemption from the darker realities of human life. Hope, not escape, characterizes the speech of the Psalms. At least half of the Psalms speak with a lamenting note. They offer language for speaking with God when our powers of positive thinking fail us.

Week One: Introduction

Readers, Addressees, Students, Petitioners, Teachers, Worshipers, Historians – Sorting out our roles in a class on the Psalms

Week Two: Living in a Broken World without Resignation
Psalm 13 & 35: "Contend, O Lord with those who contend with me!"

The people of faith in the Old Testament did not look on the world with rose-colored glasses. The Psalms provide us with ample evidence of their candid look at the world. Sin produced victims who needed protection and relief. Sin was regarded as much more than a personal defect. Evil was not merely to be endured; it was to be ended. The Psalms expect God to end evil; evil is not the last word. The Psalms are offered to us for equally candid and faithful speaking.

Readings (required sections are underlined):
Peterson: 1-32
Brueggemann: 15-28, 28-49 (Introductions to sections), 50-67
Brown: 1-53 (read for key points)
(Miller: 1-28)

Translation: Psalm 13
Translation Comparisons: Psalms 13 & 35

Week Three: Sinners, the Wicked and the Righteous
Psalms 7 & 32: "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered".

The Righteous are not sinless. The Wicked aren't the only sinners. The Psalms speak of both innocent sufferers and the Righteous who repent. Our sharp dichotomies between good people and bad people are challenged by the way the Psalms place us before God. AND God in the Psalms acts in wrath and mercy; God is not one-dimensional in the Psalms. The people of God contend with the judgment of God even as they depend on the mercy of God.

Readings (required sections are underlined):
Peterson: 33-56
Brueggemann: 67-121 (Introductions to sections)
Brown: 55-103 (read for key points)
(Miller: 29-63)

Translation: Psalm 32
The Psalms draw pictures of the dynamic relationship between God and the people of God. The images are not static. Even in Psalm 23, the most familiar psalm of trust, enemies lurk and treacherous journeys are known. The trustworthy Shepherd must continue to shepherd. The faithful wait, but the waiting is not docile, passive surrender.

Readings (required sections are underlined):

- Peterson: 57-92
- Brueggemann: 122-167 (Introductions to sections)
- Brown: 105-166 (read for key points)

(Miller: 64-78, 112-119)

Translation: Psalms 23 & 27

The Psalms continue that bold petitioning. God pledged covenantal fidelity to Israel and Israel, in the Psalms and elsewhere, held God to those promises. It is not arrogant, presumptuous speech; it speech that recognizes radical dependence on God’s promises to bring life where death and destruction abound.

Readings (required sections are underlined):

- Peterson: 93-140
- Brueggemann: 168-176
- Brown: 167-215 (read for key points)

(Miller: 125-132)

Translation: Psalm 90

Week Six: Praise and Projects

Psalms: TBA
Project Reports: TBA