



## Diocese of the North Carolina

### Formation for All series:

### What can words do?

### Re-visiting the Psalms in a God-awful time-

#### Opening Prayer

God of wilderness and water,  
your Son was baptized and tempted as we are.  
Guide us through this season,  
that we may not avoid struggle,  
but open ourselves to blessing,  
through the cleansing depths of repentance  
and the heaven-rending words of the Spirit. Amen.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Davis opens with the idea that the Psalms are poetry and therefore helpful to us. Poetry is the language that we use in territory we are not comfortable.

- How does entering into an understanding of God through poetry connect with you or how is it challenging?
- In a word or two, what does Psalm 19 tell us about God?

2. Reread the midrash Dr. Davis presented:

[God says:] “Were it not for the poetry and song that [all flesh and blood] recite before me daily, I would not have created the world.”

And whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed is he, only created the world on account of poetry and song? From the verse which says: “Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” [Ps.96:6]. That is to say, honor and majesty are before him in the heavens, but strength and beauty arise from his sanctuary on earth....

And whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed is he, created the heavens for the matter of poetry? From the verse which says: “The heavens declare the glory of God...” [Ps.19:1].

And whence do we know that Adam opened his mouth in a song of praise? From the verse which says: “A psalm, a poem for the Sabbath day. It is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing praise to thy name, O most high!” [Ps.92:1; *Adam is traditionally regarded as the author of Psalm 92*].

(From *Midrash Otiyyot Derabbi Akiba*, cited by Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], 119.)

- How do the psalms as poetry help us become better humans?
- How might we be called back to sanity?

3. Reread Psalm 19 translated by Ellen Davis-

**Psalm 19** 1. *Of the lead musician; a David psalm.*

2. The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands.
3. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night utters knowledge.
4. There is no speech and no words; never is their voice heard.\* [OR unless their voice is heard.]
5. Through the whole earth their call goes out, and to the edge of the world, their words. In them he has placed a tent for the **sun**,
6. and it is like a bridegroom coming out of his bridal-chamber; it rejoices like an athlete to run the course.
7. From one edge of the heavens is its starting-point, and its circuit to their ends; nothing is **hidden** from its warmth.
8. The teaching of Adonai is **whole**, restoring life; the testimony of Adonai is reliable, making wise the inexperienced.
9. The statutes are straightforward, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of Adonai are clear, **enlightening the eyes**.
10. The fear of Adonai is pure, standing forever; the judgments of Adonai are true, altogether just—
11. more desirable than gold, than much fine gold, and sweeter than honey, rich honey in the comb.
12. Surely your servant takes care with [OR “**is illumined through**”] them; much comes with keeping them.
13. Unwitting sins, who can discern? Cleanse me from **hidden** failings!
14. Also keep your servant away from the presumptuous [willful]; may they have no influence over me, so I may be **whole**, and be clean of great wrong.
15. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You, my Rock and my Redeemer!

- The first focus is the cosmos. How does the structure of the **cosmos** witness to the core reality of God?
- The second movement is on teaching. How does **God’s word (torah)** communicate to us what is real and true?
- The third movement is on self—me. What is really going on with[in] **me**? Am I in synch with reality? What threatens to put me out of touch with reality and out of touch with God?
- How is this psalm a prayer for deep integrity? How does the imagery of light connect with deep integrity? How does this connect with our faith and our understanding of God?
- The psalmist writes about the willfulness on one hand and humility on the other. How might we be willful? How might we be humble?
- What words and concepts strike you and have given you insight?

## **Closing Prayer**

Artist of souls,  
you sculpted a people for yourself  
out of the rocks of wilderness and fasting.  
Help us as we take up your invitation to prayer and simplicity,  
that the discipline of these forty days  
may sharpen our hunger for the feast of your holy friendship,  
and whet our thirst for the living water you offer  
through Jesus Christ. Amen.