

Wisdom

Epiphany and Enlightenment

Session 5: Connections of Wisdom (Psalms)
The Rev. John Elliott Lein — February 9, 2020

Wisdom in Review

Wisdom is “*a precise and comprehensive science of spiritual transformation that has existed since the headwaters of the great world religions and is in fact their common ground.*”
—The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault¹

Wisdom is found in a balance of three centers of knowing: mind (understanding), heart (reconciling), and body (instinct, senses). To be identified solely with the rational mind (ala Descartes) is called “being asleep.”

Wisdom is a **way** not an object; “how you get there is where you’ll arrive.” This way may include sudden epiphanies but usually after many years of disciplined **practice**.

There are many scriptures and practices in the Christian wisdom stream (in addition to other traditions) that can give us the foundation for this work. Some include:

- *Centering Prayer*: resting in the presence of God
- *Lectio Divina*: transformation through sacred reading
- ***Chanting Psalms*: vibration and harmony in song**
- *Icons*: visual contemplation as a portal to God
- *Eucharist*: sacrament as spiritual discipline

The Psalms

*“Being one like a tree planted beside a watercourse,
which yields its fruit in season and its leaf never withers.”*

- Songs of an ancient people, spanning the *Axial Age* years of 800-200 BCE. Collective hymns, not individual poems.
- The introduction of personal emotion: “...the emerging personal God can be related to with yearning, joy, devotion, anguish, and heartbreak, with one’s most intimate hopes and fears. For the first time, God becomes the Beloved, and the psalms become the love songs.”²
- John Cassian (5th c. contemplative) said that the power of the psalms is that they carry within them “all the feelings of which human nature is capable.”
- “...the psalms still carry the heart and soul of the ongoing human adventure with God...they offer a vehicle that invites—in fact, compels—the spiritual practitioner to keep working through the ‘archeological dig’ in his or her own being, using this ancient and timeless words to navigate the difficult inner terrain in the journey to spiritual maturity.”³

Chanting the Psalms: History

- Chanting the Psalms as a spiritual discipline is an ancient Christian practice going back to the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the 4th-6th centuries, some of whom were said to have chanted all 150 psalms daily.
- St. Benedict enshrined chanting into Benedictine practice as part of the *Divine Office*—a cycle of seven prayers (Ps. 119:164) throughout the day approximately every three hours (*lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline* plus the night prayer *vigils*). Each is assigned certain psalms to chant, so that a monk attending each service in a strict Benedictine schedule chants all 150 psalms every week.
- Gregorian chant has been the monastic form for 1,200 years. It functions as a “Christian yoga”: raising life energies, stimulating the inner body in vibrations, and strengthening conscious attention.⁴

Chanting the Psalms: Functions

Rather than stilling the mind, psalmody floods it with images and emotions. While initially feeling more “mental” and less ecstatic, the practice functions as a way to:

- Integrate with the *shadow* and promote healing of the personal unconscious.
- Awaken the *unitive imagination*—to think with more than just the linear mind, engaging intuition, sensitivity, creativity, and conscience. “Thinking with the heart.”
- Journey along the *inner geography*, encountering the depths of the world with compassion and interconnectedness rather than simply more of its surface. Beginning to see.

There are four senses of Scripture in traditional understanding, and chanting is one way (along with *lectio divina* and others) to reach beyond the literal, surface meaning.

1. **Literal:** The Bible as a rule-book for living, a scientific/historical account. Did this happen? Am I to literally do what is commanded? No room for ambiguity here; it is considered the “lowest” level of understanding.
2. **Christological:** Placing Christ as our center (in Judaism a different center is chosen), we begin reading in terms of symbols and as poetry as the heart awakens.
3. **Tropological (“growth”):** Leaving behind the Christ mystery and seeing Scripture as direct applications to one’s own soul’s journey; in modern terms, a “psychological” reading.
4. **Unitive:** at the fullest emergence of the deepest spiritual masters, they chanted as co-creators in one story.

Chanting the psalms over and over embeds within us (and us within) a deeper story and provides “metaphorical living” for our daily struggles: try replacing the newspaper and coffee routine with a half hour of psalmody and contemplative prayer and see how your interaction with the world changes.

Chanting the Psalms: Practice

There are four elements to chanting the psalms:

1. **Breath:** “*Every breath you take is the breath of God*”—Fr. Theophane. Chanting orders the breath, makes us conscious of the in and out.
2. **Tone:** the *vibration* you make as you add voice to breath. Here we participate in the power of Creation. To have authentic tone one must start from one’s own center, there is no way to fake or force it.
3. **Intentionality:** Unlike with *mantras*, chanting the psalms means engaging with a wide range of content and emotion in the meanings of the words. Being present with the text, and returning presence as it drifts, is vital to the practice.
4. **Community:** This practice is best in choir (formal or informal), where the joining of voices in collaboration and sensitivity to each other is important.

Notes

1. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, p. xvi.
2. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Chanting the Psalms*, p. 14.
3. Ibid, p. 16-17.
4. Ibid, p. 29.

Keep Reading:

- *Chanting the Psalms* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* by Krista Tippet
- *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* by Cynthia Bourgeault