

Rescuing and Being Rescued By the Psalms
Psalm 46 by Norman Fischer,
Psalm 91 by Leslie Brandt Brandt,
Psalm 90 by Stephen Mitchell
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Of all the ways folks of different faith traditions use different books of the bible as weapons for argument, the Psalms probably stand out as the one book that transcends the differences that divide us. At any interfaith gathering, a psalm is typically a safe bet. It's a safe bet unless, of course, we get hung up again in our own inability to get past the literalism we don't believe in to embrace the beauty of metaphor.

I find the psalms to be a great vehicle for meditation. Once I spent two years simply reading a psalm each morning, being silent for about two minutes and then writing whatever came to mind. I skipped around a lot, picking what I liked. It was a good spiritual practice.

These days what I enjoy the most about psalms is reading them four translations, Stephen Mitchell's [A Book of Psalms](#), Norman Fischer's, [Opening to You](#), Zen Inspired translations of the Psalms, David Rosenberg's [A Poet's Bible](#), and Leslie Brandt's [Psalms Now](#). I love the different ways the psalms reverberate in different versions.

Today I will share a few reflections on some of our favorite psalms. But as we rescue a few psalms, what we want more than anything else is for the psalms to rescue you.

In planning for today, I went back to some of the psalms I turn to for solace in tough times, and this past week of two deaths has been a tough time.

I often turn to Psalm 46 for my own comfort when I am troubled and shaken. I read it at hospital bedsides as I did with Bill Drummond last week. I also read it at prison cells.

Its traditional translation in the NRSV begins,

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea..."

If someone tells you the Old Testament God is simply a God of war and violence, consider the ending of this psalm.

"God makes wars cease to the end of the earth.

God breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

God burns the shields with fire.

'Be still and know that I am God!'"

We once had a banner with those words, "Be still and know that I am God" in the chapel. The first year after this church was built, an arsonist set fire to seven churches in Gainesville, including our chapel. That banner burned, and I

would love it if someone were inspired to make another with the words, "Be still and know that I am God." It's a great mantra for meditation.

Repeat that first line after me: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

Repeat the last line: *Be still and know that I am God.*

Remember these verses. Keep them in your spiritual treasury to draw on for solace.

I also realize that the God of our traditional psalm translations easily slips into that image of an all powerful deity up and above us controlling the world.

That's why I often go to other translations, to get beyond that stereotypical God.

Hear this same psalm 46 as translated by Norman Fischer in his book [Opening to You, a Zen Inspired Translation of the psalms.](#)

You, O God, are our protection and strength,

Help in the storm of anguish and despair,

Exactly and easily found close at hand.

So we are not afraid.

Even when the earth is in upheaval, even when the mountains are carried to the sea, and the sea's waters roar and foam,

You, O God, flow in the middle of the world, as the waters of a river.

You are the morning that dawns over the quiet waters.

Nations rage, kingdoms tumble, yet you are with us, our silent center, and you say:

And here I go to my favorite translation of this line by Stephen Mitchell,

Be still and know that I am within you,

After which I return to Fischer,

I am with you at the silent center of all things.

Repeat these lines after me:

Be still and know that I am within you,

I am with you at the silent center of all things.

I do not believe that such a translation violates the original intent of the psalmist. I believe it adds a welcome dimension to the image of God as a power not only above and beyond but also within and among us. This phrasing of the psalm comforts me in a week like the one just past.

The other psalm that I find myself returning to is Psalm 91. It begins,

"You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord

'My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.'

For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler

and from the deadly pestilence;

God will cover you with his pinions

and under God's wings you will find refuge."

I like the image of being held in the shadow of God's wings. I often use that image in prayers. But in its traditional translation, this psalm can get

somewhat overblown. This psalm becomes problematic when it goes on and on about how God will protect me while others around me fall. In fact when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness he used this psalm when he dared Jesus to jump off a cliff and try to fly, saying, "God will command his angels... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Thus the saying, "Even the devil can quote scripture to his own use."

Even Jesus didn't buy it.

Years ago, when a child in this church was badly beaten, I found an alternative translation of the end of this psalm by Leslie Brandt, Psalm Now, for our prayer for that child on the following Sunday. I used it again this week in remembering David Reiser. Here are its words. "Because my child loves me, I will never let him go. I shall feel the pain of his wounds and bear his hurt and shall transform that which is ugly into that which enriches and blesses. And when he cries out I shall hear and answer him."

That to me is one of the faces of God that appears in suffering, as Sandy mentioned two weeks ago, the God who is with us, within us, among us, transforming all of life.

I cannot conclude my section without also including a Psalm from the translation I turn to most often, almost daily, Stephen Mitchell's A Book of Psalms. I close with his translation of Psalm 90, the one that we know of as the basis for the hymn, "Our God our Help in Ages Past." Mitchell ends the psalm with these words,

"Fill us in the morning with your wisdom;
shine through us all our lives.

Let our hearts soon grow transparent in the radiance of your love.

Show us how precious each day is;

teach us to be fully here.

And let the work of our hands prosper, for our little while."

Prayer – Sandy Reimer

From Psalm 147

Meister Eckhart, an early Christian mystic, once said that if the only prayer we ever said was "Thank You", that would be enough. In this spirit, as we move into this season of Thanksgiving, I invite you to pray with me in the spirit of Thankfulness offered by Stephen Mitchell's translation of Psalm 147.

Let us Pray:

We come before you O God, in thankful songs and prayers for all your blessings,

We thank you:

For rebuilding what has been ruined and recreating what was lost,

For healing the broken hearted and being medicine for their wounds,

For lifting up the afflicted and giving them courage to endure,

For Sun and clouds, stars and moon, and all that flourishes upon the earth.

We thank you for shining through our lives, giving us joy, and blessing our loves with your love.
Let your love speak in all people in the silence of every heart. Amen.