God Addressed in Risky Ways: an Experience of Psalm 35

by

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Abstract

This qualitative research study is situated within the Roman Catholic faith community, and explores its association with the imprecatory psalms in its prayer, reflection, and ministry. After tracing the history of the Church’s relationship with these scriptural texts, this question was posed for investigation in this phenomenological thesis:

How do a group of informed, practicing adult Roman Catholics experience the imprecatory psalms?

The study presented the imprecatory psalms in the context of the integral Psalter. Participants were provided the opportunity to enter into a dynamic experience of the psalmic curses—with particular attention to Psalm 35—over a period of seven weeks. Included were weekly group seminars, individual reading and writing assignments, as well as group and individual lectio divina encounters with Psalm 35.

Verbal and written data were analyzed according to the parameters appropriate the phenomenological research.
Findings disclosed some level of initial hesitancy and/or discomfort with these psalms—texts with which participants had minimal to no previous interaction. This preliminary uncertainty, however, did not appear to thwart their constructive engagement with the imprecatory psalms, nor their willingness to articulate their experience. Their responses and insights appear to support a place for these psalms in the life of the Roman Catholic Church.
Acknowledgments

I acknowledge with gratitude my director, Joseph Schner S.J., for his ready availability and insightful guidance; the bishop and Diocese of Charlottetown for generous material support; the members of my Ministry Base Group for their encouragement in the early stages of the project; the study participants for the diligent commitment that made this project possible; parishioners and others, with whom I have shared the pastoral ministry relationship, for teaching and inspiring me; and the late Bernice Cullen CSM, who first introduced a searching teenager to the Psalms.
Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this work to my Mom, June Marie Connolly, for her unflagging devotion to her children.
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Chapter I
Introduction

1.1 Personal and Ministry Context

Much time in my early years was spent in the company of my maternal grandparents on a small Prince Edward Island mixed farm. My grandfather was a farmer who loved his land and his livestock. Some of my earliest memories are of him extolling the virtues of crop rotation, in an era before the practice was the subject of public debate and provincial legislation. He was a man of intelligence and wisdom who had a relationship with his animals, the earth he cultivated, the trees that bordered the fields and filled the yard, and the crops he sowed and reaped. In all of that he was mindful of the God to whom he referred as “The Man Above.” The clericalism of the day not for him, he was not shy to question something the priest said or to make up his own mind about issues not discussed in many households of the time. I imbibed from him the value of one’s opinion, respect for what God has made, the interconnectedness of creation, a sense of the relationship of faith to the everydayness of life, and the importance of finding a balanced perception of God’s immanence and transcendence.

Aside from family experience, another formative factor is my study and work in psychology. After an undergraduate degree in this subject area, I worked for three years as an in-patient psychiatric nursing attendant. Immediately subsequent to this, I completed a two-year MA in School Psychology. This was followed by several years of varied work: as a school psychologist, a counsellor-psychometrician in a mental health clinic, and a counsellor-family

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2 Mixed farming, largely phased out during the early 1970’s, was the agricultural practice of growing a variety of crops and livestock. In many places, it has been replaced by a kind of specialist agriculture, akin to the “factory farm.” For a brief contemporary discussion of the shift and some of its implications, see Michael Swan, “Getting Back in Touch with the Land: Ontario Bishops Weigh in on ‘The Fruit of the Earth,’” The Catholic Register, April 20, 2014.
life educator at a family service agency. The client-centred practice in which I engaged revealed that we desire change, healing, and growth in our lives, even if sometimes—maybe, many times—we thwart the fulfillment of our own deepest longings.

My formal study of theology—a third formative factor—was pursued out of this background. A highlight of this five-year experience was its academic work, with the opportunities, in preparing for ministry as a parish priest, to apply theology to life.

Eight years after ordination, I was granted sabbatical leave to pursue graduate work in Liturgical Studies at an American university, operated by Benedictine monks, many of whom were faculty. In studies prerequisite to the MA, I discovered anew that at the heart of Roman Catholic understanding of the Church’s liturgical prayer is the process of transformation, of change, of growth, of becoming more and more configured to the person of Christ, and of being sent out to live that in the world. Since liturgy reflects and shapes life, this coming to the fullness of Christ, in Christ, touches all aspects of who we are and what we do.

Our understanding, our world-view takes shape contextually. Our understanding of ministry has its genesis in the practice of ministry, the experience of living in community seeking the recognition of our own need for faith, hope, and love, and committing in faith, hope, and love to help our brothers and sisters address those same needs. At the outset, I want to relate my current ministerial context.

I have been a Roman Catholic priest for twenty-five years, and currently am the pastor of a three-church pastoral unit in rural Prince Edward Island. Our church-going congregation consists mostly of seniors, with a number of middle-aged couples and singles, as well as a small number of parents and young children. Older teens are largely absent from Sunday worship and
parish activities. It has been estimated that about 60 per cent of our population attends Sunday Eucharist on a regular or semi-regular basis. My pastoral relationship extends beyond the 60 per cent, to all in the area who present themselves in need of care. The exodus of people from the rural parts of our province has noticeably diminished the population residing in our area.\(^3\)

Many people in the area are retired. Resident farmers are few; land is mostly cultivated by people from outside the district. There are two small fishing ports in the area. Most parishioners of employment age work 20 kilometers away, in Charlottetown. Within the last 10 years, local schools were closed. Children and teens attend schools in the city or other rural villages. In the midst of these changes, challenges, and opportunities, while a sense of community and a desire to support it are present, both are challenged by an ever-encroaching urbanization.

The typical week finds me presiding at liturgical celebrations, meeting with parish groups and individuals, visiting the local hospital, private homes and various nursing care facilities, attending external meetings, communicating by telephone and electronically, and facilitating adult faith formation groups. In recent years, added to this are the responsibilities of D Min work.

I also have several diocesan responsibilities including Liturgical Master of Ceremonies, membership on the Diocesan Liturgical Commission and on a committee charged with supporting the ongoing development of priests, and as a facilitator with the diocesan adult faith formation program. In addition, I lead occasional reflection days and weekend retreats.

\(^3\) Reasons for this include seeking proximity to services by seniors, and employment opportunities for younger people.
Recently, I was appointed a representative of the CCCB’s Atlantic Liturgical Conference to *The National Council for Liturgy and the Sacraments.*

I work with two Pastoral Associates—a laywoman and a religious sister—and a number of parishioners, who, with us, through freely-offered ministries, provide pastoral care to the people of St. Martha’s Pastoral Unit. As pastor, I am collaboratively involved in the various aspects of the Unit’s life.

I was first introduced to the Word of God as prayer in my teens. During my time in the seminary, and post-ordination, I have had the opportunity to deepen my relationship with the Word through the prayer-experience of silent retreats, often in monastic settings. It was in this milieu that I came to appreciate and appropriate the practice of leisurely reading the Scriptures, allowing the Word to touch and inform life, which the tradition calls “lectio divina.”4 This formative experience has influenced how I approach the Bible: its relationship to my own life, and how I respond to it in my prayer, homily preparation, and the practice of pastoral ministry. Lectio divina has been part of my life for more than a dozen years, and has provided an important interpretive lens for my encounter with the Word of God in the psalms, in choosing to work with them in the study here addressed, and in presenting and interpreting its results in this paper.

1.2 Theology of Ministry

Though my ministerial relationship with the community includes interaction on happy occasions—marriages, the birth of a child, and social activities—many of my individual and family contacts are in relation to the pain and struggle people experience in life. The

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4 This practice will be further discussed below.
emotional/spiritual component of these contacts is complex. People come looking for psychological ease and assistance with coping, with discovering their own interior resources, with embracing their potential for healing and growth. They want life to be different. Because they come to the parish priest, they want, implicitly or explicitly, to find God in their turmoil. I am in solidarity with them for I know of their search from my own times of anguish, my own experience of being “incomplete and on the way.” I further know this quest to be a journey, a-sometimes-painstakingly-slow one, in which we alternately encourage and thwart ourselves.

Living in profound ambiguity, we desire transformation—maturation toward the full stature of Christ—and at the same time retreat from its possibilities. We long to be free of dysfunction, and are afraid of the very freedom toward which we aspire. I relate to this in my own journey, and hear it loudly echoed by those with whom I have shared the relationship of ministry. We often avoid active awareness of the realities in our history, our personality, our responses and reactions that contribute to our often-times self-imposed lethargy. We shy from what we interpret as our darkness. Yet, it is in the darkness that we see light. We are invited and empowered to cultivate the courage needed to gaze upon who we are on the road to becoming all we were made to be.

Christian ministry, I propose, is a relationship of trust, a participation in the person of Christ, lived out in a process whereby, each in accord with their role, the minister and the recipient of ministry journey together in that budding courage toward maturity in Christ. With

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individual and communal dimensions, ministry nurtures a mutually-developing awareness of who we are and what we are to do as Christ’s presence to one another and to the world.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

Early faith experiences, my study and work in psychology, my theological formation and ongoing reflection, my study and prayer with the Word of God, my association with the practice of lectio divina, my pastoral outreach, my person: all meld together to stimulate my desire to incorporate the Bible more deeply into my practice of pastoral ministry.

How can the Scripture help us along the way toward ministry’s fruit: our growing together “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ?” As what follows will explore, from the earliest eras of Christian faith, Christians have widely embraced the psalms’ relevance. The psalms’ ability to touch the whole range of human thought, emotion, and action led the community to incorporate the entire psalmic corpus into prayer and reflection on life. Most abundant among those ancient texts are laments, poetic prayers that bewail life’s struggles and pain. Plentiful among the laments are the imprecations: verses and entire psalms that rail against varied causes of these woes, the so-called “enemies.” As will be explored here, particular uneasiness with these expressions of raw emotion can be detected almost from the beginning, and reached its zenith in the post-Vatican II’s liturgical reform decision to omit these verses and psalms from the Roman Liturgy of the Hours.

More than twenty years ago, I began to consider the implications of this excision. A myriad influences likely coalesced to fuel my curiosity: my study and work in psychology, my

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7 Eph. 4:13.
8 See, for example, Pss. 35, 58, 83, 109, 137.
study and application of theology and scripture, my regular prayer with the psalms in the Divine Office, my personality, experiences, challenges, and emotions.

In this research project, I set out to explore the issue of our reception of the imprecatory psalms—individually and communally. Specifically, I begin here to discover how these widely unfamiliar psalms of imprecation may have a place in pastoral care. To this end, my study will ask and address this question:

**How do a group of informed, practicing adult Roman Catholics experience the imprecatory psalms?**

1.4 Outline

I begin with an exploration of the relevant literature, providing an historical overview. The characteristics of qualitative phenomenological research will be presented, and applied as the philosophical underpinning and methodology for this study. A description of the data collection and analysis will be included, followed by a presentation of the findings, and concluding with a discussion of the results and their application to the life of individual Christians and of the Church.
Chapter II
Review Of The Relevant Literature
Early Church To Enlightenment

2.1 Introduction

“It is almost impossible to overestimate the influence of the Psalms on Jewish and Christian tradition, both in terms of the worship of the community and the spiritual experience of countless individuals.” This work will address the Christian tradition, and within that inheritance, how a particular psalm genre touches the individual and communal experience of Christian believers—individual and communal.

The New Testament records Jesus’ use of psalmic prayer. Using words with which Jesus was familiar was prized by the earliest Christians. Given that most of the primitive disciples were Jews, it is all the more understandable that these Jewish texts would be at hand. Their influence in the developing theology of followers of the Way is attested by their being the source of more than one-third of the 360 Old Testament quotations in the New. By the fourth century—particularly in the East—Christian appropriation of the psalms was wide-spread and diverse.

The earliest post-resurrection tradition of psalm prayer employed all these ancient texts: the integral Psalter. This work will focus on one particular group in the context of the whole.

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9 In the body of this paper, I use the lower case for the word, unless citing a specific psalm or quoting a reference source.
11 Cf. Mt. 21:42; Mk. 13:34; Lk. 23:46.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 34.
The imprecations find their home among the most numerous of the psalm types: the laments. Throughout history they have captured the imaginative attention of Christians. Some have embraced them; others, used them, managing the harshness of their tone with interpretive methods that attempted to fit them into the gentleness and love with which Jesus was associated. Pilloried, they have been by others, who have seen them as irreconcilably antithetical to Christian prayer and ethics. The official Church has embraced them, been silent about them, excised them, and sought to keep them before the community—depending on the time and place we might consider.

What follows takes up this centuries-long conversation. After some voices from eras before our own, we will hear about the place of these psalms in the discussion of the Second Vatican Council’s liturgical reform. Picking up on the post-conciliar reception of these decisions, we will attend to abiding threads, particularly over the past twenty-five years, leading us to observe the psalmic curse’s present place in the life of the Christian community.

2.2 Patristic Views

2.2.1 Athanasius

One of the recognized accomplishments of the controversial\textsuperscript{16} fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, was his bridging the distance between desert monastic practice and urban Christian spirituality. The result was tri-fold: city-dwellers were introduced to the contemplative practices of the monks; the recluses were brought into the orbit of the Church of

\textsuperscript{16} Athanasius was exiled five times for his defence of the divinity of the Son during the rampant years of the “Arian Controversy.”
Alexandria; at the same time, though not a monastic\textsuperscript{17}, “Athanasius thoroughly integrated ascetic practice into his theology and it proved to be a decisive component to his ecclesiastical politics.”\textsuperscript{18}

One of the extant fruits of this shaping of Athanasian thought is his Letter to Marcellinus.\textsuperscript{19} In an era when Christians and their non-Christian counterparts often voluntarily embraced practices seen to enhance their spiritual growth, it may be assumed that Marcellinus was one of the urban Christians drawn into the asceticism the bishop was promoting among the people of his diocese.\textsuperscript{20} The focus of the work is the psalms, and how they can be strategically applied to the Christian life. Its inclusion as a preface to the Psalter in the fifth-century Alexandrian Codex helped make it more widely known than might have been expected.\textsuperscript{21}

Written at a time when the Psalter was gaining even wider prominence in Christian prayer, the 33-chapter correspondence takes its initiative from a conversation between the bishop and “a learned old man.”\textsuperscript{22} While “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching,”\textsuperscript{23} the Book of Psalms stands out in that it “possesses a certain winning exactitude for those who are prayerful.”\textsuperscript{24} In relation to the other inspired books, “the Book of Psalms is like a garden,” summarily encapsulating everything those others contain.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{17} It is said that one of his times of exile was spent in one of Egypt’s Pachomian monasteries.
\textsuperscript{19} St. Athanasius, \textit{The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus}. trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980). Athanasius and Evagrius, who follows, rather than providing commentary on the psalms—as do other patristic authors cited herein—begin to articulate a theology, suited to their time and place, of applying the Word to life.
\textsuperscript{21} Gillingham, 29.
\textsuperscript{22} Athanasius, \textit{Letter} 1. This elder may have been a monk or Athanasius, himself. Athanasius’ work is referenced by paragraph numbers.
\textsuperscript{23} 2 Tm. 3:16, cited in \textit{Letter}, 2.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 2 and 9.
At the same time, the Psalter is unique. To it belongs an emotionality not found in the other biblical pages. As it summarizes the Bible, so too does it encompass the sentiments of the human heart. This “marvel of its own” resides in the fact “that it contains even the emotions of each soul...In the other books one hears only what one must do and not do...[I]n the Book of Psalms, the one who hears...also comprehends and is taught in it the emotions of the soul.”

Concludes Athanasius, “For I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.” Unequivocally: “[a]nd nothing beyond these is found among men.” The words of the Psalter “become like a mirror” to the person vocalizing them, “so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.” So too, “he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him.” For each, “one would find the divine hymns appointed for us and our emotions and equanimity.” They speak to each; to all.

The psalms, writes Athanasius, become the words of those who pray them. “Remarkably, after the prophesies about the Savior and the nations, he who recites the psalms is uttering the rest as his own words, and each sings them as if they were written concerning him...[H]e handles them as if he is speaking about himself.” Not only do those who come to the psalms in prayer understand the psalms’ relevance to them, “the psalms comprehend” those who pray with them. In other sacred writings, both those who read and hear read the words

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26 Ibid., 10.
27 Ibid., 30.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 12.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 11.
33 Ibid.
relate to them as about those of long ago. “By contrast...he who takes up...the Psalter recognizes [what is written] as being his own words...And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs.”  

That effect—for the singer and for the auditor—is transformation. Through the Psalter, we lift ourselves up to God. “Let him therefore select the things said in [the psalms] about each of [life’s] circumstances, and reciting what has been written concerning him, and being affected by the writings, lift them up to the Lord.” This oblation of the self is especially effected and signified in the singing of these Hebrew poems. The “whole range of the voice” used in song signifies the entirety of the one who chants being given to God. The melodious harmony gives outward manifestation to a renewed integrity of the inner person. The one who engages the psalms “is enabled by this book to possess the image deriving from the words.” “That which is rough and disorderly [in the soul] is smoothed away.” One is brought to healing and repentance. The one who hears the psalm read, “when he is convicted by his conscience, being pierced he will repent, or hearing of the hope that resides in God...he exults and begins to give thanks to God.”

Because Christ willed that he “resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also

34 Ibid., 11.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 30.
37 Ibid., 27.
39 Letter, 10.
40 Ibid., 28.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 12.
from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and disposition of the soul, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion."43 The psalms, “the perfect image of the soul’s course of life,”44 facilitate our becoming incrementally configured to the image and likeness of Christ.

The psalms—as they were first written.45 These ancient texts teach

what one must say...when suffering afflictions...after afflictions...what the words of those who hope in God are...what one must say when giving thanks...how one must call out while fleeing...what words must be offered to God while being persecuted and after being delivered subsequent to persecution...46...what one says to be able to gratify the Lord, and by what sort of expressions it is possible to make amends for himself.47

“Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice, the things written just as they were spoken."48 To echo the words of the ancient pray-ers is the precursor to the imitation of their holy lives.49 To alter the text is to break communion with the primordial speakers. They recognize their words and join themselves to us in our prayer when we replicate them. And not only the ancients: “the Lord who watched over the one who originally said these things”50 will do the same for those who repeat them. The Psalter is to be read in its entirety “for truly the things in it are divinely inspired,” and “to take benefits from these, as from the fruits of a garden on which he may cast

43 Ibid., 13.
44 Ibid., 14.
45 Athanasius was not likely considering issues of translation, and the difficulties associated with retrieving the “very words” of the original composer.
46 Letter, 10.
48 Ibid., 31.
49 Ibid., 33.
50 Ibid., 32.
his gaze when the need arises,”51 the entire crop is required. The hungers are manifold.

Plenteous nourishment need be at hand.

In his missive to the recuperating Marcellinus, Athanasius does not content himself with
general laudatory comments in relation to the Book of Psalms. He is particularly prescriptive in
matching these Hebrew poems to concrete situations in life. In a way that may seem a bit too
neat to readers of the twenty-first century, he goes on at length delineating one scenario after
another, and its appropriate psalmic response.

And if, in giving thanks, you wish to learn what it is necessary to offer to the Lord, while
you think spiritually, chant the twenty-eighth. Further, when consecrating your house—
that is the soul that is being received by the Lord and the somatic house in which you
dwell bodily—give thanks and say the twenty-ninth.52 ... When you...are filled with
wonder over God’s love for mankind, sing your praise in the thirty-first psalm.53 ...You
marvel at the order of creation, and the grace of the providence in it, and the holy
precepts of the Law. Sing the eighteenth and the twenty-third.54 ...Since our nature is
feeble, when you come to be like a beggar because of life’s distresses, if at some time
you are exhausted and you wish to be encouraged, you have the one hundred and first
psalm.55 ...Should you become aware that you are being shepherded and led in the right
path by the Lord, sing Psalm 22, rejoicing in this.56 ...But you sinned, and being ashamed,
you repent and you ask to be shown mercy. You have in Psalm 50 the words of
confession and repentance.57 ...And then, if you wish to learn what sort of person the
citizen of the kingdom of heaven is, chant Psalm 14.58

Though much of the episcopal advice is directed toward Marcellinus’ interior state, we
find, as well, directions that pertain to his life as a member of a community, responsible for the
well-being of those around him:

51 Ibid., 30.
52 Ibid., 17.
53 Ibid., 18.
54 Ibid., 17.
55 Ibid., 24.
56 Ibid., 17.
57 Ibid., 20.
58 Ibid., 16.
When you see those who suffer tribulation, encourage them, praying and speaking the words of Psalm 19\(^59\) ... But when you see numerous people in need or in poverty, and you wish to treat them mercifully, you are able, by saying Psalm 40, both to approve those who already act with compassion, and to urge others toward doing the same.\(^60\)

Marcellinus, assumes Athanasius, will be affected by others in an additional way. He will not be in a position to rescue them from struggle; they will be visiting him with affliction. Here, too, the Psalter provides remedy. Several examples will suffice.

“When you see your acquaintances turning against you, do not be alarmed, but separate yourself from them and turn your mind to the future and sing Psalm 30.”\(^61\) Among the words enjoined upon Marcellinus are these:

Let them be silenced in the grave,
let lying lips be dumb
that speak haughtily against the just
with pride and contempt.\(^62\)

“And if when persecuted you go out into the desert, do not be afraid, as though alone, but having God there and rising before dawn, sing the sixty-second psalm.”\(^63\) Thus, the new day would be greeted with a melody whose lyrics include:

Those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down to the depths of the earth.
They shall be put into the power of the sword

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 17.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{62}\) Ps. 30: 19. (31: 17-18). Athanasius uses LXX numbering; current Roman Catholic liturgical books number the psalms according to the Hebrew. The verses cited here are among those excluded from the current Roman Liturgy of the Hours.
\(^{63}\) Letter, 20.
and left as the prey of the jackals.

But the king shall rejoice in God;
(all that swear by him shall be blessed)
for the mouth of liars shall be silenced.⁶⁴

Continues Athanasius,

And again, when the enemies are all gathered together from all points, and are both issuing threats against the house of God and forming a confederacy against true religion, lest you become despondent because of the magnitude of the crowd and its might, you possess as an anchor of hope the phrases of the eighty-second psalm.⁶⁵

Hear some of those hopeful phrases:

My God, scatter them like chaff,
drive them like straw in the wind!
As fire that burns away the forest,
as the flame that sets the mountains ablaze,
drive them away with your tempest
and fill them with terror at your storm.
Cover their faces with shame,
till they seek your name, O Lord.⁶⁶

If the psalms were to be reformative for the whole self, if the reintegration of the fragmented person was to be accomplished, how could anything but the whole Psalter be called upon?

⁶⁵ Letter, 22.
⁶⁶ Ps. 82: 14-17. (83: 13-16).
2.2.2 Evagrius

Athanasius was not alone among his contemporaries in prescribing the Psalter’s words as a life-companion and as a remedy for the afflictions of the human spirit. Evagrius of Pontus is counted among the fourth-century Desert Fathers. Prior to joining an Egyptian monastic community, he had been influenced by the Cappadocians, the Jerusalem Christians, and Origen of Alexandria. With Athanasius, he postulated that the Psalter offered a synopsis of the whole of Scripture, and, like the entirety of the Bible, had Christ at its heart.

Evagrius, as well as from an intellectual grasp of the psalms, spoke experientially. True to the monastic ethos of his time and place, it is said that he prayed the psalms 100 times a day, each time followed by a time of silent prayer, included to give the monk the opportunity to chew on the recited words. He concluded, “Psalmody calms the passions and puts to rest the body’s disharmony.” He prescribes, “Sing psalms with understanding and good rhythm, then you will be like the young eagle borne aloft on the heights.”

Like Athanasius, Evagrius is directly prescriptive in the use of the psalms in dealing with life. Psalmic texts may be directed to others who appear to be in need of their healing properties. To awaken the consciences of the wealthy who take advantage of their status to oppress and abuse: “He lies in wait in secret like a lion in his den. He [lies] in ambush to seize the poor, to catch the poor by drawing him to himself.” The intemperate may be sobered if they are offered

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67 Among them, late 4th-century Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.
68 Gillingham, 34. The ancients often used the image of a cow chewing the cud to describe the process of the monastic’s meditative regurgitation of the consumed word in order to extract its nourishment, and appropriate its sustenance.
70 Ibid. 82 in Ibid., 73.
71 Ibid. Ps.10: 30 in Ibid., 146.
these words, “My knees are weakened from fasting and my flesh is changed from lack of oil.”72

Not for admonishment only, the psalms may also be used to encourage. To help a Christian who finds herself co-habiting with those who are irreverent and sinful, Ps. 25: 9 may be recommended, “Do not destroy my soul together with the impious.”73 If one finds himself in the company of mourners, “these [words] are necessary in the presence of a soul given over to grief, ‘Why then are you sad my soul? And why do you trouble me?’”74

For one’s own advancement along the path to spiritual growth—for Evagrius, a necessary first step before one is able to guide others75—the psalms are an ally. To aid in combating the temptation to pride, he resorts to Ps. 126: 1: “Unless the Lord build the house, in vain do they labour who build it. Unless the Lord keeps watch over the city in vain do the watchers keep (sic) vigil.”76 A psalm verse is again prescribed as “useful for those demons who become visible to us and [thus] tempt us to be terrified: ‘And my eye has seen my enemies, and my ear will hear the wicked who rise against me.’”77

One of the chief benefits of psalmody, according to Evagrius, is its power to soothe and ameliorate disordered passions. Chief among these, in the reckoning of his time and place, was anger. “Anger is the sharpest passion. It is said to be a boiling up and a movement of indignation against a wrongdoer or perceived wrongdoer...Then sometimes it is lingering and is changed into rancour.”78 Anger, opines the monk, has an internal origin and spills out into external consequences. Psalmody calms the bubbling waters of the angry heart. Its balm, though, must be

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72 Ibid. Ps. 108:24 in Ibid.
73 Ibid., 7 in Ibid., 148.
74 Ibid. 6 in Ibid.
75 Ibid., 149.
76 Evagrius Ponticus, “Scholia on Psalms,” 1 in Ibid., 145.
77 Ibid.
78 Evagrius Ponticus, “Praktikos,” 11 in Ibid., 125.
applied repeatedly because the struggle with anger—unlike that with gluttony and lust—endures over the lifetime, and, he adds, is especially characteristic of those advanced in the quest for holiness. He feels thus called upon to advise, “Exhort the elders to mastery of anger and the young to mastery of the stomach. For against the former strive the demons of the soul, and against the latter, for the most part, those of the body.”

In this quest for transformation, toward growth in Christ, “psalms summon the intellect to continuous memory of virtue by cooling our burning indignation and by quenching our desires.” Singing the psalms restores, says Evagrius, the balance of bodily humours that regulate health and sickness. Undistracted psalmody, wherein the heart and voice are joined, helps establish a new relationship between virtues and the self.

After warning against anger—the “sharpest passion”—and the vices associated with it, Evagrius introduces a qualification, even an ambivalence:

Do not immediately pray when you are tempted; first speak some words with anger to the one oppressing you; for when your soul is acted upon by tempting thoughts prayer cannot be pure. But if you speak with anger to them, you will confuse and banish the ideas that come from your enemies.

It is to this qualified ambivalence we now turn.

2.3 Ambivalence

2.3.1 Emotion

James and Evelyn Whitehead summarize Christian ambivalence toward emotions. They cite the many biblical examples of an emotive God “immersed in all the passions that

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79 Ibid. 36 in Ibid. 125-126.
80 Ibid. 10 in Ibid. 126.
81 Ibid. 69-71 cited in Ibid., 128.
82 Ibid. 171 in Ibid. 133.
accompany commitment.”83 The Jewish-Christian scriptures display “the entire scope of human emotions,” the gospel writers, in particular, being clear that Jesus experienced and manifested every sentiment we would expect from one who shares fully in what it is to be human.84 Very early, though, such unbridled sentiment was called into question, fueled by Hellenistic dualism with its related Stoicism,85 and a conviction that Jesus, even though fully human, transcended mundane emotion. For mortals, though the spectrum of emotional responses might be deemed legitimate, “the decisive point is that the affections must be oriented aright.”86 Reason was to direct the potentially unruly sentiments of the heart: sentiments shared with the animal kingdom.87 A pervasive suspicion of emotions assigned them to a “subversive role” in the human person.88 Left unchecked, it was feared, such “fleshly passions” had the capacity to separate us from God.89

Seen to compromise God’s transcendence, divine emotions were downplayed.90 Within a few centuries of Jesus of Nazareth, theologians began to argue that the emotions attributed to God were human projections, anthropomorphisms not to be literally interpreted.91 A “serene God” was proposed: “unperturbed by emotion, safely removed from the murky, compromising drama of human feelings.”92 Scriptural examples from the Jewish tradition may give evidence of

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85 Ibid., 40.
87 See Lester, 43-47 for an overview of Christian theological perspectives on human emotion.
88 Ibid., 54.
89 Whitehead and Whitehead, 63.
90 Lester, 41.
91 Ibid., 39.
92 Ibid., 64.
a precedent for the early Christian discomfort with a God whose inner life mirrored exactly that of his human creatures.93

Citing the work of numerous twentieth-century theologians—the sample size of whom he observes may be criticized as insufficient—Lester opines that the work of developing a Christian theology of human emotion remains largely undone.94 A theology that does not reflect upon the emotional reality of the human person, he concludes, is deficient, comparable to “trying to understand an automobile without addressing the role of the motor.”95

2.3.2 Anger

In spite of the Hebrew insight that human anger could be transformed into the praise of God,96 the prophetic anger97 of Jesus when he saw the holy reduced to a marketing opportunity,98 and New Testament qualified allowance for anger,99 what has been said of human emotion is amplified when we turn to a discussion of anger.100 Well acquainted with anger’s potential to wreak havoc, early Christians were suspicious of its destructive possibility.101 Listed as one of the “seven deadly sins,” anger is associated with evil. It is therefore perceived to be unbecoming for the Christian, and a source of human-divine alienation, an obstacle to the

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93 This may be evidenced, for example, in Ps. 82:17: “Cover their faces with shame ‘til they seek your name, O Lord.” and in Is. 20:22; “The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing: they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.” Punishment is attributed not to God’s anger or wrath, but to his desire to instruct and save.
94 See Lester, 47-53. In support of Lester’s observation, I observe the Roman Catholic official discomfort with the emotive expressiveness of the psalms, excised from liturgical prayer. I discuss this below.
95 Ibid., 52.
96 Ps. 76:11.
97 Whitehead and Whitehead, 68, link anger to the prophetic movement in Israel. They see a connection between the “withering” of prophecy in the Church in the course of the third century and the loss of a positive view of anger.
98 Mt. 21:12 - 17; Mk. 11:15 - 19; Lk.19: 45 – 46; Jn. 2: 13 - 22.
99 Eph. 4:26.
100 Lester, 67, makes a point to distinguish anger from aggression. “Anger and aggression are two different dynamics...Many aggressive behaviours are not motivated by anger, and anger does not always lead to aggression.”
101 Ibid., 189.
presence of the Spirit, “a most destructive disease of the soul.” As such, it is seen to be a symptom of spiritual immaturity—even depravity— “a deadly poison...that must be totally uprooted from the depths of our soul.” The work of that conquering was often accomplished through suppression and denial. Its presence was thus clouded to its host; its potentially constructive energy left largely untapped.

As an emotive God was eschewed so as to protect divine transcendence, so a God who felt and acted upon the emotion of anger—as often portrayed in parts of the Old Testament, and sometimes with Jesus in the New—proved untenable for influential early Christians, who sought to preserve their understanding of divine holiness. Because emotions were largely seen as a lesser human reality, an indication of vulnerability and weakness, attributing anger to God compromised omnipotence.

According to Lester, so prevalent was the “anger-as-sin” motif that it became the voice which shouted down a divergence of opinion among early Christians. A dominant understanding among those who, while appearing to remain suspicious of anger could see its possible constructive potential was its need to be regulated by reason. Thus brought under control by the higher powers, its energy could be used in the resistance of temptation and sin, the accomplishment of good works, and a motive for repentance. Anger may be a sign of love, if it was ignited by an observed injustice to another. In and of itself, appears to be the concession

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102 John Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsay (New York: Newman, 2000), 193. Continues Cassian, “For as long as [anger] resides in our hearts and blinds our mind’s eye with its harmful darkness, we shall be able neither to acquire the judgment of a proper discretion nor to possess a good contemplative vision or a mature counsel, and we shall not be sharers in life, tenacious of righteousness, and certainly not receptive to the spiritual and true light...”
103 Ibid., 193.
104 Whitehead and Whitehead, 67.
105 Cassian betrays this diversity of opinion when he alludes to “some people [who] try to excuse this most destructive disease of the soul by attempting to extenuate it by a rather detestable interpretation of Scripture...” *Institutes*, 193.
from many circles—even if cautiously—anger “is not in itself absolutely to be condemned.”\textsuperscript{106} As with emotions, so with anger says Lester, much remains to be done in developing a comprehensive theological understanding.\textsuperscript{107}

### 2.4 Integral Psalter

For Christians of the fourth century, praying with all the psalms, using the integral Psalter was a given. Gillingham reminds us that, by the fourth century, monastic communities were fully established in Athanasius’ Egypt, as well as in Cappadocia and Syria. While practices varied, these ancient ascetics spent hours every day in prayer, largely nurtured by the psalms. In, for example, \textit{The Sayings of the Desert Fathers}, citations from and allusions to biblical books occur almost three times as often from psalms as from any other Old Testament work.\textsuperscript{108} It was not unusual for the whole Psalter to be read in a week. In Syria, some communities were reported to have accomplished this in a single day.\textsuperscript{109}

While daily prayer synaxes differed between cathedral and desert, the psalms were considered to belong to the whole Church. The Ambrosian rite completed the entire Psalter every two weeks; in Rome, the cycle was completed weekly.\textsuperscript{110} Benedict of Nursia followed the Roman tradition,\textsuperscript{111} arranging the psalms over a week, and allowing that the distribution be


\textsuperscript{107} Lester, 135. In support of Lester’s observation, consider this from Mary Margaret Funk, OSB in her \textit{Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush} (New York: Continuum, 2010), 77: Under the heading, \textit{Anger Prevents Prayer}, she writes, “A recurring affliction I have suffered through is anger. It matters not the cause; it comes and I am confronted with anger’s insidious ability to infect my mind.” That she sees anger as “infecting” implies invasion by a foreign and noxious substance. Might it have been helpful to explore anger as a source of prayer?

\textsuperscript{108} Gillingham, 41.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{111} A comparison of the 5\textsuperscript{th}-6\textsuperscript{th} century Roman Psalter and that of RB is found in Robert Taft \textit{Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and its Meaning for Today} (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 136-137. Taft, further, devotes a great deal of time to the relationship between the cathedral and monastic offices and their use of psalmody.
altered if another arrangement was seen to be more satisfactory, “but taking care in any case that the Psalter with its full number of 150 psalms be chanted every week and begun again every Sunday at the Night Office.” In Reformation times, we find the tradition of the whole Psalter in Luther’s desire to share a vernacular version of the psalms with the laity. Pius V’s 1568 revision of the Roman breviary maintained the recitation of the entire Psalter over the course of a week. This tradition among Roman Catholics continued until the 1960’s.

The tradition of the integral Psalter is demonstrably long-standing. Most numerous among those psalms are those that lament the woes of life. Included in this category are the psalms of imprecation. Imprecation is the most vivid expression of lament. These psalms bewail life’s struggles—individually and collectively—with the harshest words, while asking and expecting God’s intervention to right the wrong. Whether they be enemies of the nation or of a particular individual, unremitting retribution is demanded. Divine intervention will release the oppressed from their travails; at the same time, God will be manifested as just, “the God of gods.”

My God, scatter them like chaff, drive them like straw in the wind!
As fire that burns away the forest, as the flame that sets the mountains ablaze, drive them away with your tempest

113 Gillingham, 140. Athanasius, it appears, however, would not have been pleased with Luther’s rendering of the Psalms in metrical hymnody: “Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with persuasive phrases of the profane” Athanasius, 31.
114 Ibid, 155. The Anglican tradition read the entire Psalter over a month.
116 See Ps. 136. See also Ps. 86:8 and Ps. 95: 3. Among others, Margaret M. Daly-Denton discusses the development of Israel’s understanding of God in *Psalm-shaped Prayerfulness: a Guide to the Christian Reception of the Psalms* (Blackrock: Columba), 164-174.
and fill them with terror at your storm.
Cover their faces with shame,
till they seek your name, O Lord.  

Though it may be surprising for many Christians in the twenty-first century, as we have seen, these psalms were included in the prayer of early followers of the Way. We recall Athanasius who encouraged Marcellinus to pray the words above “when the enemies are all gathered together from all points, and are both issuing threats against the house of God and forming a confederacy against true religion, lest you become despondent because of the magnitude of the crowd and its might.”

Interpretation is imperative to meaning. These “words with teeth,” these voices of anger were included in the corpus of received prayer in the early Church. But how were they heard? A significant aspect of the answer lies in how they were interpreted. Athanasius and Evagrius have taken some time to set the stage for us. We will now turn to review, by way of historical survey, how others have taken up the task.

2.5 Other Patristic Voices

In commenting upon Psalm 83 (82), which Athanasius recommended to Marcellinus, Jerome, who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, has this to say in relation to another verse, “O God, make them like a wheel.” “Notice the mercy of the prophet; he does not pray against them, but for them. See what he says: My God who art the God of all, my very own

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117 Ps. 82: 14-17. (83: 13-16).
118 Letter, 22.
121 The psalm is attributed to David.
God, O my God, make them like a wheel. They who lay their foundation in malice, let them have no foundation at all, but let them roll back and forth and never remain fixed in their malice.” The intent of the psalmist is seen to be, not retaliation, but the eventual well-being of the perpetrator.122

Jerome’s contemporary, John Chrysostom, offers a similar hermeneutic when he interprets “Judge them O God; let them fall by their own counsels” from Psalm 5.123 “Notice here, too, the mildness of her prayer. She did not say, note, ‘Punish,’ but ‘Judge them,’ and make them put a stop to their wickedness; render their scheming fruitless, which we pray for on their behalf so that the working of evil should progress no further in them.”124 Our visceral reaction to the psalm is unfounded. What we took for a curse is really a prayer of blessing.

Another fourth-century exegete, Diodore of Tarsus, steers his hearers clear of interpreting a curse as a curse when he comments on Ps. 35. “Let them be put to shame and dishonour who seek my life...Let them be like chaff before the wind...Let ruin come upon them unawares...Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion...”125 Says Diodore, John Chrysostom’s teacher: “While the psalm possibly gives the impression of a curse, it is completely a piece of prophecy: the author foretells in the form of a prayer what the godless were destined to suffer.”126

Augustine takes a similar tack with this psalm, “The psalmist has not been praying for these calamities to happen, but foretelling that they will. And even though, speaking them by

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122 See Note 85, p. 13 “This may be evidenced...”
123 v. 10.
125 vv.4a,.5a, 8a, 26a
God’s Spirit, he has cast them in the form of a petition, he does so in the same way God fulfills the prophecy.” He then goes on to disabuse those who hear him of any notion that either the psalmist or God might be subject to the passions: “...for God acts with unerring judgment, a judgment good, just, holy, and calm; he is not decomposed by anger or by bitter jealousy or by any urge to vet his animosity. His intention is solely justice in the due punishment of vices.”

Theodore of Mopsuestia was born in Antioch about 350. Commenting on the same Psalm 35, he offers this interpretation, presaging Augustine’s justice theme: “‘Lord, judge those who wrong me.’ This is a fitting beginning for one intending to make a just request of God for punishment of those wronging him...Since justice and attention to events make the truth obvious...he intended to make request of the one capable of justly punishing those sinning against him.”

Theodore seems to allow a legitimate place for the plea for divine retribution.

Cassiodorus, whose nearly century-long life spanned from the late fifth century, began his career in Roman political administration before his conversion in mid-life. That the imprecations in Psalm 35 could be spoken by a Christian against another human being was unthinkable. The psalm, rather, “has reference to the devil and his followers...since he [Jesus] himself commands us, ‘Pray for your enemies,’ this statement cannot be aptly applied to people.” Here he echoes Evagrius, who, while he allowed a place for what Psalm 35

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expresses, judged it acceptable only if directed toward the spirit of evil, rather than a human perpetrator.\textsuperscript{130}

Contemporaneous with Cassiodorus, Benedict of Nursia wrote his rule for monasteries in the sixth century. His monks—as those before them—believed that Scripture could provide not only material for prayer, but the template for ordering all of life. The psalms had a particular place of prominence among a group whose guiding mandate was that they should “prefer nothing to the work of God.” the eight-times-daily gatherings for prayer that had the psalms at its core.\textsuperscript{131} In his Rule’s Prologue, Benedict supplies an interpretation of Ps. 137: 9. “O daughter Babylon, destroyer, blessed whoever repays you the payment you paid to us. Blessed whoever grasps and shatters your children on the rock!”\textsuperscript{132} A spiritual meaning to these jarring words, Benedict provides, writing, “While these temptations are still young, he caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ.”\textsuperscript{133} Later the same verse is interpreted and prescribed, “As soon as wrongful thoughts come into your heart, dash them against Christ, and disclose them to your spiritual father.”\textsuperscript{134} We see here an ancient interpretation of imprecation which applies the text to the interior life, in an attempt to transform and heal the heart.

2.6 A Word from the Scholastics

Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Psalms 1 to 54 had its genesis rather late in his life as pastoral lectures to Dominican friars.\textsuperscript{135} Carefully parsing words and phrases, he dissects the psalms line by line, attending to their historical setting, while providing his interpretation. On

\textsuperscript{130} See Evagrius Ponticus, “Praktikos” 171 in Dysinger, 133.
\textsuperscript{131} Rule of Benedict, 16 in Fry, 210-211.
\textsuperscript{133} Rule of Benedict, Prologue 28 in Fry, 162-163.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 4:50 in Ibid., 184-185.
\textsuperscript{135} Gillingham, 92.
the imprecation from Psalm 5, “Judge them because they are evil,” Thomas Aquinas associates it, citing Jerome, as speaking of the condemnation that awaits the “wicked” at the final judgment. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, however, raises an interpretive qualification. “‘Pray for them that persecute and calumniate you.’ I respond by saying that the prophets did not speak in accordance with their own will in their prophesies...They spoke according to the mind of divine justice.” They were not contradicting the words of Jesus. It was not their prayer; rather, “what they said was more in predictions for the future...Hence, ‘Judge,’ that is “I know that you will judge.”

He relies on prophecy and an appeal to the call to forgiveness, as well, in his commentary on the curses of Psalm 35 (34). “Let those who seek my life be shamed and disgraced. Let those who plan evil against me be routed in confusion.” After taking time to distinguish between planning evil and the actual doing of harm, he writes, “I respond by saying that in every imprecation of this kind, the meaning is two-fold. One which is said by way of prediction...or so that all things are understood as brought forth not from the zeal of one’s own vengeance, but of God’s justice, to which the just conform themselves.” He does concede, though, “If someone intends evil against another person who harms him, that does not seem to be totally unjust.” Here we find an echo of Theodore of Mopsuestia, nine centuries before.

Writing in Thomas’ era, though somewhat later, Pseudo-Albert the Great, described as likely a Dominican, and “a master of scripture studies in his day...in the school of Albert and Thomas,” comments on Psalm 137’s harshest interdicts. He sees the psalm lamenting “the

137 Ibid.
spiritual captivity of the true people of God in a spiritual Babylon.” After expressing “the
affliction and misery of the saints in this life of captivity,” the remainder of the psalm “curses
the persecutors who are cleaving to confusion because of love of the world.” He recollects the
historical situation of the Idumean’s complicity with the Babylonians in the downfall of
Jerusalem, then compares that to “the evil people [who] exhort one another to destroy the
Church.”\(^{139}\)

“‘Blessed he who repays you for the evil done to us.’ Then—as has been the refrain of
Aquinas and so many before them—to take revenge’s mandate out of human hands, “Who is
that? God and our Lord himself, who repays both those physical and spiritual enemies.”\(^{140}\)

“Blessed he who seizes and dashes your infants against the rock.”\(^{141}\) “The psalmist
seems to be addressing others or Babylon itself: the children of Babylon, that is, this world
before they collapse in sin, and throws them against the rock, which is Christ.”\(^{142}\) And the
purpose of this: “converting them and joining them to him.”\(^{143}\) Now, reminiscent of Benedict of
Nursia, seven centuries before, he adds, “Blessed also is the man who, in this world, does not
follow the little ones, that is the first movement toward sin, but, before, they have a chance to
grow, throws them against the rock that is Christ.”\(^{144}\)

2.7 Reformation and Response

Late fourteenth-century England witnessed a premonition of the Protestant Reformation
in the Lollards, a group of followers of Oxford University’s John Wycliffe. Condemned as

\(^{139}\) Ibid.
\(^{140}\) Ibid.
\(^{141}\) Ps. 137: 9.
\(^{142}\) Pseudo Albert, Commentary.
\(^{143}\) Ibid.
\(^{144}\) Ibid.
heretics for their emphasis on the authority of scripture over the influence of the clergy, they were persecuted by religious and secular authorities, and resorted to the imprecatory psalms as retaliation against what they saw to be an unfair persecution inflicted upon them by vengeful authorities. The curses of Psalm 35, “Let them be like chaff before the wind...Let them be covered with shame and confusion who raise themselves against me”\textsuperscript{145} were joined to the vitriolic litany of Psalm109, “Let his children be wanderers and beggars, driven from the ruins of their home,” to call down God’s just punishment upon their enemies.\textsuperscript{146}

A contemporaneous Benedictine monk, John Lydgate, turned likewise to the imprecations, choosing Psalm 137 to malign the Church, though not as the Lollards would have championed. “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,” was applied to the Church, which he accused of creating its own Babylonian captivity by its inability to deal effectively with heretics. “Happy those who strike your babies heads against the rocks” was interpreted by Lydgate as justification for like-treatment of the Lollards.\textsuperscript{147}

In the tumultuous sixteenth century, commentaries on the psalms were overtaken by the proliferation of vernacularized translations, and, in psalmic interpretation reflecting ecclesiastical politics in this age reformation and its countering response.\textsuperscript{148}

Martin Luther’s “attachment” to the psalms began as a twenty-two year old Augustinian friar, who with his community would have prayed these texts in the observance of the canonical hours. His concern, though, was scholarly as well as liturgical, and his aim to translate whole

\textsuperscript{145} Ps. 35: 5, 26b.
\textsuperscript{146}Gillingham, \textit{Psalms through the Centuries}, 114-115.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 131.
psalms—in rebuttal to the growing practice of psalm verses—that was both faithful to the original and accessible to the laity.\textsuperscript{149}

Luther’s growing rancor toward Roman domination and, what he saw to be, its misappropriation of the message of Jesus is reflected in his interpretation of the psalms. Two of the imprecations display this. The whole of Psalm 5 is seen as “a complaint against the ungodly, the unjust and the wicked.”\textsuperscript{150} More specifically, the psalm repudiates “all false prophets, hypocrites, heretics, superstitious ones, and the whole generation of those who devour the people of God by an adulteration of his word, and by a false show of works.”\textsuperscript{151} Seeing the psalms as prayer,\textsuperscript{152} he comments that David beseeches that “not [only] their thoughts, but their persons themselves should fall.”\textsuperscript{153} Then, some ambivalence may show itself in this: “Augustine sees the word as a prophecy (which is the sense that I rather prefer).”\textsuperscript{154} But then, David’s “prayer”—as distinct from prophetic utterance—is this: “accordingly, therefore, to this multitude of iniquities, do Thou, O Lord, cast them out, that their ungodliness be brought to naught.”\textsuperscript{155}

Commenting on Psalm 137 (136), with its “Blessed whoever grasps and shatters your children on the rocks,”\textsuperscript{156} he is more explicit: “The Lord curse the barren willows of those

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Luther, \textit{Commentary}, 227.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 230. “Their ungodliness”: is that again ambivalence, as opposed to their “persons” or does it imply their annihilation rather than their conversion in order to save the world from them?
\textsuperscript{156} Ps. 137 (136): 9.
streams,” in reference to the unfruitful sacraments of the Roman Church, holding Christians in the bondage of Babylonian captivity.\(^{157}\)

John Calvin’s sixteenth-century psalms commentary “was among the last major works of its kind for two centuries.”\(^{158}\) Commenting on Psalm 137 (136), he begins by setting it in its historical context of the Edomite conspiracy to destroy Jerusalem.\(^{159}\) He emphasizes that the “awful denunciation” of the psalm’s imprecations are justified because the psalmist—not first praying, as with Luther—but rather acts as God’s herald confirming previous Old Testament prophecies. God is called upon, under the inspiration of the Spirit “to demonstrate the truth of this prediction.”\(^{160}\) Such entreaty would be “unwarrantable” were not the conditions of God’s command and the party against whom it was sought “reprobate and incurable. For as to others, even our greatest enemies, we should wish their amendment and reformation.”\(^{161}\)

Perhaps more lenient than Luther, and less explicit, but then, though couched in the psalm’s historical setting, what would Calvin’s contemporaries make of this: “Incredible as it might appear that any calamity should ever overtake so mighty an empire as Babylon was, and impregnable as it was generally seen to be...he calls upon all God’s people to do the same, and by faith in heaven’s oracles to despise the pride of that abandoned city.”\(^{162}\)

Of sixteenth-century Jesuit, Robert Bellarmine, Pope Clement VIII is reported to have said, “The Church of God does not possess his equal in learning.”\(^{163}\) A leader in the Roman


\(^{158}\) Ibid., 146.


\(^{160}\) Ibid.

\(^{161}\) Ibid.

\(^{162}\) Ibid.

response to the reformers, Bellarmine authored a commentary on the complete Psalter. Commenting on Psalm 109 (108), a barrage the Lollards had hurled against their civil and ecclesiastical enemies, Bellarmine sees the psalm as prayed by David in the person of Christ. He sets the psalm in the context of the betrayal of Jesus, and interprets “Judas and the Jews” as the primary objects of its curses. He does broaden this to include unspecified “adversaries of Christ and of his Church,”\textsuperscript{164} though pointing out that a verse such as “Let them that detract me be clothed with shame...” is a prediction “in the shape of an imprecation.” In contrast to Luther and to Lydgate, who add no such caveat, Bellarmine regularly casts such verses as “not to be looked upon as...imprecation, but rather a prophecy.”\textsuperscript{165} The fulfilled prophecy may be salvific, he allows, for “some of his persecutors would be so taught by the scourges inflicted on them, that they would be converted...”\textsuperscript{166} Of the imprecatory Psalm 82 (83), he says, “a strong reason is offered here for God’s being no longer silent”\textsuperscript{167} against God’s enemies—again unnamed—-who are “not preparing for a raid or an incursion, but for the total annihilation and complete desolation of the Church of God.”\textsuperscript{168}

2.8 Interpretive Diversity

Our brief overview of psalmic interpreters from the fourth through sixteenth centuries has revealed some significant observations. We see a diversity of thought: from those who referred to imprecation as prayer for the one who appears to having been cursed; to those who admit the curse, but deny it could ever be applied to a person, but rather to the presence of evil; to those who allow the imprecations to be hurled, in the name of justice, against one who has

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 78, on Ps. 34 (35). See also, his comments on Pss. 5 and 82 (83).
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 204.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 202.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 203.
egregiously offended and hurt; to those who hear the words as prophecy; to those who apply the harshest of words to the enemy who resides within the pray-er’s own heart.

The entire Psalter provided for prayer; it was spoken by David; it was the voice of Christ: the focus has varied. How the psalms were experienced was dependent on how they were interpreted. A significant factor in the interpretation of the cursing psalms lay in the perception of who or what was the object of the imprecation. Does not “Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime: like a woman’s miscarriage who never sees the sun,”169 have a certain qualitative difference if hurled against a human adversary rather than as a diatribe uttered against one’s own internal struggle with dysfunction and vice? Might there not have been an experiential difference for the one who read or heard or prayed these words? In the diversity dwells ambivalence.

Our Christian forebears, as we have seen, while accepting the presence of the entire psalmic corpus, appear to have dealt with the awkwardness of the language of imprecation, when it was experienced, through hermeneutics. The Psalter remained intact, though its language was ameliorated in some cases by the meaning ascribed to it.

We have observed the early voices of Athanasius and Evagrius, both of whom used the psalms prescriptively, as direct means of helping people deal with specific experiences and situations in their lives. As early as Evagrius, we get a hint of discomfort with the emotion of anger—so starkly associated with imprecation. Billman and Migliore cite the example of Augustine’s reaction to the death of his mother and his commentary on the cursing psalms—and

169 Ps. 58:9.
laments more generally—as betraying a deep discomfort and suspicion of human emotions unbridled by reason.  

With the exception of the Lollards and Luther, the commentaries—even the earliest ones—while dealing with the issues of their time, move away from the prescriptive tenor of Athanasius and Evagrius to descriptive observation and interpretation, whose dominant emphasis in relation to the imprecatory psalms—even if sometimes seeming to admit of some place for nuance—tends to be the superseding commandment of love, de-legitimizing any human desire for revenge, and casting harsh words as prophetic oracles. Further, God, kept above the fray of emotional reaction to life’s anguish, maintain Billman and Migliore, preserved divine inviolability, and encouraged a piety of detachment wherein the only acceptable source of lament was human sinfulness. No space was left for justifiably bewailing life’s woes in the divine presence.  

This part of our historical sketch ends with the Reformation era, a time that Walter Brueggemann describes as a watershed moment in biblical interpretation. According to him, it was “the European ‘religious wars’ rooted in the Reformation departure from Catholicism [that] placed great doubt upon the capacity of a divided church to offer authoritative reading of Scripture.” What the Church was seen as no longer able to provide, reason could supply.  

This new perspective “placed unreserved confidence in the capacity of autonomous

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170 Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope (Cleveland: United Church, 1999), 50.
171 Ibid.
172 Walter Brueggemann, “The Re-emergence of Scripture: Post-liberalism,” in The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church, eds. Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes ((London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 153. It would be interesting to query Brueggemann as to whether we might see foreshadowings of the Enlightenment’s rationalistic, scientific approach in some earlier psalms commentaries at which we have looked, as—I suggest—they move away from the living reality of the psalms in the day-to-day lives of believers, emphasizing biblical context, history, and the parsing of words.
reason to read the Bible correctly and objectively,”173 and made superfluous, reference to a community with which such interpretation was validated. This represented “an immense break with traditional, church-dominated reading of the Bible and initiated a practice that was undisciplined, unfunded, and unfettered by church practice, faith or doctrine.”174 175

The Enlightenment approach to the Bible provided important gains, claims Brueggemann, but “eventually was reduced to ‘historical criticism,’”176 the method that dominated psalms discussion well into the twentieth century, and has only recently begun to give ground “to the thick reading of faith communities that were not satisfied with ‘modernist explanations’ of the text.”177 While, wonders Korting, there remains in modern biblical research, much “which gives special weight to everything, chronologically speaking, which comes ‘before’ the biblical text...in order to discover the full meaning of the...text, how do we give similar weight to what comes ‘after’?”178 How is the present situation and the lives of believers interpretive of the alive and active word of God?

Neither are broad swaths of believers and seekers now satisfied with the Bible interpreted as “a set of rules.”179 Thick reading of the Scriptures is about more than a problem-solving venture: “it is that we should be shaped as faithful men and women.”180 Thick reading

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173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
175 The more independent and analytic ethos, says Gillingham, was the harbinger of a marked decline of psalmody in the public sphere. The increased urbanization in an industrialized society marked a new-found hope in human progress, a distancing from former values, a decline in church attendance, and a growing scepticism about the relevance of psalmody that called on a God who helped those who couldn’t help themselves. Psalms through the Centuries, 194-197.
177 Ibid., 157.
178 Korting, 61.
179 John Colwell, “The Church as Ethical Community,” in The Bible in Pastoral Care and Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church, eds. Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 212.
180 Ibid., 215.
recognizes the Bible as disclosing to us, and inserting us into a transformative narrative.\textsuperscript{181} “The Bible functions properly within the Church,” says Colwell, “as a means through which we are shaped and formed as a people who can live trustfully, faithfully, lovingly, hopefully, thankfully, and worshipfully.”\textsuperscript{182} Such dynamic engagement with the Word of God is not a scientific analysis of the text, but an interaction wherein is “read and heard imaginatively in a manner that enables and promotes an indwelling of its story by those who hear and read it.”\textsuperscript{183} It is transformative: the actions of persons and a community on the way to a profound telling of the narrative through the witness of lives lived.\textsuperscript{184}

“What are we to do with these words?” was a question that appears to have motivated diverse interpretation of the psalms’ harsh speech. What of voices that query, more recently, the place of imprecation in the life of Christians? On the quest toward this “thick” reading of the imprecatory psalms, we now embark.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 216, 222.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{184} See Ibid., 222.
Chapter III
Review Of The Relevant Literature
The Reforms Of Vatican II To The Present

3.1 Introduction

One of the great boons from the Second Vatican Council was the vernacular celebration of the liturgy. It recaptured the ancient tradition of communal prayer in the language of those who gathered to celebrate it, reintroducing the understanding of the liturgy as the work of the people in which everyone is called to participate.

The vernacularization of the liturgy posed a problem to following the advice of fourth-century Athanasius. “Now, my son...I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.”185 The whole of human existence: when the less appealing aspects of that reality, the rawness of the experience and the pain of the depths were honestly articulated, how would they resound in the heart that spoke them; how would they be received by the ears that heard them? It was determined that three psalms, and the verses from certain others would be omitted from the cursus of official daily prayer because they would occasion “a certain psychological difficulty, even though [it was conceded] the psalms of imprecation are in fact used as prayer in the New Testament...”186 Verses, such as those proposed to Marcellinus for the tribulations of life, were expunged from official prayer,

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185 Ibid., 30.
attesting—in company with many other Christian traditions—says Brueggemann, “to the alienation between the Bible and the Church.”

While the purpose of this present project is not to debate this decision, it is relevant to raise the question as to whether the Church’s official choice to remove the imprecatory verses of the Psalter from official worship may have had broader implications. If these psalms are not suitable for the communal experience of prayer, should they not be held in suspicion in the broader Christian arena? Maybe, they should be avoided in every context?

The process of arriving at the decision to remove imprecation from public worship was laborious, even confrontational. It is outlined by the Secretary of the Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy, Annibale Bugnini, in a detailed and lengthy volume. With certain intrigue, the tale is told of an argument that involves the issues of ancient tradition—on the side of maintaining the integral Psalter in the Church’s official public prayer—and the concern about whether such words could be spoken in Christian communal worship. It adds, as well, controversy around papal intervention: whether that was appropriately sought or correctly interpreted.

3.2 Mixed Reviews

Two contemporaneous vignettes serve to illustrate the opposing views as to the elimination of lamentation’s harshest expressions. In the context of reporting the conciliar bishops’ vigorous debate in relation to the issue of imprecation, Bugnini relates the reaction of a

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189 It is acknowledged that there was selective use of psalmody in the ancient cathedral office. Selection was made, though, on the suitability of the psalms to the time of day, not because the content of the psalm was deemed inconsistent with Christian revelation. See Stanislaus Campbell, *From Breviary to Liturgy of the Hours: The Structural Reform of the Roman Office 1964-1971* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press-Pueblo, 1995), 152.
190 Ibid., 300.
bishop from the Soviet bloc, “Our special circumstances require that the entire Psalter be used. Afflicted as we are by a very difficult external situation, we need expressions suitable for use [against evil].”¹⁹¹ In contrast, this from the Carmelite prioress near Dachau, recounting her community’s mid-1960’s experiment with the integral psalter in liturgical prayer:

In the immediate vicinity of the concentration camp, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into the church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp. It often happens that these people are not only moved by the hideousness and brutality they encounter in the documentation in the concentration camp museum and in viewing the camp itself, but also in their own feelings of hatred and revenge because of the dreadful thing that happened in this place. Our church is the only calming influence in the camp compound...So it is clear to us that, for us today, all the biblical-theological, literary, and hermeneutical objections to the elimination of the cursing psalms and passages were of no avail. For us here, pastoral service to people who visit this place and this church comes first...¹⁹²

As powerfully compelling as is her argument, the prioress doesn’t have the last word. Though not directly addressing her objections and the responsibility of “pastoral service,” Martin Shannon wonders whether these psalms present not so much a “certain psychological difficulty,” but rather a “certain pastoral challenge.”¹⁹³ Going further, and illustrating the sharp divergence of interpretive opinion in relation to these “psalms of God’s fiery grace,” Michael Jinkins challenges the Carmelite’s assertions. He counters that “it would indeed be an appropriate vocation for a community of faith to pray...these psalms...as a way of bearing witness to the God whose justice will ultimately prevail, as a way of hearing the history” of

¹⁹¹ Bugnini, 494.
¹⁹³ Martin Shannon, “‘A Certain Psychological Difficulty’ or a ‘Certain Pastoral Challenge,’” Worship 73, no. 4 (1999): 290-309. “A certain psychological difficulty” was the concern of the post-Vatican II reformers of the Roman Liturgy of the Hours in relation to the effect of the imprecatory psalms and verses were they to be included in the 1970 revision of the Office.
those who suffered and died there. Provocatively, he continues, “Our vocation as Church is not to provide the world with a spiritual novocaine to make the injustice and cruelty a little easier for us to accept...These psalms speak the theological language of outrage because sometimes outrage is the only possible redemptive response.” They refuse complicity with “a silence that condones manifest wickedness in its fear to confront.”\(^{194}\)

3.3 Contemporary Discussion: “Thick” Reading

The conversation continues, picking up on threads and themes of researchers and pastoral practitioners who have addressed the place of psalmic imprecation in the lives of believers and faith-communities, and, through them, the life of the world, whose “joy and hope...grief and anguish”\(^{195}\) belong to us all.

3.3.1 The “Other”

The work of recently-deceased French historian, literary critic and anthropologist, Rene Girard, can be seen as to further develop Jinkins’ objections. Theorizing about the destructive cycle of violence, besetting human relationships at all levels—a pattern rooted in what Girard calls “mimetic desire”—he postulates that, as a means of temporarily alleviating the tension of conflict, a scapegoat is chosen. Upon this innocent victim and safe target, the negative energy of rivalry and competition is hurled. Out of a sense of shame and repugnance, this substitutionary process is largely hidden from those involved in its orchestration, and who rely upon it to make life more bearable. An essential key to interrupting this largely-unconscious pattern is to allow the victim of the group’s aggression to speak.


According to Girard, the Bible is unique among classic literature in articulating the scapegoat’s voice. Of the curses found in the psalms, Girard says, “As far as I know these texts are the first in human history to allow those who would simply become silent victims in the world of myth to voice their complaint as hysterical crowds besiege them.”\footnote{Rene Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall like Lightning} (Ottawa: Novalis, 2001), 116.} They record the protest of the scapegoat in guttural and unmistakable clarity.

In these psalms, we hear the voices of history’s innocent victims—among them the scapegoats of Dachau. “These victims are not silent: they curse their persecutors long and hard.”\footnote{Ibid.} Their voice being heard, victims may be humanized. Once humanized, it becomes more difficult to see them as other than they are. Allowing the persecuted horrified speech at the site of their persecution may help ensure that the cycle of such unjust violence stops with them.

To this, Irene Nowell adds, “I am convinced that refusing to pray [these psalms] is a refusal to pray in the voice of the poor, to give voice to the voiceless sufferers.”\footnote{Irene Nowell, \textit{Pleading, Cursing, Praying: Conversing with God through the Psalms} (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 35.} Probed more deeply, the curses in the Psalter disclose our relationship with the anguished who cannot speak what demands to be spoken. When they find their voice, we have the opportunity to recognize our own poverty, our shared inability to direct and manage our lives, our susceptibility to the vagaries of others.

“‘Tears night and day’ does not refer simply to the crying a particular psalmist did, but to all the times of crying in which you have engaged the death of the old world and all the times you have needed to cry but were unable to, all the bitterness and rejection that both caused
Owning our own vulnerability opens us to recognizing that of others, whom we may come to see in solidarity as our brothers and sisters. As both sign of and means toward this deepening bond, the “violent language we pray in the Psalms becomes an important bridge helping us realize we don’t pray the Psalms for ourselves alone,” says Abbott Gregory Polan, “but for all the people who find their world torn apart, and who can hardly find the words to bring before God to wrap around their pain.”

Our voice is no longer simply our own. It becomes theirs.

Neither were the earlier Christians—some of whose thoughts and reflections we have here considered—the first to recognize these texts as corresponding to the situations and circumstances of their lives. From before the psalms were redacted as we find them, says Wahl, “such prayers had been used for new but analogous situations not envisioned in their composition.”

### 3.3.2 The Loss of Lament

The laments represent the most numerous of the psalms. In language, raw and unedited, they bewail life’s struggles—individually and collectively—while asking and expecting God’s intervention to right the wrong. In their starkest anguish, they curse the reasons occasioning the relentless plight they suffer, in language that shrills in more than a few twenty-first-century ears: unsettled ears often stopped from hearing their cries. They are among the

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200 Billman and Migliore address this, 122.
203 Erich Zenger, 9, concedes the effect of the preponderance of lament on perceptions of the entire Book of Psalms: “It is not just a few psalms that have a repellent effect on many people; the Book of Psalms as a whole appears unattractive because of its obsession with enemies and violence,” 9. Zenger challenges this characterization as a legitimate reason to avoid these texts.
Bible’s many voices—all of which speak what needs to be heard. Say Billman and Migliore, we are well-advised to watch the ongoing temptation to hear those of joy, while disregarding the anguished. Such self-imposed censorship “is always [to] the impoverishment of Christian life and ministry.”²⁰⁴

Almost 30 years ago, Gail Ramshaw, speaking to the 1987 Annual Meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, addressed the diverse needs and struggles of the typical Sunday assembly. It is in that gathered community of thanksgiving, she went on to say, that “by joining disparate sorrows and fears into Christ at the foot of the cross, the eucharist transfigures private pain into the hope of the assembly.”²⁰⁵ For that transformation to happen in the lives of worshipers, says Ramshaw, there need be a place for lament: for the unabridged expression of what is broken and regretted, what needs to be righted and fixed. While Ramshaw presented her considerations to a group whose focus was liturgical, it could easily be extrapolated that, while there may well be opportunities—as she suggests—for a broader inclusion of lament in organized worship, lamentation need not be confined to Sunday morning. Worshipers’ lives are lived beyond the confines of any four walls.

Brueggemann picks up on Ramshaw’s thesis, speaking of the “costly loss of lament” from the Christian community. One such loss is that of “genuine covenantal interaction,” since the one who would resort to lamentation is left either mute or restricted only to expressions of praise and gratitude, even though such acclamation does not reflect the present reality of their lives. A second loss is the “stifling of the question of theodicy.” Queries directed to God on

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²⁰⁴ Billman and Migliore, 25. Zenger, 9, and others, amplify this caution.
matters of justice are not permissible, even when “dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.”

Ramshaw and Brueggemann have observed the absence of lament. David R. Blumenthal, demonstrating communion with the Jewish tradition in relation to these texts—and thereby making a broader societal connection—goes further in relation to our facility with giving voice to our most bitter traumas and fears, when he speaks of “the lost art of imprecation.” He observes in the Psalter that anger—expressed in the language of the curse—is integrated into the prayer of the psalmist. This reality spoken in words to God, Blumenthal offers, “needs to be revitalized.” There are many contexts in which we acknowledge and attempt to deal with our anger: in our dreams, with friends and therapists, in the embarrassment and shame of its presence within us, in our repression, channeling, and sublimation of the emotion, “but we do not pray it. We do not bring our anger to God, at least not enough.”

A balanced prayer-life, says Blumenthal, reflects the vicissitudes of life. “It includes moments of rage, as well as times of reflection and meditation; moments of sadness, as well as times of joy and praise...” Recollecting the sentiments of Athanasius, he adds, “Psalms, precisely because they flow from the sheer variety of human life, contain the whole range of human emotions, feelings and awarenesses—all of them brought before God, all of them incorporated into a full and vital prayer life...[alternatively] bringing first this and then that feeling before God, turning first this, then that emotion into prayer.”

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208 Ibid., 179.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
Though anger is often not our choice, and the need to move through and beyond it is essential to our ultimate well-being, when we experience ourselves as put-upon Blumenthal submits, “Acceptance is only half the answer. The other half is acknowledging anger and rage—learning to think them, to feel them, even to pray them. That is what the angry psalms are for.” Prayer with the psalms—all the psalms—reflects life as it shapes life, shapes life as it reflects it.

The price paid for the exclusion of lament is reiterated by Herbert Anderson, who describes lamentation’s framework as “an alternation between resistance and relinquishment, between protesting injustice and trusting in the mercy of God.” That interplay is essential, for “resistance without relinquishment ends in bitterness and relinquishment without resistance leads to quiet powerlessness in the face of evil.” The dynamism interaction between resistance and relinquishment “gives voice to mute pain and creates communities of the suffering ones:” communities, one need add, that are not ghettos, but oases offering support and encouragement. Here, says, Lane, “we discover ourselves no longer alone...We meet other wizened souls who have weathered sun and heat...They are what the church has been summoned to be, a community of broken people, painfully honest, undomesticated, rid of the pretence and suffocating niceness to which ‘religion’ is so often prone.” From an explicitly Christian perspective, Maria Boulding adds,

212 Ibid., 197-198.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
Though we are the new creation in Christ...we still have a stake in the old chaos. We know something from time to time of the unloving, lifeless, impotent areas in ourselves. These precisely are to be yielded to the creative act of the God who brings life from death, not hidden or swept out of the way before we can pray...When you know yourself to be empty and poor and sterile, unable to love and live, when you experience in yourself the impossibility of giving life to others or of forgiving others as God forgives you, then you really know yourself to be the lifeless chaos...We have to pray from a position of chaos, because that is where we are, and that is the material on which the Spirit delights to work...The psalms can make great sense as chaotic prayer...The psalms are about human experience, and no part of it is hidden from God, or felt to be unmentionable in his presence.217

All of this leads Anderson to opine, “The recovery of the language and structure of lament may be the most important aspect of connecting the Bible and pastoral care for our time. Recovering the rich biblical tradition of lament is necessary to live without apathy or the eclipse of hope in a time of pervasive irrational suffering.”218 Adds another commentator:

“Contemporary faith allows the words of a text to come alive in the concrete course of living out a faith-filled vision.”219 It is the world in front of the text. “Our worldview and self-understanding strongly influence the ways in which we read a particular biblical text.”220 Not only does the passage influence our understanding—at all levels—our perceptions bring meaning to the words we hear and read.

3.3.3 Freedom of Speech and Self-Awareness

Walter Brueggemann further calls us to observe the frankness of the words. “Note the psalms...propose to speak in an honest, freeing way.”221 When we employ this speech to articulate our perception of experience, we are set at odds against what is typically said and

218 Anderson., 208-209.
220 Ibid., 147.
221 Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 7.
heard, “for much human speech...is a cover-up,”222 deemed necessary “for purposes of public equilibrium.” Our language is curtailed because the honest expression of the Psalter’s words would reveal the ongoing reality of orientation-disorientation-reorientation that comprises life—individual and societal—and that would be anathema to a “stable, functioning, self-deceptive culture where everything must be kept running young and smooth.”223 Living in that culture and, to some extent unavoidably imbibing its priorities and dominant appraisal of reality, psalmic words of imprecation invite us to a sort of about-face. They ask us “to depart from the closely managed world of public survival, to move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy One.”224

As with all prayer of ancient Israel, notes Brueggemann, lamentation is voiced at the limits: in this case, “at the limit of anguished self-insistence, when God must yield in costly ways and care in powerful ways to the speaker in need.”225 The imprecation’s present moment of liminality is grief’s wailing expression of loss and rupture, yielding to hope’s vision of what could be: Brueggemann delineates its structure as one of orientation, disorientation, new orientation.226 What is “often thought to be the very antithesis of hope and praise,”227 is the means through which hope and praise may be articulated anew. “Paradoxical as it may seem, genuine hope cannot be separated from the experience of suffering, and authentic joy and praise cannot be divorced from the permission to lament and protest.”228

222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid., 8.
227 Billman and Migliore, 124.
228 Ibid.
Lament and protest: the language repels us. Yet, “when we know ourselves as well as the Psalter knows us, we recognize that we are creatures who wish for vengeance and retaliation...The capacity for hatred belongs to the mystery of personhood.”229 Roland E. Murphy challenges our being scandalized by words reflecting a reality “that is part of our own daily experience.”230 After discussing the context of the ancients, and denying any desire to “exonerate” them, he opines that the barbarity of which these psalms are often accused resides not only in the world in which we live, but in our own hearts. Far from avoiding the imprecations, Murphy suggests we allow their cries for vengeance to “become an accusation, an echo of the vengeance and hatred that lurks in our hearts.”231 Reminiscent of seventh-century Benedict’s interpretive commentary on Psalm 137: 9, and that of the later Pseudo-Albert232 Murphy concludes, “Such psalms become a pointer to our own wrong-doing.” And beyond that, “when we see our own hearts reflected in the cursing psalms, a process of genuine repentance and renewal can begin.”233

Encouraging us to the same self-awareness, the curses we hear in the psalms, says Brueggemann, mean “that the agenda and intentions of the Psalms is considerably at odds with the normal speech of most people, the normal speech of ”a culture that insists—often contrary to the evidence—that all is well.234 In radical contrast, “the speech of the Psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and dangerous. It announces that life is not like that, that our common experience is not one of well-being and equilibrium, but a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation

229 Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 64-65.
230 Roland E. Murphy, Responses to 101 Questions on the Psalms and Other Writings (Mahwah: Paulist, 1994), 8.
231 Ibid., 9.
232 “Blessed whoever grasps and shatters your children on the rock.”
233 Endres, 152.
234 Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 7.
Echoing Ramshaw, Brueggemann proposes that the articulation of the dislocation is essential to the hoped-for relocation. If one fails to acknowledge the disorientation, the need for new orientation will remain unknown. We are left—either oblivious or disingenuous—“praise stuck in our throats as we approach the throne with anger and sorrow hidden deep in our hearts.”

“If one freely and openly admits the emotions as associations that arise on reading or hearing [the curses] from the psalms, what one feels are irritation and resistance.” They are words that bring extremity to expression. Hearing them is all the more “urgent for the church,” because the church has a protracted history of being “intimidated by extremities.” “When all is quiet and peaceful...many may not feel very keenly the need for the use of the Imprecatory Psalms... Some people may have considered [these] psalms an offense in better days, but their relevancy has been brought home to them” when the tide turns.

Erich Zenger goes on to challenge those “whose roots are in the harmonic, over-affirming, and catechism-style language of Christian prayer” not to give up too easily on these disarming texts, often heard as the words of the impious. They arise, though, out of reflections that do “not take place in the mystical half-light of a gothic cathedral, or in the well-ordered psalmody of monastic oases, or in the silent chambers of the soul: instead...in the midst of a world that is often felt to be hostile...against whom those at prayer are defending

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235 Ibid.
237 Zenger, 10.
240 Zenger, 11. Here Zenger might be accused of caricaturization.
themselves;” and shouting that defence not out of their own strength, but “by bringing God forward as their protector and companion in battle.”

3.3.4 God and Justice

God as protector and companion in our struggle with the enemy: Nowell points out that the curses in the Psalter direct the task of retaliation away from us and toward God. The exoneration of the put-upon is left to God. It is not for us to exact revenge. These psalms “are not cries from individuals and communities for permission to carry out their own retributive acts for the wrongs done to them.” That is for God, as an expression of divine justice, and justice, says Wenham—as did the fourth-century Jerome—not vengeance is what the psalmist wants exacted. Rather than encouraging pay-back, postulates Michael Jinkins, “[p]erhaps these psalms are the only things that stand between us and revenge, taking into our hands the judgment that belongs to God alone.”

While writers like Margaret Daly-Denton situate the harshest words of lamentation in an Israel possessed of an immature understanding of God, arising out of a phase in the “learning journey of the people,” blunt words of protest and petition, as prayed in the cursing psalms, need not be indicative of embryonic belief, says Howard Neil Wallace. To critique vengeance in the psalms as simply a matter of the old dispensation or of the Old Testament being superseded

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241 Ibid.
242 Nowell, 30.
245 May this be a dulling of the edge of the sharp words? Is it a subtle denial of the torment that could lead one to want revenge, and the place of such a longing in prayer—full stop? We see it, I propose, in Jerome and some of the other patristic commentators. Possibly here, too?
246 Jinkins, 98.
247 Daly-Denton, 166, 168.
by the New or of Jewish-Christian division is simplistic. It is, likewise, a mistake to equate such sentiments with inadequate hope or trust. Succinctly, he adds, “This is the prayer of a mature faith.”

Billman and Migliore agree. These words may be “preparing the ways for new understandings of God.” Addressing God in the curses recorded in the psalms is not, according to them, the hallmark of the theological neophyte awaiting enlightenment, but, rather, the manifestation of a humble wisdom acknowledging that there is “much about God and God’s purposes that we do not comprehend.” They have the potential, claims Beth LaNeel Tanner, to “provide a new way to define true and honest relationship between humans and their God.” These psalms tell the experience of God’s absence, and give voice to those struggling to keep faith as they search for God in the darkness. Speaking their words is the necessary preliminary for finding God already there.

Psalmic curses reveal belief in God as “vulnerable” and affected by what happens in the world. These ancient seekers witness to an understanding of “God’s perfection to include the freedom to share the suffering of the creation.” At one and the same time, the one whose prayer is that of the psalmist grapples with a God who is hidden at the same time as she expresses absolute trust in salvation amidst the present crisis. God’s throne is a place, not only of praise, but where there are no improper questions. The God of the psalms need not be

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249 Billman and Migliore, 111.
250 Ibid., 112.
251 Tanner, 151.
252 Ibid., 113.
flattered or manipulated,253 “but can be addressed in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared.”254 These psalms hold nothing back, witnessing to a faith recognizing “there is no thought that [we] must be on good behaviour in the presence of God. Everything that is present in life is readily brought to expression.”255 “God-with-us does not want us to ignore...feelings of anger, rage, or vengeance.”256 And beyond that: no need “to pretend that those who have faith in God are above such feelings.”257

As the language of the psalms reveals the reality of God, so God in the psalms reveals us to ourselves. According to Brueggemann, a God who accepts only our praise does not lead us beyond ourselves or challenge us to impact the world; a God “who is available in assault correlates with the emergence of genuine self and the development of serious justice.”258 God’s voice, our voice, and, as Girard reminded us,259 the cry of the poor: all one.

Billman and Migliore continue the association among a sense of God, of self, of others through the imprecations. These prayers of lament and protest “strengthen our self-understanding as responsible agents.”260 When we know God’s receptivity to all we have and are, we are able to live in the assurance that God “honours us in the fullness of our humanity and wants to relate to us as responsible subjects.”261 The language does something redemptive in us and through us. Anger can be constructive, and its expression, “an alternative to living in the

253 Brueggemann, The Psalms and the Life of Faith, 73. Brueggemann refers to a body of scholarly opinion suggesting that the God of Israel may be unique among ancient deities in this regard.
254 Ibid., 108.
255 Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 54-55.
257 Ibid.
258 Ibid.
259 Girard, 116 ff.
260 Billman and Migliore, 116.
261 Ibid., 117.
world of inner deadness...caused by victimization.”

Beyond ourselves and facing out to the world, “it is in risking the use of the passionate language of lament that the prophetic mission of resisting injustice and oppression can be fuelled.”

Our temptation and our tendency to reject such texts entice our engagement with them. “In this way, they may be considered a kind of school room for moral and ethical reasoning and debate.”

Our initial discomfort with the text becomes the portal through which we may enter into a renewed commitment to justice, and the choices that promote its presence in the world.

United to Christ and in Christ with those of every time and place who would claim these words as their own, we are revealed to ourselves as servants and children of the God who claims us as partners and co-workers in the outreach of saving love, in justice spoken, promoted, and lived. The violent, vengeful language found in the cursing psalms is “essential” to the power of the Psalter in deepening the resolve of those who pray those words to work to change the world so that such expression becomes no longer necessary.

At the same time we are actors, these psalms remind us we do not act out of our own resources. If the imprecatory psalms insist suffering is not inflicted as retribution, then neither may riches be seen as divine affirmation. These psalms destroy the “doctrine of retribution. By obliterating the doctrine of retribution, the psalms of lament ultimately invite us to live by

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263 Silva, 222.


265 Endres, 152. Endres enters the dialogue by making the theological/ecclesiological distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ. While a traditional interpretation of the psalms centred on the psalms as prophetic of Jesus, “a renewed appreciation of a Christ-centred approach to the psalms has also emerged.” This emphasizes the Christian community as the body of Christ. Christ unites us with other believers—and beyond that with all humanity.

266 Polan, see note 200, above.
Prayer that is bold enough to question and to argue is person-forming and person-empowering. The formed and empowered person-in-community is then manifested in thoughts, words, and deeds of justice, facilitating formation and empowerment of others in the communal journey toward lasting peace.

### 3.3.5 Story

Stories, brought together and shared, constitute a way of seeing the world, and shape perspective. These accounts of and from life give rise to what Sedmark calls a “local theology,” a way of interpreting life with reference to God, arising out of waking up to the “somewhere” from which the theological reflection is done. The psalms arise out of stories. As Brueggemann puts it, narrative is implicit in every psalm. These texts “draw together a rich variety of local traditions.” The communal conversation they both express and shape uses language that is pointed and specific, all the more necessary if they are to convey, not only the details, but the sentiment of what it is to live through the event the story attempts to relate. Without this attempt to express that which defies speech, says Sedmark, there is no real talk about life, no sense that how we live in the here and now makes any difference, no search, in the particularity of the moment, for our identity in the light of who God is. We are left compartmentalizing life, and risk neglecting realities most in need of articulation.

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269 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 44.
270 Ibid., 53.
271 Sedmark, 7.
272 Here, I am reminded of a similar reflection: “The American version of Christianity...ignores the inescapable disorder of humanity after the fall narrated in Genesis, or by the classical term, in humanity’s post-lapsarian bent. I’m sad to say that bright-eyed American Christianity is intent on its own righteousness even in the face of humanity’s obvious failures at every turn... I see...Roman Catholics...lip-synching gleeful slogans of good news of Christ’s resurrection without his death, of a kind of salvation with no admission of human sadness and suffering, disappointments and disorder, and effects of sin...” Martin Connell, PhD [Convivium reflection, St. John’s
The psalms provide a corrective to this eventuality, for, as has been so oft repeated, through their words, everything present in life is readily brought to expression. The person or the community that is formed and empowered through emotionally honest prayer speaks out of the context of a life-story. These sacred texts, when they are read along with the “text of life,” not only help people tell their story; psalm-reading has an “expressive function” in helping people more deeply comprehend who they are. These psalms are where “living stories encounter the living word,” facilitating an articulation that “may be the most accurate language of the soul.” The audacious prayer lamented in the words of the psalms’ curses arises out of the lived experience of the psalmist, the story disclosing the identity of one whose suffering has insisted upon pulling all the stops: reporting what is happening, describing the destructive impact of persons and events on the one who prays, and manifesting stubborn hope.

The longing for relief occasioning these stark lines, comments Brueggemann, arises out of events that place us “at the edge of our humanness.” Words, “dull and mundane,” could never be charged with conveying the urgency of what needs to be said, with telling the story. Expanding from a work co-authored by Karl Rahner and J.B. Metz, Billman and Migliore second Brueggemann: “Neither the banal discourse of a consumer society nor the one-sidedly

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274 Endres, 151.


affirmative ‘official Christian language of prayer’ offers a form of speech that might give voice to the language-shattering experience of suffering.”277 The stories, told in the imprecations, are as varied as the situations out of which they arise. What unites them is the awareness of the incongruity between God’s promises and the present reality, and that the experienced discrepancy—of which God is reminded—is intolerable.278

Those back-stories of the words of ancient sufferers are not confined to the past. In writing of his peace activist experience in Chiapas, Mexico, on the side of peasant farmers against their government, Fred Bahnson describes a Eucharistic celebration at which these words from the prophet Isaiah were proclaimed, “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.”279 Reflects Bahnson: “I was standing above those coastlands, high up in the New World among an ancient people who weren’t just hearing the teachings of Isaiah but were recapitulating them in their lives. They dwelt within that ancient story.”280 Bahnson’s observation of the relationship between biblical prophecy and contemporary life applies to the psalms and life in every time and place.

And lest we see our biography as detached from the desperate words we hear abundantly in the Psalter, “those verses have a value for they show us how we might ourselves behave if, for example, our society were to disintegrate or if we felt in some situation we were but the helpless victims of injustice or discrimination...for then perhaps we, too,... might find that we

278 Billman and Migliore, 28.
279 Is. 42:4 (NRSV).
did not have any option but to curse.” Stories inhabit three tenses: we tell them in the present as we recollect the past; authentic expression of lament is essential if we are to push toward the future, says Brueggemann. Where the cry is muffled, “heaven is not moved and history is not initiated. The end is hopelessness. When, on the other hand the pain is bewailed full-throated, heaven may answer and earth may have a new chance...In the absence of lament, we may be engaged in uncritical history-stifling praise.”

3.3.6 Jesus and the Enemy

Life-stories—that of the psalmist and our own—reacting with harsh honesty to their disorienting realities are not disconnected from the lived experience of Jesus of Nazareth, claims Larry Silva. They may not be as “less than Christ-like” as we initially perceive. In referring to Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus teaches, “love your enemies,” Silva cites nine pericopes where his words show “that imprecation and righteous wrath are very much part of the New Testament language.” Significantly, and reminiscent of some of the patristic commentators we have seen, who sought to distance Jesus from passions unmediated by reason, Silva adds, “Jesus’ imprecatory sayings were meant to be instructive, to call for radical change in the ways of those who heard him.”

Billman and Migliore seem to raise the bar in addressing the same issue. Making particular reference to Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer as recorded by Mark, they proffer that, in spite of many Christian exegetes trying to “explain it away in some fashion...it is hard to make human

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283 Ibid., 86.
285 Ibid.
sense of [this prayer] without assuming a real struggle and the raising of hard questions.”

Hardship in the life of Jesus of Nazareth was not confined to his experience of death. Nancy C. Lee claims Jesus is “caught up in the fray of human suffering” from his birth. Human experience elicits human response. John N. Day cites the episode with the non-fruit-bearing fig tree as an example of imprecation on the lips of Jesus. Carroll Stuhlmueller cites two examples of Jesus, in John’s gospel, employing Psalm 69, a psalm that “not only includes one of the longest curses in the Psalter, but is also...one of the most quoted in the New Testament.”

Lee adds an important insight into a perceived paucity of lamentation—with its varied levels of intensity—in the New Testament. The earliest Christians—Jew or Gentile—adopted Torah, Prophets, and Psalms as their own. There is no specific collection of laments in the New Testament because the early Christians relied on what they found in the Old.

How, for the Christian, can insistent cries for vengeance be reconciled with Jesus’ core teaching of love for our enemies? This, says Laney, is “the problem with the imprecatory psalms, or more correctly, the interpreter’s problem with them.” Marti Steussy adds another factor in our judgment of these texts as being at odds with Christian belief: “the problems fear and anger cause us.” Billman and Migliore make the distinction between loving enemies and pretending they don’t exist. Dealing with the foe—in whatever guise it is experienced—is

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286 Billman and Migliore, 36-37.
289 Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 144. From Ps. 69, v. 4 is cited in Jn. 15:25, and v. 9a, in 2:17. He continues, v. 9b, in Rom. 11:9-10; v. 24, in Rev. 16:1, and v. 25, in Acts 1:20. (Checks of the references supplied by Stuhlmueller indicate the latter two are explicit curses—v. 24: “Let their eyes grow dim and blind;” v. 25: “Pour out your anger upon them; let your burning fury overtake them.”)
290 Lee, 108.
complex and a process in which imprecation may have a productive place. Day opines that love and imprecation are compatible, and seeing otherwise “overly restricts the definition of love and minimizes the fundamental ethical continuity between the testaments.” Love for one’s enemy is to be unremitting; for Day, though, there is a caveat. “If the enemy’s cup of iniquity has become full, this love is overtaken by the demands of justice and divine vengeance.” The point: in extreme cases, imprecation need not extinguish love, nor be a sign that its light has been snuffed. The key to resolving the perceived tension between Jesus and the curses in the psalms, says J. Carl Laney, is to understand their relationship to the covenant made with Abraham. These words call God to fidelity in situations in which it appears God has forgotten the promise.

The notion of “enemies” stymies many. Billman and Migliore point out enemies are more than personal foes. In the psalms, they refer to “all that opposes the peace, justice, and reconciliation that God intends for the world.” They are the “Powers” spoken of by Walter Wink, destructive realities that have “an inner spirituality as well as outer institutional forms.” Steussy points out that, in the psalms, enemies are typically human.

“One of the wonders of psalmic language, however, is its flexibility.” Were that not the case, these ancient prayer-poems would not have endured. In harmony with Wink, the

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293 Billman and Migliore, 121, 138.
294 Day, 112.
296 Ibid.
298 Billman and Migliore, 121.
300 Steussy, 9.
301 Ibid.
enemies, claims Steussy, may be “personal demons such as depression and addiction.” She shares the further insight that we need be cautious lest language of enemies lead us to blame forces “out there” rather than accepting personal responsibility, as appropriate, and allowing these psalms to be the means through which we take our need for transformation and change to God. Another caution offered by Steussy, and this as a corrective against assuming our enemies to be God’s: hear these psalms from both sides of the conflict occasioning them. Have we ever done anything that would lead us to be the object of someone’s curse? Have we reflected upon the fact that many of those labelled “enemies” consider themselves victims? These curses help us comprehend and filter our own reactions and emotions—individually and communally—affording us the opportunity to develop strategies to deal with conflict in non-violent ways.

Billman and Migliore agree that on many levels “prayer can indeed be a way of exacerbating the hostilities and separations between people.” Seussey’s self-directed questions can be antidotal in responding to concerns that such texts may transform oppressed into oppressor. Might such broader interpretive options address Endres’ observation of the frequent reluctance of care-givers to use these psalms in ministry? The varied interpretation we have discussed is more faithful to the biblical witness than the “completely naive and misguided” approach of removing all such texts in the pretext of avoiding their challenge and

302 Ibid.
303 Ibid., 12.
304 Endres, 152.
305 Silva, 228.
306 Billman and Migliore, 121.
307 Endres, 151.
308 Billman and Migliore, 121.
complexity, being left with what Shannon refers to as “a thoroughly antiseptic Bible.”

Involved, does it seem? “But we shouldn’t expect grappling with human conflict—and our own insides—to be simple.”

Picking up on the reality of enemies and the language employed in relation to them, Nick Jowett ponders, “The Psalms: What *can* we do with the nasty bits?” He takes on those who propose a place—even a private one—for these psalms to “help us to face and work through the self-righteousness, self-pity and violence that are in all of us...Well perhaps; but then I imagine the mild, liberal-minded academics and clergy who defend all this need for rage and catharsis, and I am deeply unconvinced.” In a world in which religion is often accused, and sometimes guilty, of funding hatred and violence, what are we to do with the parts that are “very unedifying?” After decrying any place these texts could ever have in “public prayers and worship books,” these passages, “which represent what no Christian should want to say or believe... violent, self-righteous, and paranoid utterances, [vis-à-vis] all the precious passages.”

Jowett concedes—and thereby betrays an ambivalence toward these texts we have observed before—“[T]here *may* be a role for the angry and miserable psalms at points of crisis in private spirituality, and there is certainly a place for them in imaginative wrestling with, and preaching from, the whole corpus of scripture...”

Stuhlmueller is similarly ambiguous. Even for the well-versed in the language of the Bible, these texts are troubling. How much more-so for those not so prepared? “Yet the

309 Shannon, 297. Polan uses the same word—antiseptic—to caution against prayer that does not admit the harshness of life, thus inoculating the one who prays from feeling the pain of the world. See Note 200.
310 Steussy, 12.
312 Ibid., 26.
313 Ibid., 25.
314 Ibid. Italics original. One wonders how preaching from these texts and expunging them from public worship are able to co-exist.
Christian community cannot deny, and therefore not completely bypass, the presence of curse psalms in the Bible.315 Ambivalence is the theme voiced by LeMon, who expresses concern that these words may shape the one who prays them to act violently; at the same time he refutes abandoning them as a tenable solution. He calls for an awareness that these psalms “have value and that they can be abused,” and sees interpretation in the context of “the entire witness of Scripture” as essential to finding their proper place in the community.316

3.3.7 Context: the Hermeneutical Key

We have surveyed the cursing psalms through the interpretations of patristic, medieval, and reformation authors and of various scholars of the past 50 years. While isolated for the purposes of this discussion, these texts—as LeMon has just pointed out—have not arisen, nor do they now exist, outside a broader psalmic and biblical milieu. Both Athanasius and Evagrius, we recall, made abundant use of the cursing psalms in their prescriptions for prayer that nourished healthy living. These words, though, were to be prayed in the context of words that reflected the cross-section of moods and circumstances weaving together to form the tapestry of life. “If in giving thanks...when consecrating your house...when you are filled with wonder:” these circumstances found their place with “when suffering afflictions...after afflictions...and when persecuted you go into the desert...”317 The consciences of the wealthy are awakened, mourners are comforted, one’s own pride is checked through the judicious use of a wide variety of psalms.318

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315 Stuhlmueller, 154. Does his inclusion of the redundant, “completely,” further emphasize Stuhlmueller’s betwixt-and-between conundrum with these texts?
317 Athanasius, Letter, 10 and 20.
318 Evagrius, De Oratione, 83, 6, Scholia on Psalms, 1 in Dysinger, 70, 148, 145.
Use of the integral Psalter did not exclude one psalm genre from another; it made all available in order to take all of life’s circumstances into God’s sphere. In keeping with patristic understanding, Billman and Migliore have given particular attention, they say, to lament’s fullest expression in the psalter to emphasize its place as “an important, though neglected, dimension of authentic prayer...alongside praise, thanksgiving, confession, and intercession in a holistic understanding of prayer.” They reaffirm the “breadth and wholeness” of Christian prayer as “needed by all people of faith, whether they be in the academy or congregation, the sanctuary or the street corner” as the pathway toward “deeper joy in Christian life and worship [and a] strengthening of doxology.” “Lament is not contrary to praise, but the condition of authentic, honest praise.” “Each psalm has its place in a total life of faith.”

Joel M. LeMon points out that the final redaction of the Psalter speaks to the interrelationship of all the psalms. The Psalter’s “Amen’s” come not at the end of each psalm, but form the conclusion of each of its first four “books.” For the “Amen” to be valid, ascent must be given, not only to one prayer, but to the entire section’s corpus of prayer. Imprecation is thus voiced and heard in the context of praise and thanksgiving, and lamentation, less urgently expressed.

Silva reiterates the importance of context in praying and interpreting the imprecatory laments:

If the imprecations are used properly, recognizing that they are only part of the complex message of the Bible and not the last word, they can release an energy in the community

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319 Billman and Migliore, 149.
320 Ibid., 19.
321 Ibid., 3.
322 Wallace, 47.
323 Book 1: Pss. 1-41; Book 2: Pss. 42-72; Book 3: Pss. 73-89; Book 4: Pss. 90-106; Book 5: Pss. 107-150.
324 LeMon, 107.
that can give it courage in the midst of struggle and a sense that God understands even [our] darkest and most dangerous emotions—and can transform them into the true love of enemies in the achievement of justice.\textsuperscript{325}

The goal is not to stay in cursing lamentation, but to move beyond it to life manageable and well-lived. To get beyond bewailing, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge its cause, to speak it, and to walk, not around, but through it toward participation in the transformation of the world. The structure of imprecatory lament, says Anderson, “is an alternation between resistance and relinquishment, between protesting against injustice and trusting in the mystery of God.”\textsuperscript{326} One looks to the other for fulfillment: “Resistance without relinquishment ends in bitterness and relinquishment without resistance leads to quiet powerlessness in the face of evil.”\textsuperscript{327} Hence, with its extremity of expression, “the recovery of the language of lament may be the most important aspect of connecting the Bible and pastoral care for our time.”\textsuperscript{328}

We have heard the voices of present-day psalms scholarship reflecting on texts of imprecation and their place in the life of faith. What of the contemporary official Church? It has recently addressed the issue.

\textbf{3.4 Verbum Domini}

The Church’s continuing quest to find a way to integrate the entire corpus of psalmody into its life is highlighted in one of the most recent official teachings on the Word of God and the place of the Bible in the life of the Roman Catholic faith community: Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation, \textit{Verbum Domini}.\textsuperscript{329} “The Bible was written by the People of God for the

\textsuperscript{325} Silva, 222.
\textsuperscript{326} Anderson, 208.
\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{328} Ibid.
People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{330} The word of God is a present event,\textsuperscript{331} drawing us “into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the \textit{Book of Psalms}, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God.”\textsuperscript{332} The psalms are a compendium of human reality, for in them—and here he is deeply reminiscent of Athanasius—“we find every possible human feeling expressed masterfully in the sight of God; \textit{(sic) joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation.”}\textsuperscript{333}

What of those words of God to us that become our word to God, the so-called \textit{dark passages of the Bible},\textsuperscript{334} among them the psalms, the entirety of which Athanasius, Evagrius, and many of their descendants saw as relevant to life, and our navigation of its courses? “…It would be a mistake to neglect those passages of the Scripture that strike us as problematic.”\textsuperscript{335} We need, rather, to learn how to interpret them.\textsuperscript{336} Therefore, continues Benedict, “I encourage scholars and pastors to help all the faithful to approach these passages through an interpretation which enables their meaning to emerge in light of the mystery of Christ.”\textsuperscript{337} Here, \textit{Verbum Domini} picks up on the advice Marcellinus received: Recite the psalms “intelligently [for] in this way [we] are able to comprehend the meaning in each, being guided by the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{338} Benedict’s call for awareness of these texts and for a responsible and faithful hermeneutic on the part of the community echoes Charles Kimball’s assertion, out of a different...

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 30.
\item\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 33.
\item\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 24.
\item\textsuperscript{333} Ibid. Among others, Swenson uses similar words to describe the psalms: “Psalms, especially among the books of the Bible, exert a powerful influence, representing more than any other biblical book, varied and heartfelt responses to a wide range of human experiences,” 6-7.
\item\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 42.
\item\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{338} Athanasius, 33.
\end{footnotes}
milieu, of the need to know holy texts in their larger context, as a remedy to selective reading and narrow interpretation.339 Because “it is much easier to know the truth than to seek it,”340 adherents may resist or deny the need to ask the good questions341 that encourage interpretive maturation342 and combat literalism,343 calling us to be mindful of how, especially in relation to passages from the Old Testament, “in the Jewish tradition meaning is not a property of a text but something that must always be wrestled with and continuously sought and redefined.”344

To this, Keith Ward adds his voice,

Religious scriptures can be misused…There are texts that can be found and used by those who are filled with rage and hatred. But they can be so used only by ignoring the scholarly tradition of interpretation in the religion, by a refusal to engage in reflective discussion of the whole scripture, and by using a careful selection of texts on considerations of hatred and intolerance.345

While the wider Christian community remains unsettled as to the place for the honest expression of pain—our own and that around us—some have embraced its possibility. It is to them, and to their work employing the psalms in the ministry of pastoral care, that we now turn.

3.5 Pastoral Care and the Bible

Pastoral care arises out of the deepest sentiments of the human heart and, additionally, in the Christian community, flows out of the witness and call of Jesus, who identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick: Jesus, who stood in solidarity with the

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340 Ibid., 77.
341 Ibid., 108.
342 Ibid., 55.
343 Ibid., 70.
344 Ibid., 69.
least of his brothers and sisters, those considered last, who are, in reality, first and greatest of all.

While acknowledging the scepticism of many biblical scholars—some of which he opines is justified—Kille points out that preachers and pastoral counselors have long since viewed the Bible as a “richly psychological document, [one that encourages] growth, maturity and fullness of living in the lives of those with whom they work.” A new openness to modes of biblical hermeneutics, combined with a growing cultural awareness in western society has brought psychological approaches to scripture “again into the foreground.”

Others have seen modern pastoral counsellors as, for a variety of reasons, more tepid and reluctant to engage the Scriptures in their work. This caution is rooted in such factors as the Bible’s historical use in moralizing and admonition, divergent views as to the Word of God in such relationships, and the discrepancies between the biblical world and the one we inhabit.

David Lyall makes the point that the hesitancy around the use of the Bible in the work of pastoral ministers may be rooted in a basic tension, “not always creative, between those who take the Bible literally and those who (merely?) take it seriously.”

Herbert Anderson considers the uber-presence of the psychological paradigm in interpreting the human situation as a significant factor in “the divine narrative...often [being]
overlooked in pastoral conversations.”351 Craig Bartholomew agrees “the well-documented
subjection of pastoral care to psychotherapy [has rendered] theology and Scripture
irrelevant.”352 Anderson cautions that “we are rightly cautious about making the pastoral care
moment a bully pulpit or an occasion for admonishing. Good care is not individualized
homiletics...Nonetheless, biblical language remains disclosive speech, opening us to words that
invite us to see differently,”353 and, as such its “images and stories are as much a part of the
tools of pastoral care as good listening skills and accurate empathy.”354

Kille bridges the perceived tension between psychology and the Bible by proposing that,
while the authors and redactors knew nothing of modern psychological language, “it is the task
of contemporary hermeneutics to bridge the distance.”355 This blending, says Kille, is in the
service of making the “ancient texts intelligible to an audience immersed in psychological
perspectives.”356 We are, thus, given one more route “in the adventure to understand
ourselves.”357

These tensions considered, the recent displacement—as we have heard from
Brueggemann—of the historical-critical method from the pinnacle of interpretive
methodology358 has opened new vistas. There is now “greater freedom to move beyond an
overly simplistic equation between the biblical world and ours, and an overly cautious

351 Anderson, 195.
352 Craig Bartholomew, “In Front of the Text: The Quest of Hermeneutics,” in The Bible in Pastoral Care and
Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church, eds. Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes
353 Anderson, 209.
354 Ibid.
355 Kille, 127.
356 Ibid.
357 Ibid., 133.
358 Brueggemann, The Re-emergence of Scripture, 153. See earlier discussion, pp 36-38.
distancing of Scripture from the present situation.” In our present context—one that has its distinctions and similarities in relation to the fourth century—the prescriptive place Athanasius and Evagrius saw for the Bible in helping believers navigate the ebb and flow of life is being rediscovered. The world “in front of the text”—the person and the context they bring to the relationship of pastoral care—is as relevant to the issue as “the world behind the text”—the person and context of the author/compiler. Biblical narrative is more than a compilation of “long ago and far away.” Bourgeault describes Bible stories (including the “story-behind-the-story” of the psalms) as “holograms of the soul’s journey. They are rich portraits, in analogical language, of the stages and steps we all go through in the journey of transformation.”

We find this discussion taken up and applied through the work of practitioners in the field of pastoral care and counselling.

3.5.1 Applied Imprecation

“As long as there is in human nature one dark corner of violence, one dark corner of jealousy, one dark corner of loneliness or abandonment, the psalms will be familiar and relevant.” The psalms disclose a “kaleidoscopic emotionality.” As such they may be used for acknowledging emotions, and more deeply as a “tool for releasing, for learning to detach from the surface of yourself and enter into the deeper places of the heart.”

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359 Anderson, 201.
360 Ibid., 206 picks up on the issue of “believers,” and applies the use of the Bible with couples exploring the story of their married relationship, and relates that those “for whom the Bible has little authority are nonetheless quite willing to explore Scripture in search of images or stories around which they might form their new narrative.”
362 See Brueggemann, “The Re-emergence,” 171, Bartholomew, 135-152.
363 Bourgeault, 51.
364 Ibid., 46.
365 Ibid., 45.
Billman and Migliore speak of these psalms as catalysts for “revisiting [difficulties and discovering] new possibilities of meaning amidst the tragedies of life and new possibilities of understanding and relating to God.” Caregivers, sometimes subjected to the bitterness and anger of those with whom they work, may be helped by recognizing that the turmoil, directed toward them, is ultimately aimed at God.

Brueggemann draws parallels between the imprecatory lamentation and the insights of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross into the dying process. He also proposes “we now have important work to do in reconstructing a form of pastoral care that will learn from the psychologies of the day but will take with seriousness the radical and abrasive claims of the Bible.” We now turn to some who have begun the integration.

Holly Taylor Coolman sets the stage with direct reference to Athanasius’ Letter. She speaks in the context of pastoral care, and the sense of the magnitude of the problems brought to the care-giver. While cautioning that many issues are not readily resolved, how the difficult psalms may help move the person along the path of healing. In identifying with the words and the plight of the psalmist, the one who seeks remedy is drawn into a process whereby changed speech and action gradually yield a changed heart. From a psychological perspective, it has to do with insight. “First those who hear and speak the psalms are brought to a new awareness of the passions within them, and, second, these passions are at the same time disciplined and

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366 Billman and Migliore, 138.
367 Ibid., 139.
369 Ibid., 166.
371 See Letter, 12: “And it seems to me that these words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul, and thus affected he might recite them...For in fact he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him.”
healed.” 372 The psalms encourage giving voice to anger, guilt, and despair that are already at work, often in hidden ways. Concretizing them through speech begins to deflate the negativity of their energy.

In *The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow*, Jones, without making direct reference to such as Athanasius and Evagrius, expresses a view of the psalms corresponding to that of the ancients, and echoed by Pope Benedict:

The psalms are different. They speak of life in ways other scripture, doctrine, and theological presuppositions are not able. The psalms are poetry. As such they offer a different view of life. The psalms offer a view that is thick, rich, and runneth over. They seek not so much to explain but as to offer the reality of life in all its messiness, both pain and praise. 373

His article sets out to explore how the psalms can be a resource in pastoral care, how they can provide support in the process of grief, and how they work to transform sorrow. Springing from the experience of ancient Israel, and putting us in solidarity with them, the psalms provide a form of stylized speech. Citing Walter Brueggemann, Jones continues, “The community uses, reuses, and rereuses these words because the words are known to be adequate and because we know no better words to utter.” 374 He then goes on, using Brueggemann’s tripartite schema of orientation, disorientation, new orientation as a framework for traversing life’s labyrinth. The movement is from life as manageable, through life falling apart, to life reconfigured and refocused. There is a dying and rising involved. “Through the lament, the psalmist invites each of us deeper...The descent leads into disorientation, into the depths of human experience. It is only through this descent [that] new life and a new orientation [may] be

372 Coolman, 231.
374 Jones, 49.
discovered.”375 The psalm leads us where we would rather not, but need go. We know not how the psalmist gets to “the very stuff of new life.” But she does, and the one who makes those ancient words their own travels along to the destination of transformation.376

These psalms, concludes Jones—psalms of lamentation’s messiness, anger and fear—have implications particularly for the hospital setting wherein their pattern is regularly played out. “Patients wait anxiously for tests to come back, surrender their lives and autonomy to a surgeon, subject their bodies to chemotherapy and radiation, submit their dignity to the indignities of a hospital gown. The hospital reeks of disorientation.”377

And not only for patients, these “words with teeth:”378 staff are formed in and by them. Especially so for students, claims the author who has observed those coming for Clinical Pastoral Education with a particular need for flexibility and for a willingness to see the world with new eyes. The experience of disorientation experienced by those to whom they minister, and articulated by the psalms can lead them out of their own—oft times inadequate—sense of orientation through the uncertainties of disorientation to the willingness to risk their own treasured beliefs [and] open themselves up to the possibility of transformation...The more a student has experienced the transforming power of lament in his or her own life, the more he or she will be able to be present with other persons in their laments...379

“The psalms of lament, in all their pain and sorrow and in all their praise and thanksgiving, contain the mystery of transformation. They contain the hope for transformation.”380 As with

375 Ibid.
376 Ibid., 52-53.
377 Ibid., 55.
378 Title of forthcoming book on the imprecatory psalms by Brian Doyle.
379 Jones, 56.
380 Ibid.
Athanasius to Marcellinus in his times of fear and foreboding, in the disorienting moments of pursuit and mockery: the point precisely.

Kristen M. Swenson discusses the place of the psalms’ curses in supporting people who live with chronic pain. Taking physical hurt as her starting point, she broadens her perspective “because pain that defies attempts to eliminate it...affects all aspects of a person—mind, spirit, and community, as well as body.” Quick to acknowledge that she is not proposing “a one-to-one correspondence between the psalms and pain relief, or that there are cures hidden or encoded within the text,” and acknowledging the challenges associated with an “easy reapplication of the psalms” to any aspect of twenty-first century life, Swenson cites the lamenting imprecations of Psalm 69 to express the “feelings of exhaustion, anger, and despair...the recognition that this pain isn’t going away any time soon” often elicits.

This psalm “reveals layers of pain that require layers of meaning-making,” and this not only for the sufferer, but for other readers—health-care providers, family members, friends—as the words invite them to “modify and adjust reasons for the psalmist’s pain and reasons for its relief as they integrate new information, line by line, into a developing sense of the psalmist’s [and the present individual’s] experience.”

Arising out of and authenticating “a theology of candor [and] honesty, this psalm challenges ‘cold-comfort reasoning’ that resorts to the quick answers of retribution and God’s

381 See Letter 17, 20, 22.
382 Swenson, 3.
383 Ibid., 69.
384 Ibid., 76.
385 Ibid., 89.
386 Ibid., 94.
387 Ibid.
388 Said Swenson earlier: “The psalmists challenge a too easy theology that cannot abide the fact that bad things happen to good people and is scandalized by the questions and responses that such a fact elicits”, 6.
will, “and reflects a powerful emphasis on relationships...in the context of such pain and suffering.”

Furthermore, also quieting well-meaning voices scandalized by such strong words directed to God, “that the psalmists’ difficult words are canonized in sacred texts suggests that such dynamic wrestling has a place, even in a ‘godly’ life.” Though ongoing anguish is often isolating—emotionally as well as physically—Swenson proposes that the Psalter’s words can serve as a catalyst whereby the one who lives with chronic pain is able to advocate for others in the same predicament.

Youth minister, Bob Yoder, has observed lament as “a missing crucial ingredient” in adolescent ministry. He conjectures, “Engaging practices of biblical lament will help young people live through not only the major losses of life, but also those that occur on an everyday basis.” While overemphasising the penitential psalms, he says, “[t]he Western... church has too often neglected practices of lament in worship, pastoral care, and biblical instruction.”

In response to his observations, Yoder developed and conducted a study with three groups of Mennonite adolescents—categorized according to age—and their adult pastoral leaders. Following an interval of introduction and preparation, and in a ritual context, the youth were asked to engage in a three-step prayer-writing exercise on four different occasions over a five-month span. The first step had the participants vent their anger to God; the second, to recollect a time they had experienced God’s goodness; the third step involved praise and thanksgiving. Data was collected through two questionnaires—one after the first gathering; the

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389 Ibid., 110.
390 Ibid., 6.
392 Ibid., 34.
393 Yoder’s work served as an inspiration for the present study.
second, after the final. This was followed by a group conversation including the adult leaders. All participation and sharing, the author stressed, were informed, voluntary and confidential.

Results showed that all groups expressed appreciation at being given the opportunity for honest expression of their feelings to God. A large majority concluded that adults would also appreciate a similar chance. No differences were apparent between males and females. In the younger and middle age groups, “a small, yet significant number...struggled...to know it was okay to argue with God.”394 The third, college-aged, group desired more time for reflection than their younger peers. Common themes emerging from this group included issues related to responsibility and stress, career choice, divine abandonment, and a desire for a deeper relationship with God. Human suffering, hatred, and issues related to school were present, but less common themes. Adult leaders were positive in their appraisal of the experience.

Yoder concludes, “Even though biblical lament practices may be new and different to many people in our society, this project indicates receptivity for such practices of lament that connect their struggles, losses, and grievances to God.”395

Dominick Hankle speaks thus of his use of the imprecatory psalms in therapeutic work: “Because the psalms lend themselves nicely to emotional expression, they are an excellent vehicle for resolving emotional stress leading to psychological and spiritual benefits.”396 He then sounds a caution. “Because many therapists are not theologians the need to respect certain boundaries in biblical interpretation is imperative so that scripture is not misused by either the

394 Ibid., 48.
395 Ibid., 52.
client or the therapist.” He delineates four senses of scripture—literal, allegorical, anagogical, and moral—and suggests such practices as lectio divina can help “progress the client through the literal sense to the other senses allowing the scripture to provide a healing encounter.” In the tradition of Athanasius and Evagrius, he sees these psalms as agents of reintegration, transformation.

These psalms, continues Hankle, help the believing client accept “that God hears the cry of those he loves and wants them to express in their terms the pain and suffering they feel.” Because these psalms are considered holy, they allow “the individual to recognize that although what they feel seems so foreign, it is a natural reaction needing to be acknowledged and expressed.” Once their oft-times latent presence has been acknowledged and explored, the client’s important next step is to release the negative energies of anger and fear and violence into God’s hands. The imprecation in the psalm provides the hinge moment between grief for what was, to acknowledgment—and ultimately acceptance—of what will be.

In proper context, “scripture becomes empowering, allowing human beings to mature and grow instead of becoming a reference for quick answers in a purely literal and simplistic way.” No magic elixir, no wizardly incantation nor faith-healing of the TV evangelist, the healing outcome of these harsh expressions of human pain relies, as does any therapeutic intervention, on the individual’s willingness and ability to work with what is proposed by a

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397 Ibid. The ethical mandate, “Do no harm” applies here, as in all therapeutic relationships. All practitioners are expected to be informed as to their pastoral intervention of choice; competent, and responsible in its exercise.
398 Ibid., 278.
399 Ibid., 279.
400 Ib. id., 279.
401 Ibid., 278.
402 Ibid., 275.
caring and competent guide. Under these conditions, summarizes Hankle, “these psalms provide appropriate release and resolution of difficult emotions such as anger, hatred, and frustration.”

There we have it. The thick reading of the psalms of imprecation has led us back to where our review of history began: to Athanasius and Evagrius, and a prescriptive understanding of these—for many—troubling texts. If you are grieving...if you are a caretaker...if you are angry...if you are frustrated...if you are in physical, emotional, spiritual pain...if you are in search of your deepest self...these ancient words may be remedial. Though necessarily more nuanced than in the fourth century, attempts by formed and informed pastoral care-givers, supporting real people in their desire to apply these psalms to their real lives, are true to the tradition of who we are as a community of Christian disciples.

Who knows? Had psalmic imprecations been kept in the public prayer of the Church, they may have been scarcely noticed. As Swenson has observed, our discomfort and rejection of these texts serves as a portal for our interaction with them. What is apt for individuals may be so communally. The Church’s disquiet with the psalms’ curses, and their subsequent excision, may have been the gateway through which scholars and ministers have entered the discussion of the gift they may be, and how that inheritance may be shared in our common journey toward maturity in Christ. What follows, I hope, may be part of that quest.

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403 Ibid.
404 Swenson, 76, cautions against an “easy (re)application of the psalms.” Hankle, above, emphasizes the two-fold necessity of a free choice for assistance on the part of the seeker, and a competent and caring pastoral minister.
405 Ibid., 103.
Chapter IV
Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

From the earliest centuries of the Christian era, the psalms have held a place of prominence. Beginning with Athanasius and Evagrius, many have shown us the application of individual psalms to specific life-situations. The psalms’ relationship to life included lamentation’s most unedited expression, found in the verses and psalms of imprecation. From this beginning, we have highlighted voices from the patristic era through scholastic times, to the reformers of the sixteenth century, to Enlightenment influences, and beyond to theory and practice in the twenty-first century. We have noticed a diversity of opinion—from rejection to ambivalence to acclaim—as to the place or suitability of these texts to Christian belief, prayer, and life.

Attempting to continue the discussion through providing opportunity for a thick reading of the psalms and other texts, this study has asked and addressed this question:

How do a group of informed and practicing adult Roman Catholics experience the imprecatory psalms?

4.2 Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach belongs to the qualitative method of research. Qualitative research, according to Creswell, “begins [on the part of the researcher] with assumptions, a world view...and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or a human problem.”406 Research is appropriately

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conducted qualitatively, according to Creswell, when a complex, detailed understanding of an issue is seen to be necessary, and can be reached only by talking directly to people, being open to their responses and reactions and “allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature.”

This focus on participants’ views requires the researcher to allow adequate time and means for data collection, as well as the opportunity for interpretive validation. While the qualitative researcher is integral to the study, a radical openness on her part calls for putting aside, as far as possible, preconceived notions and expectations so as to allow the full impact of the participants’ voices to be heard, to elicit rich and descriptive data. Research embarks upon a quest that implies final understanding not yet to have been reached. Those studying a phenomenon are challenged “to approach a lived experience with a sense of newness,” distinct from theoretical preconceptions and the researcher’s own prior experience.

Phenomenology is the approach to qualitative research employed in this study. Creswell opines “the problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individual’s common or shared experiences of a phenomenon,” in this case that of the imprecatory psalms. Phenomenology is a research inquiry that looks at “what comes to light” when a reality is experienced, and the experience shared. It seeks, from the participants shared experience, to identify the essence of the phenomenon under study. Stuart

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407 Ibid., 40.
408 Ibid., 269.
409 Ibid., 61.
410 Wayne Martin, *Phenomenology: Beginnings and Key Themes*, accessed, May 15, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oev9GAm2MrI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oev9GAm2MrI)
and Mickunas see phenomenological research as a return to the traditional task of philosophy as search for wisdom. 411

4.3 Data Collection

For this study, the six participants were adult members of a diocesan committee, who had been together in that capacity for several years. All were regular participants in the worship and life of their parish communities, and were involved in one or more ministries. Four were women; two, men. While their experience with the psalms varied, they held in common a very limited experience of the imprecations. The participants ranged in age from about 45-80 years. They could be considered representative of a small group who might avail themselves of a parish-based faith formation group.

The imprecatory psalms were experienced in the context of the entire Psalter. Reading whole books of the Bible as opposed to scattered passages was an ancient tradition in the Church. 412 More recently, Nancy Koester writes, “Whole-book study will yield an astonishing variety of life, including some things a group may not have thought about discussing at all.” The discipline of reading through an entire book may respond to the “need to let God take the lead in the conversation as we open ourselves to the unexpected, the disconcerting, and the surprising.” 413

On the other hand, selecting passages here and there... “may lose one of the very things that makes the Bible so interesting—its unabashed and provoking otherness...” [While whole-

book biblical studies may, of necessity, not include every verse, they] will bring people to places they would not see otherwise. In a whole book study there is a pretty good chance of hearing something that they never told you in church.\textsuperscript{414} The last sentence is particularly apropos the Psalms.

The study was conducted from May 5 to June 22, 2015 at the Catholic Centre, the diocesan offices of the Diocese of Charlottetown. In the six weeks, from May 5 through June 8, we met weekly for about 90 minutes. In order to provide a more extended time for reflection at the completion of the seminars, a two-week hiatus was provided before our final group gathering on June 22. Prior to each gathering, participants were electronically sent an outline of the upcoming seminar that included the assignment to be completed. Two of the participants each missed one session: one from illness, the other from an unexpected commitment. Both provided their written home assignments, which were shared with the group. They, in turn, received the completed home assignments of the others. An individual interview between each of the participants and the researcher to elicit further feedback and any necessary clarification was conducted within 10 days of the final gathering.

Prior to the beginning of the study, participants were supplied with a copy of Irene Nowell’s \textit{Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms} (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013).\textsuperscript{415} Nowell, a member of the Benedictine community of Atchison Kansas, and an Old Testament scholar, who teaches at the undergraduate and graduate level, wrote this 86-page book “to encourage [her readers] not only to use the Psalms as your

\textsuperscript{415} In the winter semester of 2001, I participated in Nowell’s \textit{Psalms} course as part of the MA in Liturgical Studies program at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota.
Prayerbook but also to use them as models for additional personal prayer.” The psalms, she adds in the book’s preface, “teach us to tell our story, cry out our pain, and give praise to God.”

The book was chosen by the researcher because of its comprehensive accessibility, a text which provided, appropriate to our purposes, an overview of all psalm genres, setting the imprecatory psalms in the context of all other psalm types, and providing a necessary intellectual component in balance with the study’s experiential emphasis. Chapters from the book were assigned as preparation for the first three seminars.

The First Seminar was spent discussing chapters that provided a general introduction to the psalms, and related the psalms to the “story” of our lives and the life of the world around us. Participants, in preparation, had written a one single-spaced page summary of their reading, which was presented orally to the group. There was an exchange of questions and comments following the presentations. To enhance the seminar experientially, the second part of the first day was allotted to a shared exercise from Nowell’s book where they inserted events from their own lives in the communal praying of Psalm 136.

Participants prepared Seminar Two by reading chapters related to psalms of thanksgiving, trust, and praise. They were asked to write a one-page summary of the points that impressed them and, as previously, to share it with the group. Further, they were asked to comment on Nowell’s observation of emotions in the thanksgiving psalms, and again, using the

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416 Nowell, ix.  
417 Ibid.  
418 Magrassi, 72-76, speaks of this balance, while being careful to state the two are not in opposition. In relation to this, Verbum Domini notes “the unity and interrelation between the literal sense and the spiritual sense” of the scripture (37), and of “the need to transcend the letter” (38).  
419 See Appendix B for the full text of the material provided to the participants prior to each seminar.
assigned reading material, to consider the place of a variety of psalm types in the telling of “our story.” Finally, also from the reading—and to assist them in entering the psalms more deeply—they were asked to consider and discuss the similarities and distinctions between praise and thanksgiving.

The preparation for Seminar Three introduced participants to the psalms of lament, the category within which we find the imprecations. Nowell’s interpretation of the psalms as autobiographical was highlighted in reference to lamentation. Participants were asked, in their preparatory work, with reference to specific quotes from Nowell, to attend to their experience of lament in praying and reflecting upon either Psalm 88 or 109.

Seminar Four moved us to the specific treatment of Psalm 35,\(^{420}\) an imprecatory psalm chosen for its close correspondence to Nowell’s structure.\(^{421}\) In preparation, they were introduced to the practice of *lectio divina*\(^{422}\) as a way of experiencing/interacting with the psalm through a written handout prepared by the researcher, for their reading and reflection. They were given instruction to read the psalm through at least twice at one sitting. Then on the third reading to, with reference to Nowell’s book, note the form of the psalm. They were then assigned to pray with the psalm, once a day, on at least two consecutive days for at least 15 minutes each time, and to write a one-to-two-page journal entry on their experience of the

\(^{420}\) See Appendix C for the full text of Psalm 35, with imprecatory verses indicated in italics.

\(^{421}\) See Nowell, 20-27. See also p. 213, Appendix B, below.

\(^{422}\) *Verbum Domini* reports the 2008 “Synod [on the Word of God] frequently insisted on the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer…with particular reference to lectio divina…. which is truly capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God” (86, 87). For further on lectio divina, see Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: the Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1996); Michael Casey, “The Art of Lectio Divina” in *The Benedictine Handbook*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003); Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. (New York: Paulist, 1988); Wilfrid Stinissen, *Nourished by the Word: Reading the Bible Contemplatively*. (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1999); Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996). See Appendix D for the text of the material provided to the participants prior to Seminar Four.
exercise. They were advised the researcher would collect these; they would not be shared with the group. The seminar was spent in a shared lectio divina exercise with the psalm.

In preparing for the Fifth Seminar, participants were asked to re-read Psalm 35 at least twice. They were given instructions to accomplish the task of creating a scenario out of which the psalm may have arisen. In one to one-and-one-half pages, they were to tell the “story” behind the psalm: based on their own experience, the life of someone they knew or from a media news report, relating it as if it were now happening to them or as if they were observing it first-hand. The composers were asked to enter into the thoughts and feelings of the one whose story gave rise to the psalm, and to describe those in detail. In conjunction with this exercise, as in the previous week, they were asked to write a one-page journal entry describing their emotional and cognitive experience of the task. The journal entries were to be collected, not shared. The seminar was spent sharing and discussing the scenarios. Participants were reminded that these scenarios would be the basis upon which they would compose their own imprecatory psalm for the next gathering.

Seminar Six was prepared by providing the participants with a structure, based on Nowell’s text, for their psalm composition. They were asked to compose an imprecatory psalm attentive to Nowell’s arrangement, and based on the scenario they had described the previous week. In conjunction with this, as a means of focussing their experience of the task, and directed by specific questions, participants were asked to record their experience of the assignment in a page to page-and-a-half journal entry. These would be collected, not shared. Session Six was spent sharing and discussing the psalms.
The Final Seminar was prepared by the participants by their composition of a two-page—or more lengthy, if necessary—paper, in which they were to respond to specific questions designed to help them reflect upon and record their experience of the previous six gatherings, with particular attention to their work with the imprecatory psalms. These papers were presented and discussed in Seminar Seven.

Within 10 days of the Final Seminar, each of the participants attended an individual interview with the researcher. This interview provided the researcher the opportunity to seek clarification or elaboration on points participants had raised or comments they had made in the course of the seminar discussion or written work. These exchanges are noted in the presentation of data, with reference to Final Interview (FI) in the transcript which follows in Chapter V, below. The researcher also used this meeting to seek participants’ validation of observations and interpretations of their spoken and written work. Their affirmative responses to direct questions were taken to confirm validity. The Final Interview also invited the participants to offer impressions or observations of the experience, and to add anything they may have wanted to further contribute, but neglected—for whatever reason—to add in the seminars or in their written work. Their having reached their saturation point was determined by their negative response when asked if they had anything additional to add. The Final Interview further served as an occasion to repeat the offer made in the introductory letter they had received prior to the beginning of their involvement in the study: at the conclusion of the process, all participants will be provided with a written summary of the results, and invited to a gathering of all participants for discussion, comments, and questions. The entire final, approved thesis document will be made available on loan to those participants who may wish to review it.
With the informed, signed permission of the participants,\textsuperscript{423} audio recordings of seminars three through seven\textsuperscript{424} and of the final interview were made. These were transcribed, using pseudonyms, immediately following the gatherings. All written work was retained for analysis. Field notes of the researcher’s observations were kept to add another dimension to the data review. All data were kept securely and accessible only to the researcher in accord with what was outlined in the Thesis Proposal,\textsuperscript{425} and approved.

To help support participants’ holistic encounter with the psalm texts, the development of the study was informed by David Kolb’s \textit{Experiential Learning Cycle}.\textsuperscript{426} Rooted in the work of earlier developmental, cognitive, and educational psychologists, Kolb proposed experience as the centre of learning. “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”\textsuperscript{427} The learning cycle is a dynamic process comprised of four components, among which there is overlap and interplay. Each learner enters the cycle according to their own learning style and preferences. Effective learning is accomplished when the learner is able to enter all the constituents of the model. A basic outline of Kolb’s theoretical framework and its relationship of the various components to the present study follow:

\textbf{Concrete Experience: doing/having an experience}\textsuperscript{428} (Nowell text, interacting with the psalms, seminar conversations)

\textbf{Reflective Observation: reviewing/reflecting on the experience} (assignments, discussion seminars, self-monitoring of reactions to experience)

\textsuperscript{423} See Appendix E.
\textsuperscript{424} These seminars dealt directly with the imprecatory psalms. The first two seminars set the context in the whole psalter. Field observation notes during these gatherings were recorded by the researcher.
\textsuperscript{425} See Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{427} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{428} Interpretation from S.A. McLeod, accessed December 9, 2016 [link](www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html)
Abstract Conceptualization: reflection gives rise to a new idea, or the modification of an existing abstract concept (preparation for seminars, presenting and responding in seminars)

Active Experimentation: planning/trying out what has been learned (lectio with texts, psalm composition, application of texts to life).

4.4 Data Analysis

Relying on Moustakas, Creswell offers an outline of data analysis, appropriate to a phenomenological study, which was followed in this research. In order to allow the reported experiences of the participants to have priority, and to facilitate deeper understanding of these experiences, the researcher, after sharing possible personal biases with the participants, attempted to bracket preconceived notions and experiences of the imprecatory psalms. In attempting this, Creswell’s comments on the difficulty involved in bracketing—as it is currently widely defined and interpreted—were noted. He calls for a more nuanced understanding of the term, and cites LeVasseur’s suggestion that it be seen as “a reflective move that cultivates curiosity” in relation to the participants’ expression of their experience.

Recorded seminars were transcribed by the researcher, and the transcriptions first read through to get a sense of their flow, and, then, re-read multiple times. From these readings, marginal notes were made, and initial coding undertaken. Significant statements were identified. These statements were then clustered into units of meaning. Marginal notes were made in the review of participants’ written materials. Initial coding, identification of significant statements, and theme clustering were also completed with this data, as with the transcripts of the final

430 Creswell, 235.
interviews. Field notes were reviewed with reference to the other collected data. Cross comparison of these materials, triangulation, was conducted to identify commonalities and variants among participants.
Chapter V
Results

5.1 Introduction

From seminar transcripts, written work, participant feedback, and researcher observation, a number of themes were identified in response to the multivalent experience of the psalms of imprecation. While there were often blurred lines of distinction between and among themes, and some data samples could be classified under more than one, a thick reading suggested the categories that follow.

These psalms evoke discomfort.
These psalms gradually disclose their place in the Christian life.
These psalms foster self-awareness.
These psalms are cathartic.
These psalms tell a story.
These psalms are voice to the voiceless.
These psalms inspire responsive action.
These psalms inform our relationship with God.

5.2 Themes

5.2.1 Theme 1 These psalms evoke discomfort. In the seminar immediately following their first exposure to Psalms 88 and 109, two psalms of lament cited in Nowell’s text, four of the six participants articulated their discomfort with the language of these psalms.

What could be interpreted as Phyllis’ statement of discomfort was implicit: “...I think, ‘Is it anger with God?’ No, it’s probably anger within our own selves. We’re reaching out for God, but it’s coming out as anger” (S-3, B-2). Toward the end of our time together, Belinda

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432 S = Seminar; B (and later C) = pages in reference to the transcribed data.
tempered the tenor of the curses by interpreting them: “like when we’re hurling curses, it’s not
the person. It’s the action they do” (S-7, B-80).

Gloria commented, “It’s interesting that when the psalms talk about expressions of anger
and revenge, it’s the word of God. That’s what I find really difficult...I don’t experience this as
the word of God today. I’m not used to looking at the word of God as very messy. I’m not used
to it at all. That’s the upbringing I would be familiar with” (S-3, B-2, 16).

Blaine offered, “My question is culturally, are we ok with being angry with God? I’ve
never had a close loss,...I think if I had such a feeling [of being angry with God], it would be
tied up with ‘No, how could you have such a feeling?’ so you’d be guilty with feeling angry
with God, and not express it in any way...It’s not the way I would pray” (S-3, B-16). In
response, Gloria said, “Part of the discomfort I have is that you’re speaking so boldly in such
language to God” (S-3, B-17). Phyllis, later in the seminar series, took exception to psalms
calling God to account, such as 88 (“Wretched, close to death from my youth. I have born your
trials. I am numb. Your fury has swept down upon me; your terrors have utterly destroyed
me...Friend and neighbour you have taken away; my one companion is darkness” vv. 16, 17,
19). “The psalms were truly unjust to God: several psalms. I realized that the psalmists were not
blaming God, but were reaching out for help” (S-7, B-87).

Blaine had taken up this theme in his written preparation for the seminar while relating
Psalm 35 to a pastoral experience of working with three families, dealing with bullied children,

The curses of the psalmist ask God to hurl these same feelings back at their tormentors. I
can rationalize that such temptations must occur in the messiness of the experience, but my own experience and maybe it is part of our training to “respect others” that

\[433\] Italics mine. The curse seen as a temptation seems to add a moral dimension, and speaks of Blaine’s attitude
toward the psalm genre at that point in the experience.
makes it hard to wish for another to experience the pain that victims of bully (sic) go through. The curse, “Let their path be slippery and dark; let the angel of the Lord pursue them,” evoked resistance in me. I found it hard to wish such a fate on anyone” (S-4, Written Work).434

Vince recollected back to age 12, and listening to the performance of an opera, where one of the performers sang about justified anger with God, “and I thought, ‘Whoa! This is daring!’” (S-3, B-18). An artist, a little later in the same seminar, he looked back 35 years to a movie he had seen, recalling a scene where a young man told of his younger sister being raped, “and he had so much anger about God, I [thought] Ohhh! It made me feel really dirty inside. I thought, ‘Why does he talk about God that way?’ In comparing two psalms from his preparatory work, Vince continued, “I was thinking about Psalm 109 this week, and thinking this [Psalm 35] is a little softer edge...But by the same token, it had a sort of flavour that made me feel guilty for even trying to empathize with these thoughts” (S-3, B-20).

Rachel harkened back to a childhood, where “we grew up children should be seen and not heard...A voice in here says, ‘Keep it to yourself.’ And, to that moment, “I know we feel angry...but I never think of blaming God” (S-4, B-39). A further point of discomfort for her: “It struck me, too [from Ps. 35], ‘I’ll praise you in the assembly’ if...I’ll tell the world, if...’ I think it’s bribing [God]. In reply, Vince offered about the same text, “That also made me feel a little weird. Why are we bribing God?” (S-4, B-40). Joining the conversation, Gloria—maintaining her stance of “not liking” these words—reaches back to an experience with a group of women telling their stories of sexual abuse, and their need for a measure of healing before they were able to do that. “Maybe that’s the whole thing of why the psalm says that [words Rachel and

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434 Written work done in preparation for the seminar.
Vince have interpreted as “bribing God”], ‘If you rescue me. I need to be healed first. Then I’ll tell the story’” (S-4, B-40).

Blaine’s intervention signals his hearing in the feelings of discomfort, an invitation, “It speaks to me of a boldness in the relationship with God, when we’re able to do that. I certainly feel challenged by it. That’s not the way I would pray [Belinda inserts here, “I would sometimes” (S-4, B-40)], but it’s inviting. It’s opening up. Like the power of this psalm is kind of that we don’t share” (S-4, B-40).

Two weeks later, responding to another participant sharing her psalm composition, Blaine commented, “I guess the whole thing brought up for me that we’re often not all that comfortable with people in the midst of affliction” (S-6, B-63). A little later the same day, in response to Phyllis’ staccato delivery of her psalm—a machine-gun reading upon whose effectiveness several commented—Blaine reported, “I was probably recoiling a bit at the roll of curses” (S-6, B-64) as they sputtered out of Phyllis’ mouth—Phyllis, who in an earlier seminar had said about cursing, “I would like to be able to use it, to be strong enough. Yeah, I haven’t got it in me. I could pray [Psalms] 109 or 88, and think, ‘Oh, if I only had the power,’ but I can’t. That’s not in my heart. Would I like to? Yeah, but I can’t...It gets every emotion inside of me going” (S-3, B-12).

Picking up on Blaine’s comment about the discomfort felt in response to those “in the midst of affliction,” when responding to Rachel’s psalm, Belinda added this connection, “What came to me was non-acceptance of that part of myself” (S-6, B-69). The psalm, others, our own selves—though not explicitly expressed as yet—all finding common ground in the theme of discomfort.
Discomfort with these texts—from the Psalter, their own composition, and the writing of other participants—did not entirely dissipate over the course of our time together. In nuanced ways, two participants expressed their lingering unease. In the final interview, Blaine reported these texts as “still unsettling” (FI, C-9).\textsuperscript{435} Gloria held to her, “I don’t like praying them. I don’t like the language” (FI, C-13). Of her experience in psalm composition, she shared with the group, “It was difficult for me to create curses, like harder to do than lament, ask for help, try to motivate God to listen, so I resisted, I really did—strong resistance, and I had some written and I took them out” (S-6, B-59). In spite of her stated discomfort, in a psalm where the enemy is poverty, she did include these:

O God, hold those with big houses, shiny cars, and wallets of money guilty
And let them fall from public grace and power.
May their houses crumble, their marriages fall apart, their cars break down, their lives under addiction and their children beg for food.
Let passers-by stare at them, then turn their heads and walk away.
Let them fade into sidewalks of this city and know disgrace and shame.

At the same time, noteworthy is Vince’s comment. In his work in preparation for the final seminar, he wrote, “I do not find the sentiments expressed in the imprecatory psalms all that surprising” (S-7, Written work). He echoed the same feelings to the group on that occasion, attributing his reaction to his on-going liturgical exposure to the psalms—though their harshest expressions would not be found there. Particularly worthy of observation is his above comment of feeling “guilty for even trying to empathize with” (S-4, B-32) the one doing the cursing. It

\textsuperscript{435} FI = Final Interview.
calls to mind that as these psalms waffle among supplication, curse, and thanksgiving, we may do the same in our recollection of the ways they touch us.

More evidence of ambiguity in relation to the imprecatory psalms was offered during the seminar in which participants, in response to Psalm 35, were sharing the scenario that would be the basis for their cursing psalm composition. It came in an exchange between Gloria—perhaps of all participants, the one who expressed most initial discomfort with these texts—and Belinda, whose scenario was based on the feelings of a daughter whose father had left the family for another woman. Gloria observed to Belinda,

> When I was listening to you...your language is beautiful; I’m just wondering how you are going to get the curses in [when you compose the psalm from the scenario just shared]. (Field notes record Gloria laughing here.) We tend to tell our story in hindsight when we’ve kind of come to the end, so we make it kind of safe or we make it more beautiful than actually maybe it was at the time. So, I just wonder when you go to write your psalm, how are you going to get the anger and abuse, and being disowned by your father. How’s that going to?...The psalm ends with what you’re saying, Belinda, but the psalmist says, “Only then will my tongue speak your praise.” It hasn’t happened yet. It’s the desire of the heart that you’ll be able to say, “Graceful God,” but it really hasn’t happened yet, because two verses before he’s cursing (S-5, B-48).

Here, Gloria, admittedly uncomfortable with cursing, calls upon what might be referred to as the honesty of the psalm’s words to preserve, in its telling, the integrity of the story behind them. All to which, Belinda replied with laughter, authenticating the researcher’s observation of Gloria’s ability to refocus the group, “We need you at this table, so you can keep reminding me to have curses” (S-5, B-48).

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436 Gloria’s emphasis.
437 Gloria’s emphasis.
5.2.2 Theme 2 These psalms gradually disclose their place in the Christian life. It is relevant to note that, in the midst of their voiced discomfort with these texts, as early as the first seminar after their introduction to the lament psalms—and their subcategory of imprecation—we see glimpses of the troubling psalms inviting the study participants to take a closer look.

Gloria, who has many years of familiarity with the psalms, though, admittedly, little exposure to imprecation in the psalter, described her experience of the Nowell chapters introducing these texts, as “very revealing, but very difficult” (S-3, B-2), and had this to say in response to something shared by Belinda’s recollection of a pastoral encounter, “Did you kind of have a sense of what was very disturbing from what you were hearing...that this could be the word of God in their lives that day? I find that a hard connection to make, but that’s what they’re saying in [Nowell’s] text: they’re being their truest self before God and others” (S-3, B-2). Belinda agrees, “The thing I said to myself, ‘It’s better for them to say it and reflect it out to others than to keep it in, because it would boil and seethe. It has to come out’” (S-3, B-3).

Gloria goes on in that first post-lament session, “As I was reading and reflecting on these chapters [of Nowell’s book], I was thinking what I sometimes find difficult to hear in peoples’ anger are (sic) who they are at this time. It’s their truth, and it really challenges me to receive it, rather than say, ‘It’s awful [that they said that]’” (S-3, B-4). Field note observations recall Belinda’s interrupting Gloria, as she affirms her insight, “Exactly!” (S-3, B-4) Continuing the conversation, Gloria adds, “It’s real and maybe—this is a stretch for me—maybe it’s the word of God in you right now. It may not be pretty, but that’s what it is. That’s a new understanding and a new revelation I got—whether I’m off-base or not—but it seems that way” (S-3, B-4).

As the discussion continued, Blaine shared his thoughts, “[I think] the psalm helps us identify violence in each of our hearts...to acknowledge that violence we don’t like to admit is
very real. It’s much healthier to expose that to the light of God than to keep it wrapped up inside...It doesn’t make it easy, but it has to be” (S-3, B-6). He next alludes to a then-recent shooting in the United States, and the widely-reported street violence that ensued, “That’s not something I could do or be part of, but I think if the situation were just a bit different, we could, or I could. So it acknowledges that potential for violence, and helps us get those hurtful or potentially violent emotions out where they can be solved, where God can help us work through them. That’s what I take out of it” (S-3, B-6). A little later he opines that being angry with God, “and not expressing it in any way at all...sounds a little dysfunctional... I’ve come to see that it’s very healthy to do that [express anger]” (S-3, B-6).

In the session where we shared lectio divina with Psalm 35, Rachel used the image of a “panic room” to describe her experience. She defined the term as, “you know a room where you go in and scream and shout, and then you leave the room in some form of calmness or something” (S-4, B-37). In the engaged conversation that followed among Rachel, Gloria, and Phyllis—one in which the field notes record them sometimes finishing each other’s sentences—Gloria, in relation to finding a place for the imprecations in life, adds, “So maybe your idea of finding a safe spot where we can express it in all its ugliness, maybe it’s a way to move forward to get to the point where we can say [the concluding verse of Ps. 35], ‘Great is the Lord who delights in the peace of his servant.’ I like this idea” (S4, B-38).

In relation to these psalms carving out a space for telling the story, and associating the text with his experience of families of children who are being bullied, Blaine adds, “It’s not easy to open up, and they’re very helpful and they’re very healthy to be able to get the story out, wrinkles and all.” Continuing the thread of the same conversation, Gloria adds, “I still don’t like
cursing. I don’t know. I’m not comfortable with people who wish evil on others. I think it’s to validate expressions of anger, despair, disgrace” (S-4, B-43).

Belinda hastens a reply, adding a not-as-yet-mentioned perspective. “When you were saying that, this thought came to me: Maybe in doing that you bring the other person [the perpetrator] to an awareness of the way they are acting, and in that you free them” (S-4, B-43). Affirmingly, Gloria adds, “You enlighten them” (S-4, B-43). Belinda rejoins, “Yes, but the curses, like I see it as an invitation, like ‘You go into the pit that you have created for another person’... If they enter into that or like you know really look at what they’re doing to people... Whereas if you never do that, they’ll never go down into the depths to come up again” (S-4, B-43-44). Gloria—who, after the experience of composing an imprecatory psalm, had opined, “The psalms almost sound like witchcraft” (S-6, B-61)—asks, “Could you ever curse a person?” (S-4, B-44) Belinda: “Well, I’ve told some people I didn’t like what they were doing” (S-4, B-44). Gloria: “That’s not cursing. I think it’s just being honest” (S-4, B-44) Belinda: “They can look at it as a cursing because they’ve never looked at themselves in that light. They don’t see the anger; they don’t see the hurt they’ve caused in others” (S-4, B-44). Belinda’s psalm composition hints at such attempts to enlighten the perpetrator of hurt and harm: “Oh God deal with them as they have dealt with me.” Blaine’s psalm, on the other hand, is explicit, “Break their legs and they may feel my pain. Blind their eyes that they may feel the darkness that envelops me.” Vincent’s psalm includes, “May they learn the loss of trust that comes from the betraying word.”

Phyllis enters the conversation between Belinda and Gloria about the educative value of the curse in the life of the victimizer. It wasn’t clear whether she was challenging or affirming Belinda, “Do you believe in the Golden Rule? Do onto others as you’d have them do onto you”
Quickly from Belinda, “I’ve appreciated when someone pointed it out to me, and almost cursed me. You know; it made me look at myself, and say, ‘What are you doing?’” (S-4, B-44). Gloria doesn’t let it go, “It’s not the same as wishing a curse on someone: that your life will be short-lived or have an accident on the way home” (S-3, B-44-45). Phyllis: “That’s terrible” (S-4, B-45). It appears Gloria, and to a lesser extent, Phyllis, may have been trying either to dissuade Belinda from finding a niche in which the curses of the psalter might find a role to play in life or seeking to impress upon her the gravity of the genre, pushing her as to what language qualifies as a “curse.” Belinda, though, doesn’t seem to concede. She concludes with—field notes recall—a friendly curtness, “There’s a lot to be discussed further” (S-4, B-45).

After composing her own psalm based on the real-life scenario of a relative’s struggle with domestic abuse, among the most reticent about these texts, Rachel, in response to one of Gloria’s regular attestations as to her dislike of cursing psalms, summed up her own changing perspective as to a place for the imprecations in life thus: “I never thought of not liking it, but that it might be useful sometimes. I don’t like the idea of cursing, but to me, they’re useful, saying some things that I would not think of saying, but they’re there to be said anyway, and depending on the situation, they come in handy” (S-6, B-61).

A possible utility of these psalms was echoed by Gloria as, in her Final Interview, she reflected on what these texts disclosed to her over the course of the study experience,

That’s where I really started from: not liking them. I don’t like praying them. I don’t like the language, but as the process went on, my dear, it was an awareness to realize that expressing—even in sometimes very violent ways—what feels in the experience is very valid and it frees the person to move forward from an experience. It’s just kind of foreign to me to handle it that way. But so I can probably read those psalms now with more understanding and a little more awareness. I don’t mind the laments, but the curses part of it, that wishing bad things to people was, has been very difficult for me. But if
you understand the way it was kind of mentioned one time, the curses are being aimed at God who can handle it. Let God take care of it (FI, C-13).

5.2.3 Theme 3 These psalms foster self-awareness. Psalmic imprecations are not tidy. They volley back and forth among anger, hope, despair, and gratitude. It shouldn’t surprise us, then, that any attempt to classify reactions to them would not be neat and clearly distinct. The border land between themes was porous. This was notably the case between the psalms gradually disclosing their place in the Christian life and fostering self-awareness. In some cases, particular quotes could find a home under several themes, so we may find them repeated.

In the first seminar that dealt explicitly with the psalms of imprecation, Gloria reported insights into her reaction to the curses:

As I was reading and reflecting on these chapters [from the Nowell book], I was thinking what I sometimes find difficult to hear in people’s anger is who they are [when they are expressing it]. It’s their truth, and it really challenges me to receive it, rather than say, “It’s awful [that they said that]...It’s the word of God in [the person] right now...That’s a new revelation and a new understanding I got. Whether I’m off base or not, but it seems that way (S-3, B-4).

Blaine, in the same seminar, spoke of these texts revealing violence in our own hearts, “There was once I, maybe not today, but in others and at various times to acknowledge that violence that we don’t like to admit is there is very real” (S-3, B-6). During our final gathering, several weeks later, Blaine expanded upon the insight of violence within and the psalms’ ability to enlighten us, “It’s like the hidden part of the iceberg. Again just going a little deeper; it’s like an invitation to go into that iceberg and see whatever it is—whether it’s violence or anger—and it’s [the psalm] just a tool to be able to access that” (S-7, B-78).
“It’s within us,” (S-3, B-7) added Belinda, who continued in response to Blaine’s initial comment about heart-held violence—and who would, at a later gathering, reiterate her “non-acceptance of that [dark]part of myself...whatever is evil in me” (S-6, B-69)—“I kind of skirted around that when I was reflecting. I didn’t want to look at the violence within myself...I looked at it from someone else’s...Another time I looked at the violence in me that was causing harm to others, and that was sort of a revelation to me, but I thought that’s for another day” (S-3, B-9). Without elaborating, Phyllis also claimed the recognition of interior violence as an insight (S-3, B-9).

Rachel picked up on the theme, and added, “Sometimes if I get upset about something, I always think what will be the result. How will it affect somebody else? And then I will pull back if it’s going to be hurtful, and I think, ‘Oh, I’m not going to say it.’ I suffer it inside” (S-3, B-9). As she so often did throughout the gatherings, Gloria intervened with an insight that had come to her, “What if we’re not able to manage to keep two steps ahead, and all our defenses are gone? You meet people who don’t have any of those filters around or in them because of life’s experiences. They’ve lost them. They’ve lost it, literally” (S-3, B-9).

In response, Vince offered, “Sometimes I know full well that the words I’m going to say are going to be destructive, and I will say it anyway. So I have that defense mechanism. I have that decision point,” (S-3, B-10) where he can choose to speak or hold it in. He continued, “I was reading this, and I was thinking about if I would ever wish, reading Psalm 109, would I ever wish that many things to happen to [someone who owes him a large sum of money]? (S-3, B-10).
The discussion prompted Blaine to share, “I’ve come to see that it’s very healthy [to express anger to God], as you would in...My closest relations are the most honest. I’d let anger show in front of [his wife] much more than I would in this group. And sometimes she gets the anger that [should be] redirected to someone else” (S-3, B-17). A little later, Blaine continues in relation to expressing anger to God,

I was reflecting on that last night: how my image of God has changed. The childhood image I had where God was much farther away, more the Santa Clause, but I’ve found, although I’ve accepted more closer images of God, in some ways I haven’t allowed this [God accepting our anger] to my new image. The image of God still as judge when it comes to anger or being completely honest with God: although I believe [God] certainly knows everything, I’m not going to discuss it with him. But I came to that awareness that that is a bit of an inconsistency. I haven’t grown up in that particular part of the image (S-3, B-18).

In his written work in preparation for that day, Blaine put what he shared orally this way, “I am not so bold before God that I could demand action to my petty problems or to curse those things that are obstacles in my life...As a result I have neglected to allow God access to some corners of my life...” He had also touched on the theme of growth in seeing a place for expressing anger at God. He wrote, “I can remember a religious sister, whose faith I admired, sharing about her anger with God on the occasion of the death of her mother. At the time I felt her anger was misplaced and childish. I can now see her courage in sharing her experience, undiluted, with her God” (S-3, Written work).

Gloria picked up on Blaine’s group sharing, “But it’s interesting to think if we were really our truest self, we’d say those things to God instead of tearing someone else apart. We’re safe [with God]. God is so big, so beyond what we could imagine. It’s interesting how we were brought up... It kind of made for a very sanitized religion. Good prayers were ones in church” (S-3, B-19).
During a subsequent seminar, reflecting on the home lectio divina experience with Psalm 35—particularly v. 4: “Let them be shamed and disgraced who seek my life”—Gloria shared an awareness into her own past experience of what she termed “shame and disgrace.” Lectio with the psalm, she added, encouraged her to re-think and gave her fresh insight into a pastoral experience with a family who had confided in her, “We could never go to church. We’d be too ashamed” (S-4, B-29).

From her reported discomfort with the task of including curses in her psalm composition, Gloria reported an experience of self-illumination, “I think I understand some of that from my own personality. I do the Enneagram, and I come out between either a peacekeeper or a giver who do (sic) not like confrontation, do (sic) not like when people are cursing around me, just kind of clam up or say something positive and that kind of lights the fire. So that’s part of why I think I found it difficult” (S-6, B-59).

In response to Rachel’s psalm articulating the words of one who has suffered domestic violence, Gloria went beneath the curses’ ready association with anger to underlying feelings of “fear and terror for her life that has (sic) come out because that’s the crux of the story” (S-5, B-49). Another time, Rachel and Gloria, in response to Blaine’s psalm from the perspective of families embroiled in supporting bullied children, also labeled the root emotion, “fear” (S-6, B-72). “Extreme fear” was seen as the source of the desire for retaliation and revenge. Blaine spoke of the anger of the parents and his anger with being bullied as a child,

I think there was a lot of fear under the anger that resonated with me: fear of losing control of the situation, fear of what the future was going to bring. And I can relate that to my own experience [later as a young adult] when my life didn’t have any direction: fear of how are things going to turn out. So these general fears seemed to be driving a lot of other things, not until digging down that you kind of identified them (S-7, B-100).
In his Final Interview, Blaine was asked whether interpreting these psalms as motivated by fear rather than by anger might make them more palatable. His response:

Maybe if the psalm was of social injustice (sic), it would be ok. But I’m not all that interested in digging into the fear, even if I recognized it. What if we called these psalms of fear rather than cursing or imprecatory psalms? My experience around that was that to call these psalms of fear wouldn’t be any more inviting for me to come to them, even having been in the situation where we’re caught up or driven by our fears or our fears are getting the best of us. To have a prayer for fear or a psalm in a time of fear wouldn’t be inviting for me, I didn’t think.

KK:438 “What would be the reason for that?”

Blaine: I guess partly because knowing that digging down is not an easy process. It’s going to be painful. It’s going to bring up things that aren’t pleasant perhaps, and just a reluctance. Not saying that it isn’t or doesn’t need to be done, but it doesn’t make it any more inviting.

KK: And how does seeing it as a psalm of response to social injustice make it easier to go into it?

Blaine: I think a little bit because it’s outside of ourselves. You know it’s something that I can dive into, but almost you can detach from yourself, and put your energy into it. This digging down into the fear, that’s work that has to be done within, and it’s messy. Now it can be messy when you get out into social injustice and what not, but I don’t think, for me anyway, it’s (sic) certainly not as reluctant to do that (F1, C-11, 12).
5.2.4 Theme 4 These psalms are cathartic. As the experience with the psalms of imprecation touched the intellectual reality of participants, reportedly fostering self-awareness, affectively, they were described as cathartic. Gloria likened the psalmist to “a really good journaling person, whether [the psalmist] is writing for him/herself (their own experience) or for the community and whatever situation they are going through. It’s like when they say, you go for help for something, ‘Write it down. Get it outside yourself.’ The value of expressing it, getting it out before something terrible happens” (S-3, B-6).

Vince compared his experience with imprecation in the psalms to “going to a psychiatrist [or] the confessional. You say it; you get it out, and you come out of the session, and say, ‘I got it off my chest. I feel relieved.’ There is a catharsis in expressing yourself, and even if it is to express curses or desperation or anger, I think ultimately it is fruitful to put it that way on paper or word than letting it fester and grow and become worse” (S-3, B-8). He went on to speak of a situation where he has not expressed anger where he feels called to, “But the problem is because I have not confronted [the person], it is still eating me up inside” (S-3, B-8).

In the psalm Phyllis composed, she penned these words: “Let those who destroy me find themselves standing in molten ash as they hide in wait for me. Let the stench of the street they walk on burn their nostrils...Let the water they drink be filled with slime...” For her, this writing “was difficult. It was and it wasn’t. It allowed me to put myself into it...I’m a peace-keeper; I avoid trouble, but [composing the psalm] allowed me to get something on the table that’s been in here for many years” (S-6, B-63, 64).

Blaine, commenting on Phyllis’ further observation of our developing ways to express and deal with our own interior violence, adds that while we may be able to manage our own, he has experienced it as “even scarier” to be in the presence of another’s emotive catharsis. “The
fact of someone else: you can’t make them do anything about their anger or violence...You can lead the horse to water, but no more” (S-3, B-8). Belinda amplified Blaine, “I’ve been in two situations where someone else was in that situation—very angry—and [I was] terrified. I thought they were going to lose it” (S-3, B-8).

Blaine went on to share another insight into the psalms’ cathartic possibility,

It’s just getting it out. Though we’re calling on God to do these things, we know God is forgiving and merciful. There is no way God is going to rain our expectations on our foe. In some way, the saying of [the curses], it helps us to that realization and calls us to that mercifulness that God has, that steadfast love, and changes our heart in making us more forgiving. “No, I don’t really want that to happen, even though I’ve asked for it. In asking for it, I realize that I do not want that violence. I do not want that eye for an eye (S-3, B-11).439

Rachel raised another cathartic point, “Do you think we didn’t write the psalms; someone else did. Then we don’t have to take responsibility for the words we’re saying...You know because maybe personally I wouldn’t think of all those things to say. But it’s here so I read it and bring it out, and maybe help my anger or whatever I was feeling. It’s not really from me, so” (S-3, B-12). Here, she trails off.

The psalm Rachel composed in the name of an abused relative cursed abusers that “their hands be broken as they raise them to strike me. Let their legs be cut from under them so they may never walk towards me with evil intent. Let their lips be sealed shut so they may never utter an angry word against me again.” At the psalm’s closing, she bargains, “Help me O God; rid me of my suffering. Then I will be strong to continue to helping (sic) your children here on earth...” In response to Rachel’s work, Gloria commented, “I was just thinking that when we express those negatives, it’s like a catharsis in us. Like, it frees us. It’s almost like when you experience

439 The researcher has had this experience.
abuse or something, it’s always kept quiet, and you get a chance to say it, and it frees them. It has kind of a transformative. The doors open. Just do it in a safe place” (S-6, B-67, 68).

Blaine picked up on transformation, comparing his response to Rachel’s psalm and the follow-up discussion, “Reflecting on it, I thought, ‘This is our eucharistic moment, where God transforms our reality into something. We’re walking forward a different person than when we came to Eucharist, and these psalms have that same transformative power. We take our prayer to God as full of rage as they are; they come out in some measure of peace on the other side...We’re not the same person who offered it up, who gets it back’” (S-6, B-68, 69).

In his Final Interview, Blaine responded to an invitation to elaborate:

I guess it was the experience of having prayed with [these psalms], and then the process of [composing a psalm]. Looking back to see I’m not the same person as I was before I started this process, and I related that to the change. I have an image that when we come to Eucharist, after that encounter with Christ, we leave a new person. We put on a new cloak. And it’s incremental. It may be a very tiny, but in participating, in taking, in listening to the Word of God, that somehow challenges us or affirms us to help us and then in that moment of participating in the Eucharistic Prayer, and the Eucharist itself, it changes me a little bit for the better, and I just compare that same experience to what had happened with the psalms FI, C-7, 8).

Gloria offers another analogy, “It’s like people who are an (sic) alcoholic giving a witness statement almost thanks God for the addiction because it brought him to another place in his life. They are grateful for the terrible struggle that brought you through to somewhere else” (S-6, B-69). To which Belinda adds, echoing an earlier comparison by Vince (S-3, B-8), “It’s something the same as a penitential service, when you go to confession and you bring up something inside of you...This is what is evil in me, and I get it out, and ask for God’s
forgiveness. It’s sort of the same pattern as that. It’s a whole transformation. You got it out. It’s gone” (S-6, B-69).

The conversation continued. In response to Vince’s psalm about a mother retaliating against unjust treatment of her son, Gloria commented, “The son became what they [his accusers] said” (S-6, B-74). How do words effect transformation? Blaine brought the conversation along, “The curse fights back. It empowers. It gives you a weapon to fight back” (S-6, B-75). The sharing continued in brief sentences. Belinda: “The curse is bringing you up again [from the diminished state] others are putting you in” (S-6, B-75). Phyllis: “You are gaining power” (S-6, B-75). Belinda: “It gives you the strength to fight back” (S-6, B-75).

Gloria intervenes, initially expressing a lingering discomfort, then, “Angry people change the world. We know that...There’s a role for it [the curse]. It gives people a voice” (S-6, B-75).

Vince: “[It’s] from sheep to shepherd...Those who get angry enough: they take the leadership role and they become a shepherd” (S-6, B-75, 76). Then, in words, field notes recall, spoken with “gusto and determination,” Blaine joins in,

I wonder if it can clear your focus as well. After you get rid of the rage, get it out into the open, you’re then either able to focus on what needs to be done or see a little clearer that, ‘No, I don’t accept the critique that I’ve been getting.’ Now free from that spell they’ve put on me, I can see it’s nonsense. Just as much as my curse isn’t going to become real, what they’ve called me (S-6, B-76).

Gloria cuts in here, “...won’t have power over me anymore” (S-6, B-76). Blaine responds, “Exactly!” (S-6, B-76). In spite of his animated and convincing response in the group, Blaine’s written work, chronicling his reaction to writing his own imprecatory psalm while allowing a cathartic release from the pain, planting a seed for peace once again...it still remained difficult and unsettling in my gut, there was resistance to praying using curses.
I certainly do not want others, even my enemies to suffer. It feels unchristian to pray so graphically, but I can justify that it is far preferable than to act thus (S-6, Written work).

Rachel described catharsis in her experience of psalm composition,

One day I was thinking, “What do I say? What do I say? All of a sudden, I just let it pour out. I wrote it down, went to the computer. I just did this one thing. I never like had to go back. It just came out like a flood. That was it. (What did it feel like: to come out like a flood?) It was a relief. The curse: I felt happy because this person [in whose name the psalm was written] has been through so much, and these words were never said—ever. So, for me saying: it was a relief. I can’t really say I enjoyed it, but I felt good writing what I did. Like I said, everything came out at the same time (S-6, B-65).

5.2.5 Theme 5 These psalms tell a story. Phyllis made a connection between the psalms and her story very quickly, “I think I can only tell you experiences of my own difficult years with family sickness and death, you know: accidents and things like that. And I think, and you say, ‘My God, my God, why?’” (S-3, B-2). Later in the same gathering, she related the imprecations to an estrangement between her and a sibling (S-3, B-13). In her final interview, she expanded on that: “When I wrote my own psalm, I really learned a lot about myself. I was harbouring some hard feelings with someone who was very close to me for the better part of 20 years, and I think it gave me an opportunity to put things to rest when I wrote my psalm.”

Blaine connected with his grandfather’s death (S-3, B-16). Gloria made a unique connection between the cursing psalms and her father’s knowledge of the curses of Irish folklore. From this recollection, she interpreted the curse as “like the other side of a blessing;” each of them manifesting the power of the spoken word. Contrastingly, she explored the Irish curses “just for a lark;” (S-3, B-11) at the same time, she maintained discomfort with the psalms throughout the seminar period. She linked this to the story of her “family and church culture,” where “you did the things you were expected to do, and so you would deny some of the other
things. Like, if you were really angry about something, it wasn’t the thing to lash out in anger” (S-3, B-18). Then, a possible source of the internal conflict around these psalms, “The psalm is saying it’s healthy to express what we’re feeling because it’s who we are right now. But that’s not what we grew up with—not at all. It wouldn’t be God’s word in our house, not at all!” (S3, B-18) Vince concurred from his own growing-up story. Rachel related the psalmic connection to her 25-year experience of wanting to emigrate to Canada, and her husband’s contrary decision. “I was in a mire, in a pit. I just went along” (S-3, B-21).

Blaine commented upon the difference between the lamenting imprecations and the prior work with psalms of thanksgiving and praise. The former, he related as “driving me deeper into my own experience 25 years ago...I can relate to the psalms because I can recall, ‘Why or why me, God? I’m lost; my career didn’t pan out. Where am I going? What do you have in store?’ And it seemed there was no answer coming” (S-3, B-22). In the following seminar, he reached back to that recollection and associated these psalms as facilitating having “your own story made more present, to make that deeper immersion possible” (S-4, B-42). Earlier, in a discussion about his work with families of bullied children, Blaine recalled another part of his story, arising out of his interaction with the imprecations.

The second time I prayed with it, I came to acknowledge my own experience of being bullied when I was young, that I had almost forgotten in a sense. It wasn’t until the second time that I thought, “Oh, I’ve been through that, and it’s kind of interesting that when it happened, it wasn’t a situation that you relish, and I don’t recall having particularly the animosity that you have in some of the images [in these psalms] ... (S-4, B-34)

Blaine went on to share an insight about the one who, in diverse forms, is always present in the texts: the bully, the person seen to be the purveyor of hardship.
Sadly, looking at it, the fellow that did bully me, he had a lot of demons, and sadly, that’s what likely led him to being a bully in the first place. And it’s almost like a lot of these curses happened to him in a way over his life. He’s dealt with addictions, and the break-up of his marriage, and depression, and this and that. I’ve been an acquaintance of his over the years (S-4, B-34).

Vince and Rachel added notable considerations to these texts and the telling of our story. In our first seminar after being introduced to the lamenting imprecations, Vince spoke to the group, “I was very fortunate most of my life; I would say even today I’m very fortunate, which makes me look at these psalms with almost alien eyes” (S-3, B-23). Two weeks later, in response to the scenarios participants had shared in preparation for authoring their psalms, he said, “I was struck by the emotion going through some of the stories, particularly Belinda and Gloria. I can tell by the way you were describing these scenarios, they hit really close to you, and so I was...It made me appreciative of how sheltered a life I relatively led...There is nothing in my personal history that would evoke the kind of feeling that psalm calls upon” (S-5, B-46).

From Rachel, “It made me think someone is suffering every day, and they are in this psalm. I feel guilty for not having suffered these things” (S-4, B-42). In her written work prior to the final group gathering, she discussed telling the story of “someone” as contrasted with telling our own, “When we tell someone else’s story we tell of what we know or have been told, when we tell our own story, we have to sort out all the feelings that surfaces (sic) in that story...[some] long forgotten or hidden” (S-7, Written work).

It is noted that both Vince (S-3, B-8; S-3, B-14; S-4, B-30; S-6, B-73) and Rachel (S-6, Written work) at other times, shared incidents from their own lives of which the psalms reminded them. In his Final Interview, Vince elaborated on how he saw the voice in which the
psalms are often expressed as conducive to telling a story—and not simply that of the original composer.

One has to question what was going through the minds of the psalmist when they wrote imprecatory psalms, and I think when we read the Scripture, for the most part, I find, are relating, telling stories of things that happened in the past: sometimes with the lens of societal norms and stuff of the day. So, it sometimes I feel like I’m reading a historic history book. When you get to the psalms, because often times they are not said in the third person, but in the first person, there is a sense of that unique vantage point of you becoming the person saying this. It’s not just, “He did this,” or “He did that.” It’s “I” saying it (FI, C-2).

In the final seminar, Belinda drew this connection between psalm and story in response to what others had offered,

And to relate to the story in the psalms: I didn’t think of that “story in the psalms,” but it is a story of a person [the psalmist]. It is the story of our lives. And I guess I was impressed by that as I was doing [the exercise in preparation for the day]. It’s just like I never knew the psalms. They’re like life: the actual happenings. When I think of saying, like look at the newspaper, and what are the events there? What are people cursing each other, and where there’s thanksgiving and praise (S-7, B-80).

Going back to this in the Final Interview, Belinda added,

I couldn’t get over how these people could write away back then, whoever they were, how current they are. You take that cursing and apply it to what’s going on with others or yourself or what others are going through or how you’re going through with God or how you’re going through with yourself (FI, C-15).

Gloria, picking up on another’s comment in the final seminar, went on to say,

I liked what you mentioned about your story and our story with the much bigger story; to think that we’re part of this long, long tradition or heritage of story-telling, but also of different forms of prayer. I forget what you said, it’s like when we pray the psalms or we even do our own, we’re part of this rich tradition of the Church. It put things in perspective. It’s a much bigger picture than just my picture. I like that (S-7, B-83).
Rachel’s recognition of the presence of the world’s suffering in the words of the psalms, with Belinda’s and Gloria’s sense of the psalms growing out of and reflecting a bigger story provide a segue into another theme.

5.2.6 Theme 6 These psalms are voice for the voiceless. At the first seminar, Gloria spoke of the challenge she experienced in the presence of harsh language similar to that voiced in the psalms. “Reading and reflecting on these chapters [in Nowell’s book] I was thinking that what I sometimes find difficult to hear in people’s anger is who they are at this time. It’s their truth, and it really challenges me to receive it, rather than say, ‘It’s awful [for them to say that]’” (S-3, B-2). In her written work done in preparation for the seminar, she wrote

I have been brought up in my home, school and community...to be a good daughter, to be a nice child, to be a good student, to always be polite...and to not express anger, outrage, nor complain to anyone, let alone God. I was never encouraged to express anger, so these chapters certainly opened me up to the messiness of life that needs words—shocking words I have never uttered as I reflect on my own difficult life experiences...Psalm 88 has been no friend of mine, so this week I have taken time to pray with it in the context of being part [of a local group that advocates for the economically disadvantaged] and because of the failed efforts over the past ten years, and I and many others have become discouraged and stopped attending meetings. From the stories I heard as well as the frustration of [group] members, I took some time to write in the style of Psalm 88, making God the enemy and being a voice for the poor (S-3, Written work).440

Her words are poignant:

God, we cry to you and to your people every day.
You know we are the poor who live from hand to mouth.
You see us struggle to survive, to pay the rent, the lights, the heat.
You understand we cannot give healthy food to our children.

440 This was undertaken on her own initiative, distinct from the psalm composition required for the project.
You weigh us down in poverty and hardship,
You take away our esteem in the community,
You make us the despised and looked down upon,
You diminish our strength and our hope,
You see our tears and our anger every day.

You place good people in our path
who stay awhile, but have no power to lift us up.
They meet and talk and advocate to no avail.
Your good people drift off to other projects, other causes
leaving us drowning in our own prisons.

Where are you, God? Have you no mercy on us?
We lose our partners, our children, our homes
We drown our sorrows in cheap liquor,
We collect bottles for a drug high,
People look away from us on the city street,
We sleep on corners or in alley ways.

You God, don’t you care for us?
Why do you reject us God? Why pass us by?
Why make us the despised of Charlottetown?
Where is your special love for the poor?
And if this is your way of loving, you can have it back!

A discussion of Gloria’s psalm followed its presentation in the group.
Gloria: The only thing I say is, when I read the chapters, I wondered what it would be like to think that way, because I’ve never, ever done it. I’ve never cursed God, not in my entire life. Even someone saying, “God damn it!” really bothers me terrible. So it’s kind of. I made myself do it to see what it would be like, but I did it. It’s very sanitized. I know some people I know on the street would never say it so nicely. It’s sanitized. It’s tidy (S-3, B-25).

Belinda: When you were finished, how did you feel then? (S-3, B-25)

Gloria: I still don’t like it because in my mind, poverty is not God’s fault. In my mind, but to think and reflect in a way that you can blame God for your situation (S-3, B-25).

Rachel: God said the poor would be always with us. How does that make you feel with these people? (S-3, B-25)

Gloria: I’m sure they don’t want to be poor (S-3, B-25).

Vince, earlier in the day, had made a distinction between empathizing with the voice heard in Psalm 88, and condoning the words employed, said, “I can understand your pain, but do I condone it? Do I feel I want to get on board with it?” (S-3, B-5) He then used the example of someone feeling they needed to kill someone for vengeance. “I can maybe understand that person’s pain and suffering throughout his whole life, but does that make me say the psalm helped me side with him? No” (S-3, B-5).

Here he involves himself in the discussion with Gloria about her impromptu psalm,

But I think in the art of writing, anyone who is a journalist or I won’t say fiction because poverty is not fiction, you are taking on a role, putting yourself into a role. So you are a spokesperson for the oppressed, and you’re putting yourself into what they must feel like, so it’s not you for yourself (S-3, B-25).

Gloria: Not this one, no (S-3, B-25).

Vince: So I think that you are becoming a spokesperson for the people you are writing about. If they had the voice, the eloquence to say this, this is what they might be saying. I think there’s nothing, in terms of you not liking it. You don’t like it because from your lips, but if you are playing a role here. Just as I’m sure the psalmist [in Psalm 88] may have
been writing for other people. It may not be one person’s angry words. It may be a sense of what many people can relate to (S-3, B-26).

Gloria: We don’t know who Psalm 88 was written for—the psalmist or. I think a lot of these meetings we attended: we have a lot who are the poor. There are always four or five present. They are so...Their words are very descriptive. In their desperation, for example, they’re just trying to provide for two children, and they run out of money, and they say, “Those government, they don’t give a ##@@*** about us!” They just feel that way. They just have to survive (S-3, B-26).

At a subsequent seminar, in the general discussion following our shared lectio divina with Psalm 35, Gloria shared another pastoral moment of the voiceless taking an opportunity to speak, brought back to her by something another participant had said,

I had an interesting little experience when Vince was talking about rejoicing when someone is caught in the net. When I was in __________, there was a death in the community: a young man, probably in his late 20’s, and he had a lot of issues. Some I was aware of; some, I wasn’t. But at the wake, there wasn’t (sic) many people coming because of all the family difficulties, so I stayed for a while. This little girl came in, and sat beside me...she was maybe four or five. She looked at me, and said, “You know I’m glad he’s dead.” I was shocked the little girl said that, but she said it so beautifully, “I’m really glad he’s dead.” And I said, “Oh, why?” She said, “He hurt me.” It came out later he was sexually abusing her. He was a baby-sitter there. But I was thinking that little girl—she’d be about four or five—knew in her bones that what he was doing was wrong, and was feeling some kind of freedom in his death, which is very strange for us to think that way. Most of us were feeling kind of sad or sorry because of the whole family situation: dysfunctional and had a lot of. She said it right out, “I’m glad he’s dead.” So, this psalm would be her psalm (S-4, B-36).

At a later seminar, while discussing participants’ psalm compositions, the voices of the survivors of the Residential School System, spoken during the Truth and Reconciliation process, were associated with the cursing psalm presented. “Taken out thinking they were providing a better life, but the loss of the bond of the parent: very strong. So it would be devastating,
especially if you experienced it as a positive bond, but there is a bond anyway” (Gloria, S-6, B-59)\(^{441}\)

The same day, Blaine, recalling a recent newspaper story chronicling a reporter’s experience posing as a homeless person on a Charlottetown street, replied to these words from Gloria’s “Psalm for Tony:”

...Poverty as a child, a youth, a teen,
I’m a young man driven to addictions and violent behaviour,
now with wasted talents and dreams,
I fathered children I couldn’t care for
With jobless years and now rejected—look at where my life has gone.
Good God! Where the hell were you when I was I trouble?

Poverty, you are my great enemy and yet you live in my house and in my life
As a constant but unwanted companion on my road.
You make me as one despised, the refuse of the city...

Blaine: The lament psalms certainly bring when we’re not comfortable with people in the midst of affliction. But that’s their voice. Through this experience to hear those with no voice calls me to hear, to listen, to acknowledge that it is there. It’s much easier, like in the

\(^{441}\) In May 2013, Dennis Saddleman, a survivor of the Residential School System, presented his experience to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through three of his poems. In one, he recites, “I hate you, Residential School. I hate you; you’re a Monster. Go away. Leave me alone. You’re following me; following me wherever I go. You’re a cold-hearted Monster, cold as the cement floors. Your stomach growled at me every time I broke the school rules. You didn’t care how much you ate up my native culture...I hate, hate, hate you.” Another poem reflects a transition: “33 years later, I rode my Chevy Pony in Kamloops. From the highway, I saw the Monster. I looked over to the Monster and I was surprised. I wasn’t looking at the Monster anymore; I was looking at an old school. In my heart I thought, ‘This is where I earned my diploma of survival.’ I was looking at a tall building that has four storeys—storeys of hope, storeys of dreams, storeys of renewal, storeys of tomorrow...” The two poems reflect a contemporary use of the curse. We note in the combination of the two poems the movement from anger to healing and hope, typically found in the biblical psalms of imprecation. For the excerpts of these poems copied here, and an audio recording of the second, visit: http://infotel.ca/newsitem/you-didn’t-care-how-you-ate-up-my-native-culture/it218! For the full text of the first, visit: canadianchildabusewatch.com/monster-poem.html, accessed March 3, 2016.
[newspaper] article that I thought the fellow who disguised himself as a homeless person. One of the things he noticed: no-one wanted to make eye-contact. No-one wanted to see you because then [they] had to acknowledge that your existence is real. You’re, what you’re going through is real (S-6, B-63).

Belinda added another dimension to the voiceless being given voice: the potential impact of their words on the source of their anguish and pain:

Maybe in doing that [voicing curses in the hearing of the perpetrator] you bring the other person to an awareness of the way they are acting, and, in that, you free them...the curses, like I see it as an invitation, like, “You go into the pit that you have created for another person.” You know you challenge them to that, and they go. If they enter into that or, like you know, look really at what they are doing to people because when they are cursed then they know what it’s like, and maybe they’ll come through that; whereas, if you never do that to a person, they will never go down into the depths to come up again...They’ve never seen themselves in that light. They don’t see the anger. They don’t see the hurt they’ve caused in others (S-6, B-63).

Insight, not only for the agent of the hurt: Belinda spoke of her own experience with the cursing psalms as speech for those not heard, “Some of the psalms are so terrible...but it makes you see the reality of life much differently, and that there is a dark side of life, and there are people who experience that, and live that, and it’s part of their being, and this is the way they express it to God” (S-6, B-62). To this, Gloria responded, “It may give me more power to be empowered to speak for people like that. Maybe we need the graphic expression to smarten us up, to wake us up” (S-6, B-62). The conversation between the two serves as a transition to our discussion of the next theme.
5.2.7 Theme 7 These psalms inspire responsive action. It has already been mentioned that, while the data have been parsed in the service of analysis and of creating a coherent narrative to support its presentation, identified themes, rather than standing as monoliths, easily meld into each other. Self-awareness is nurtured by hearing the voiceless speak; those words, in their turn deepen the reflective knowledge of the one who hears them with the “ears of the heart.” All of this in conversation with other themes influences decisiveness toward action.

To the end, Gloria maintained her discomfort with these prayer texts. “I don’t like them,” was her oft-sung refrain. In our first seminar after being introduced to the cursing laments, in response to Rachel’s comment that she holds back speaking her mind out of concern for the feeling of others, Gloria asks—with some vigour, field notes recall—“What if we’re not able to manage to keep two steps ahead and all our defenses are gone. You meet people who don’t have any of those filters...They’ve lost them. They’ve lost it, literally” (S-3, B-9). Gloria’s similar remarks over the next weeks included this, after she presented her psalm, and reported “I was crying” (S-6, B-61) while writing it, “I think [her regular conversations with the man who was the inspiration for her composition, and the experience of authoring it] has given me a glimpse into what it must be like for some people in our city, and it kind of motivates me, in some way, to really get back on that [anti-poverty advocacy group] that are trying to be their voice to speak to government because they’ll never be heard” (S-6, B-61). Her written work for the day was more decisive, “This exercise has motivated me to rejoin [the anti-poverty advocacy group] and add my voice and support to the voice to other concerned voices for justice” (S-6, Written work). Still, immediately following her report of how her experience


443 Because it was the first to deal directly with the imprecatory psalms, the third seminar (S-3) was the first transcribed. Two introductory seminars had preceded it.
with the psalms served as motivation to support the work of justice, she adds, “The psalms almost sound like witchcraft. You hear where they’re putting spells on people. They’re like, that’s what really struck me at first: you’re wishing bad things on people” (S-6, B-61).

Belinda picks up on Gloria’s psalm and the feeling with which she shared it with the group, and describes her as having “entered into his life so deeply to capture that in words” (S-6, B-60). Vince’s intervention that Gloria had put herself “into the role, so you are a spokesperson for the oppressed, and you’re putting yourself into the mindset of what they must feel like,” (S-3, B-25) reinforced Belinda’s comments.

In another example of expanded vision and concern, walking the perforated line between self and other-focused awareness, Belinda, during the lectio divina gathering with Psalm 35, chose v. 17 for comment (O Lord, how long will you look on? Come to my rescue. Save my life from these raging beasts, my soul from these lions). She spoke of a broadened focus from the verse. “I was thinking of the world situation today...I was wondering what the raging beasts were today, and what those lions were today, and hearing news about people being killed and wars...Like, we don’t seem to know where to go. We need to turn to God, and say, ‘Come!’” (S-4, B-34).

Blaine, the same day, went back to his experience with three families where children were victims of school-bullying. He spoke of their frustration and hopelessness in a system that didn’t seem able to provide sustained support, and of their perceived isolation. He throws out to the group, “How do we, as God’s people today, walk with that situation...?” (S-4, B-35) On another day, he complements Belinda’s expressed need to involve God in our responsive outreach. In speaking of the cathartic release of the vehement expressions of the psalter, he adds,
“I wonder if it can clear your focus. After you get clear of the rage, get it out in the open...it might give you the focus to say, ‘This needs to be done, and now I’ve got the focus to go do it, to start it’” (S-6, B-76). This “doing” was in relation to interior work and to outreach beyond the self. From Blaine, as well: “Through this experience, to hear those with no voice being given a voice calls me to hear, to listen, to acknowledge that it’s there...What [they’re] going through is real...There’s something that needs to be done about it, and you need to do something, instead of the next person who comes along” (S-6, B-63).

Vince, earlier that day, had addressed the same issue, in relation to the energy expressed in the psalms’ diatribe, “Those who don’t fight back: they just sort of go with the flow. But those who get angry enough, they take the leadership role, and they become a shepherd” (S-6, B-76).

During the final seminar, Rachel had this to say,

I am looking at the psalms with a different eye...I’m breaking them into little bits and pieces of praising God, and look beyond what the curses are saying, like feeling the person’s anger or and then the hope. I’m trying to find different things, whether it applies to me or not. I feel something of what the psalmist is trying to say. It’s your [another person’s] story, and whether I hear your story, and don’t just shut it up or you leave. You pass someone on the street, and they might be going through the same thing, but you don’t know about that. I feel, after we leave here, what do we do about all these things we know about, whether it is poverty or what do we do? I just go home and it’s over with. It’s done. No more. But what do we do with what we’ve learned here? (S-7, B-84).

Rachel’s written reflection prior to our final gathering appears to reflect some concern about follow-up to the work of the group, “I felt helpless, too, in the sense that, what can I do to help alleviate someone else’s pain, whether it be abuse, bullying, or poverty...?” (S-7, Written work)
Several of the participants mentioned specific application of the imprecatory psalms. Vince, involved in music ministry, spoke of his deepened awareness of the curses influencing his composition for parish music. The previous week, he had been adapting music for responsorial psalms, and noticing more clearly the interspersing of lament in the texts. “As I was reading them, I thought, ‘Oh, there’s a little bit of this, a little bit of that: something that snuck into an otherwise happy-go-lucky psalm, and suddenly—this is where I had to change it [the notation] from a major key to a minor key...So it can’t be happy music for sad, so I change the whole thing to a minor” (S-7, B-82). The same day, Vince volunteered he could see the use of these texts in the context of a retreat. He had expanded on this suggestion in his written work preparatory to the day, “Perhaps a study of the imprecatory psalms might be useful in retreat settings as a means of unlocking the protective doors that prevent many of us from opening up to each other in God’s presence” (S-7, Written work).

Belinda saw the possibility for these psalms being used in youth ministry. “They might appeal to young people more than we think because of just their turmoil” (FI, C-17). She added she could also see these texts becoming the focus of an on-going parish scripture group “if you knew enough how to [facilitate the group]” (S-7, B-89). On that, Gloria wrote in her final assignment, “These psalms with a grounded introduction may well be helpful for people dealing with difficult life situations as in a faith support group in a parish, community, correctional centre, anger management setting, lectio divina group or in any listening situation that is dealing with life’s pain and hurt” (S-7, Written work). Echoing Gloria’s call for a “grounded introduction” and Belinda’s, for facilitator-preparation before pastoral use of these texts was undertaken, Blaine added a note of caution he had felt as he considered his encounters.

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444 Yoder, we recall, employed these psalms in youth ministry.
with the mothers of bullied children, “I’d hope at some time to be able to say, ‘Would this be something that we could use to get through the situation?’ but I don’t [feel competent]. It might help others as they go through life experiences; but that may be for the Master’s course or something” (S-7, B-78).

5.2.8 Theme 8  These psalms inform our relationship with God. Discussion about God came up early in the process. Vince introduced the topic of prayer in the first post-lament gathering. “It’s very easy when, sitting here, right now, I feel fine—the prayers I say. I know when I’m feeling miserable: it’s then that I pray most fervently to God” (S-3, B-14). Gloria agreed, “Whatever it is, our suffering brings us to God... It’s interesting, it’s not always when things are going well; when we’re celebrating and busy and having a good time, we don’t even think of God, but when we’re in trouble” (S-3, B-14). Phyllis interrupted here—field notes recall, with emphasis—“We cry out for help!” (S-3, B-14).

Belinda offered another experience from her pastoral work, “I know people who were what you’d call, “good pray-ers,” but when a tragedy came they said they could not pray, which is the total opposite of what they had experienced up to that point. Like, why did it happen? Why did he let that happen?” (S-3, B-14). Rachel seemed to concur, “If something happens, you’re not angry. But it’s just that nothing comes. Afterwards, you will pray in thanksgiving just to know God is there, but in the moment, it’s not anger or anything. It’s just a desert period” (S-3, B-15).

Gloria offered this, “You know our style of praying. When tragedy happens, you’re—as you said—you may not think you are praying, but you’re praying even more then because you are so faced with the dilemma. It’s right in your face. Words don’t really matter like they did

445 Emphasis hers.
before. I kind of think people pray more than they think they do” (S-3, B-14). Belinda shifted it a bit, “I do feel that there is a time when tragedy strikes some people that they feel abandoned by God, and—as you say—their prayer might be that abandonment, but it’s not the prayer you’d expect from them. They’re asking, ‘Why did [God]?’” (S-3, B-16) Rachel added to the discussion in relation to Psalm 88, “So the person that wrote this acknowledges that there is a God, and that God is powerful” (S-3, B-16).

Blaine introduced trepidation in relation to feeling angry toward God, supposing, “I would think if I had such a feeling, so you’d be guilty with feeling angry with God, and not express it in any way at all.” He then adds, “It sounds a little dysfunctional” (S-3, B-16). After Gloria inserts that she shares such sentiments, and attributes them to upbringing influences, Blaine continues, “Part of the discomfort I have with these psalms is that you’re speaking so boldly in such language to God. That’s not my reality at all, though I’ve come to see that it’s very healthy to do that” (S-3, B-17). In his written work preparing for the final seminar, he wrote, “The most challenging part of the experience was to learn how to let go and curse...and to speak boldly before God. This challenge attacks the soul of my being and upbringing, the very nature of my relationship with God...But I am coming to an awareness that God can take my ire, and it is healthy to be honest with myself and God in the face of injustice” (S-7, Written work).

Gloria, at another gathering, brought up an interpretation of psalmic curses directed toward other persons. “I wonder if these lament psalms, these cursing psalms—or whatever you call them—like the psalmist, the cursing is so awful, like how do you know if someone really means the curse or it’s a way of expressing anger?” (S-5, B-52). This comment was in keeping with Gloria’s written and spoken reports of her discomfort and resistance to the curses. Field notes recall her expressiveness in raising her objections.
Rachel wondered,

Were people closer to God in the Old Testament than we feel now? God was always saying something to Jeremiah, saying ‘Do this or do that.’ The psalms reflect the same thing. Today, we don’t feel the same way that God is right there...That’s why today we are afraid to talk to God because he is all-powerful, and we don’t want to be disrespectful, but God just seemed to be closer (S-3, B-17).

Gloria intervened, “The psalm is saying it’s healthy to express what we’re feeling because it’s who we are right now” (S-3, B-18). Blaine continued the discussion, “The image of God still as judge when it comes to anger...” Then he raises it a notch, “or being completely honest with God. Although I believe God certainly knows everything, I’m not going to discuss it with him” (S-3, B-18, 19). “God,” added Gloria, “is so big, so beyond what we could imagine. Funny how we were brought up...It kind of made a very sanitized religion” (S-3, B-19).

Regarding personal use of these texts in prayer, Vince wrote in preparation for the final seminar,

For myself, although I have often questioned the reasoning behind God’s actions (or apparent inaction) during the darker chapters of my own life, I have never felt the need to accuse or chastise. As for those around me who have proven to be thorns in my side, I have never felt the need to call God down upon them to exact my revenge. I guess I prefer to fight my own battles. I suppose during these challenging times, I prefer to talk to God organically, rather than leaning on previously written material. Therefore, it is unlikely I would turn to these psalms in the midst of crisis. Of course, that’s just me (S-7, Written work).

When questioned by Belinda, after presenting from what he had written, as to what he meant by “organic,” he replied, “Like when I talk to God, I don’t start reciting a rosary. I talk to God from my heart, and that’s why when I read the psalms, to me it’s like reading literature, and even when I can understand the depth of what was in terms of what the psalmist may be thinking and
the process, just for myself, I don’t find that an answer for me” (S-7, B-80). Blaine, on the other hand, shared in his final written assignment, “I found it cathartic to pray to God in this way...It was critical for me to view the psalms as God’s Word, even the difficult passages. It is reassuring to be part of a long and rich tradition of faith” (S-7, Written work). In her final writing, Rachel highlighted a quote from Nowell’s book, “The psalms are first of all the Word of God” (S-7, Written work). In the closing interview with the researcher, she added the other side of the dialogue: In praying with the psalms, “I feel like you’re speaking to God directly” (FI, C-18).

Belinda agreed with the presence of God in the texts. She put it this way, “Well, [God is] saying, ‘Live your life as it is in this present moment, and turn to me. I’m part of your life in that situation” (FI, C-16). And further,

As I pray the psalms...I am listening to the voice of God...I try to pray the psalms as God and others speaking to me, and me speaking to myself. I cry out to God to help me in my relationship with others. I plead for God to help me and to destroy the enemy that is troubling me. I have come to realize that the enemy can be within me. Before, the enemy was outside me...In praying the psalms I have come to realize anew that the love and mercy of God is limitless. I can go to God and rant and rage about what is going on in my life and feel that God will help me and lead me to forgiveness, acceptance, and peace (S-7, Written work).

“I can go to God and rant and rage,” said Belinda. In our closing individual interview, Gloria applied that insight this way,

When you sit with someone who’s really upset, and they use violent language, it’s very much easier now for me to sit with it. It will be much easier to sit with it and say, “Well, you’re expressing how you’re feeling. Feelings are fine. How you say how you’re hurt is fine.” Really: to listen. It’s kind of “Come as you are.” If not, they’ll never come (FI, C-18).
Chapter VI
Discussion And Implications

6.1 Introduction

Though mentioned only passingly in this work, the post-conciliar decision to excise the imprecatory psalms from the Church’s liturgical prayer was the impetus stirring my curiosity about the role these texts might play in the life of the Christian community. Chief among the reasons for their exclusion was the concern that they would precipitate a psychological difficulty for those who read, prayed, or heard others using them in public communal prayer.446

“How would a group of adult, practicing Roman Catholics experience these texts?” That liturgical decision prompted me to explore this question in the present study. Those psalms, as we have seen, were present in faith life from the earliest Christians. More recently, the literature has explored issues related to the pastoral place of the imprecatory laments in the contemporary faith community. How do the literature and the study participants’ reported experience converse with each other?

To that conversation we now turn. God, Others, Self: these are the categories helping us focus. Since categorization always arises somewhat from the arbitrary, selections are not always clearly differentiated. There will be overlap.

6.2 The Literature and the Data: a Conversation

6.2.1 God

Vengeance left in the hands of God: thus, Irene Nowell describes one of the hallmarks of the imprecatory psalms. “It’s not for us to exact vengeance. That is for God.”447

446 See The General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours, no. 131.
447 Nowell, 30.
appropriateness of such a prayer has come up repeatedly in our survey of the literature.

Athanasius appeared to have no qualms encouraging Marcellinus to a “no-holds-barred” approach to the psalter.448 While Theodore of Mopsuestia agrees that one may make a “just request of God for punishment of those wronging” her, Jerome449 and John Chrysostom,450 interpret the motivation behind the words more benignly. Cassiodorus asserts any prayer for retaliation as against the commandment of Jesus to pray for enemies.451 Later writers waffled between these verses being prophetic rather than directive and their being justified in relation to human enemies—often of the Church.452 More recent discussion shares varied points of view as Daly-Denton,453 for example, and Walter Brueggemann454 attest.

Wenham, a present-day proponent of these texts, denies ill-intent in the psalmic address to God, “After all, it’s not vengeance, but justice the psalmist calls for.”455 Jinkins puts it more aptly, I propose. “Perhaps these psalms are the only things that stand between us and revenge, taking into our hands what belongs to God.”456 Jinkins allows what Wenham leaves unconsidered: to entrust retaliation to God is not to deny that retaliation, rather than justice, may have been demanded by the initial speaker of the words, and, likewise, by those who echo them today.

Among the participants in the present study, similar hedging was observed. Repeatedly, Gloria articulated a discomfort with the curses: “I don’t like the words.” This curt experiential retort gives us pause for several inquiries, with pastoral ministry implications. Disliking these
harsh words: is it sufficient reason for their exclusion from our experience, or to avoid the psalms altogether, the Old Testament, the harsh words of Jesus? Is it possible that many who enter into relationship—whether sporadic or habitual—with the Word of God prefer certain biblical genres over others? What do we expect of the Bible? Is it more helpful—even responsible—to explore our discomfort than to avoid its purported source?

These queries lead us to an observation about Gloria’s unfolding response to the imprecatory psalms. Her repeatedly reported discomfort with the texts did not appear to prevent her entering into them. She was articulate in naming these troubling expressions as God’s word in the lives of those who spoke them, and to state her conviction that the psalmists being their “truest self” (S-3, B-2) trumped—even if it did not dissolve—her disquiet. These words, she said another time, kept religion real rather than “sanitized” (S-3, B-19). They helped reveal a welcoming God, who extends a “Come as you are” (FI, C-18) invitation. Gloria’s forthright and articulate narrative of her experiential journey helps us see that initial, even persistent, discomfort need not dissuade us from fruitful dialogue with the Psalter’s curses. Her response appears to support Maria Tasto’s observation, “In this kind of reading we let ourselves be vulnerable to the text; we are willing to let ourselves be touched, to be changed, to be formed by it.”⁴⁵⁷ Discomfort, rather than barring entry, may become the very portal through which we pass to deeper awareness and response.

Others seemed reluctant about the texts—even if to a lesser extent. Phyllis spoke of the distinction between anger with the person and with their actions. She later described the word of God as “messy,” (S-3, B-2) adding that we’re not accustomed to seeing it that way. Though Vince claimed to experience the curses as “not all that surprising,” (S-7, B-83) if one views his

⁴⁵⁷ Tasto, 10.
responses over the course of the study, some waffling seems apparent (See S-4, B-32). Blaine described, on one occasion, the psalmic diatribes as “temptations” (S-4, Written work), adding, “My own experience and our training to respect others” made it difficult for him “to wish such a fate [referring to the curses of Ps. 35] on others” (S-3, B-11). Later, he adds emphatically, “It’s unchristian to pray so graphically” (S-6, Written work).

Blaine’s latter comment leads us to ask, “How are we to reconcile the imprecatory psalms with the core of Jesus’ message: forgiveness and love—including toward our enemies? How could such words be addressed to God in Christian prayer?” Laney says that the problem is not with the psalms, but with their interpretation. These words have their origin in the reality of fear and anger in our lives, and may have a productive place in the journey toward resolution. Imprecation and love, if we take into account the complexities of life, experienced and lived, need not be incompatible. Curses may be markers along the path of love. Life stories, says Larry Silva, reacting with harsh honesty to conflict and woe, are not disconnected from the lived-experience of Jesus. He cites examples where Jesus uses harsh words, calling for radical change in the lives of those toward whom they were addressed. Making particular reference to Mark’s version of Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer, Billman and Migliore wonder how we could make sense of this prayer “without assuming a real struggle and the raising of hard questions.” For Day, insistence upon the absolute incongruity between love and imprecation “overly restricts the definition of love.”

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458 Laney, 37.
459 Steussy, 7.
460 Billman and Migliore, 121, 138.
461 Day, Crying for Justice, 112.
462 Silva, 223. See note 256.
463 Billman and Migliore, 36-37.
464 Day, Crying for Justice, 112.
It is noted that, other than Blaine, none of the participants made direct reference to the teachings of Jesus as invalidating the Christian use of these words. One might have expected the love commandment of Jesus to be troubling for many in relation to these insistences upon retaliation, retribution, and revenge. Is it possible that the participants may have had a sense, as did Day, that imprecation and love need not be incompatible and, to insist upon such is to be too narrow in one’s definition of love; and further, as Silva opined, the story of Jesus’ humanity is not disconnected from our reacting with unsettling honesty to wrath and woe.

Related to the discussion of Jesus and imprecation is Margaret Daly-Denton’s view that these texts represent a less mature faith than that inaugurated and commissioned by Jesus. Wallace is of the opposite view, “This is the prayer of a mature faith.” Billman and Migliore side with Wallace, opining that the articulation of these words may be signposts of a deepening faith, a humble acknowledgment that there is much we have yet to discover about God and the ways of God. As Gloria put it in one of our seminars, “God is so big, so beyond what we could imagine” (S-3, B-19).

Part of maturation in the relationship with God is marked by a new honesty, which these controversial texts have the potential both to express and to inspire. The Psalter’s rages for deliverance are addressed to “a vulnerable God,” whose omnipotence does not exclude divine participation in the suffering of creation. They remove the need for pretense with God.

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466 See Silva, 223.
467 Daly-Denton, 166, 168.
468 Wallace, 80.
469 Billman and Migliore, 111-112.
470 LaNeel Tanner, 151.
471 Ibid., 113.
472 Silva, 222.
because they disclose a God before whom no words need be left unspoken.\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{The Psalms and the Life of Faith}, 73.} In the study group, Gloria, in spite of her repeatedly-expressed discomfort with the words, spoke of a God who invites, “Come as you are” (FI, C-18). From Blaine, “I am coming to an awareness that God can take my ire” (S-6, Written work). Later, “It speaks to me of a boldness in the relationship with God, when we’re able to do that. I certainly feel challenged by it. It’s not the way I would pray, but it’s inviting. It’s opening up” (S-4, B-40).

Related to the same theme, Rachel wondered at one of our gatherings if people in the time of the psalms “felt closer to God,” and thus “freer to speak” (S-3, B-17). Phyllis spoke of maturation in terms of a certain “power” (S-3, B-12) she felt lacking, but thought necessary to pray those words as expressive of her own experience. Blaine mused that having feelings of anger and not expressing them “in any way at all” might be “a little dysfunctional” (S-3, B-16). Are the three here asserting a maturing faith as one robust enough to be relevant? Could these texts be catalysts nurturing that growth? What becomes of faith when it seems to make little room for our frank reaction to life’s most painful realities?

Blaine went on to associate these expressions with honesty, and the difficulties it presents. “It’s not easy to open up, but [these words] are helpful and they’re healthy. I’ve come to see that it’s very healthy” (S-3, B-17) to express anger to God. Healthy, but not easy; one might choose to opt out: “Although I believe God knows everything, I’m not going to discuss it with him” (S-3, B-18, 19). He, another time, added, “As a result, I have neglected to allow God access to some corners of my life” (S-3, Written work). One may wonder if Blaine is sensing a conflict within believers who have an innate awareness of God’s desire to be present to all we
are, but for any number of reasons believe selective exclusion necessary. That being so, where do I take my darkness, if not to God, for will it not insist on going somewhere?

For those who take the chance on being forthright, according to Gloria, “These words depict people being their truest self before God and others” (S-3, B-2). Belinda’s rejoinder, “Exactly!” (S-3, B-2) suggested the observation was shared. Gloria, another time, picked up on the same idea and extended it to connect our relationship with God to our interaction with others, “If we were really our truest self, we’d say those things to God instead of tearing someone else apart. We’re safe with God” (S-3, B-19). God as custodian of a safe place was an image employed by Rachel, who described these words to God as a “panic room,” (S-4, B-37) a shelter where one could speak with startling frankness without fear of reprisal. Without such honest and heartfelt words, concluded Gloria, we’d be left with “a sanitized religion” (S-3, B-19) that reads and prays from “a thoroughly antiseptic Bible.”

Honest, heartfelt words, reflecting the truest self we can muster before God: what may happen within and through us is the question, when we come to realize that God accepts every bit of us, even—to use Blaine’s word—our “ire?” (S-6, Written work) And not only accepts, but—again to rely on Blaine—transforms us (S-6, B-68, 69). To allow the psalmists’ rage—with all its underpinnings—our rage, the rage of the world to be one is to bring to God that within and around us most in need of salvation. What then—reminiscent of Rachel—of God’s immanence and our freedom (S-3, B-17), both of which she assumed present in the psalmists if they were to have what is needed to speak words, echoing still in twenty-first-century hearts (S-3, B-17)? The task is significant; the dove’s meekness and the serpent’s wiles ever need be at

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474 Shannon, 297.
hand. The question is posed: Where might the sense of God’s providence and our responsive freedom lead us: toward our own transformation, and through us, toward that of the world? Does avoidance of what these psalms articulate get in the way of all being made new: in the first case, ourselves?

6.2.2 Others

The goat, captured and driven into oblivion bearing the foibles and faults of the community of which it has been a part, lives today, millennia after it first assuaged the guilt of the wandering people of Israel. Scapegoating, says Rene Girard, remains a dysfunctional means employed at all levels to help society both deny and cope with the vices that stymie its growth.

The problem is two-fold: first, the scapegoat is an innocent victim; second, its expulsion not only does nothing to deal constructively with the problem, it perpetuates the cycle of violence and chaos its selection is meant to interrupt. An essential remedy lies in allowing the victim of the group’s aggression to speak.

Claims Girard, the cursing psalms are one means of allowing the victim’s voice to be heard. Since violence is cyclic, and its perpetrators, in this case, often unconscious of their actions, such speech may help truncate violence’s further spiraling.

In one seminar, Gloria spoke out of her psalm experience of an insight related to this reality,

Did you kind of have a sense of what was very disturbing of what you were hearing: that [the curses of the psalm] could be the word of God in [the psalmist’s] life today? I was

476 See Lev. 16: 7-10, 20-22.
477 Girard, 116.
thinking what I sometimes find difficult to hear in people’s anger [is] who they are at this time. It’s their truth, and it really challenges me to receive it, rather than say, “It’s awful [that they say that]. It may not be pretty, but that’s what it is (S-3, B-2).

Then, seemingly in keeping with Girard’s contention of the lack of awareness that envelopes this process, she adds, “That’s a new understanding, a new revelation I got.” Further underlining the novelty of the insight, she concludes, with hesitancy, “Whether I’m off-base or not, but it seems that way” (S-3, B-2).

Blaine reiterated, “The lament psalms...that’s their voice. Through this experience, we hear those with no voice” (S-6, B-63). Belinda responded to Blaine, expanding on how the voice of the scapegoat functions in the cycle in which they have been caught up and victimized, and provides an interesting twist.

Maybe in [voicing curses in the hearing of the perpetrator] you bring the other person to an awareness of the way they are acting, and, in that, you free [the perpetrator]. The curses, like I see them as an invitation, like, “You go down into the pit you have created for another person.” You know, you challenge them to do that, and they go. If they enter into that, or like you know, look really at what they are doing to people because when they are cursed they know what it’s like, and maybe [the perpetrators] will come through that; whereas if you never do that to a person, they will never go down into the depths to come up again. They’ve never seen themselves in that light. They don’t see the anger. They don’t see the hurt they’ve caused in others (S-6, B-63).

These psalms become light in the darkness for those who stand on the backs of others in order to raise themselves up. Belinda has not only talked about the rescue of the victim; she has disclosed how the rescue unfolds: through the perpetrator’s deepened awareness and subsequent change of heart, occasioned by the vehemence and honesty of the curse from the mouth of the one whom the victimizer has wounded. These psalmic texts become the medium of dialogue between victim and perpetrator, where the victim’s voice is allowed all the insistency human
dignity demands, leaving us imagining the hurt expressed and the healing offered in the discourse between scapegoat and scape-goater. Irene Nowell speaks of the role belonging to all of us in relation to what Belinda has articulated. Our refusal to pray these psalms, she says, is a rejection of the victim, a failure to allow expression of what they, most often silently, endure.  

The voice of the other, heard in the psalms’ words, helps fuel “the prophetic mission of resisting injustice and oppression.” These texts, according to the reported experience of all participants, help sensitize us to those who struggle. They are invitations to live justly, and to work for justice where it has yet to be: invitations issued from the lips of those who, according to one of the participants, refuse by their words to accept the role they have been forced to play (Belinda: S-6, B-75), and who most desperately need us to act in order for them to have the support they need to change their lives. Rachel said it this way,

I am looking beyond what the psalms are saying, like feeling the person’s anger, then the hope. I feel something of what the psalmist is trying to say. It’s [another person’s] story, and whether I hear your story, and don’t just shut it up, and you leave. I feel, after we leave here, what do we do about all those things we know about, whether it is poverty or what do we do? I just go home and it’s over with. It’s done. No more. But what do we do with what we’ve learned here? (S-7, B-84)

Gloria’s experience prompted action. From her ongoing conversation with a man who had been dealing with poverty over many years, she composed a poem where poverty was railed against as the enemy. After the writing experience, she related her difficulty giving expression to the curses she knew had to be included if her psalm was to be an authentic representation of reality. In response, Vince reflected on her role as psalmist,

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478 Nowell, 35.
479 Silva, 222.
You are taking on a role...so you are a spokesperson for the oppressed, and you’re putting yourself into what they must feel like, so it’s not you for yourself...If they had the voice, the eloquence to say this, this is what they might be saying. I think it’s nothing in terms of you not liking it. You don’t like it because [it’s] from your lips, but if you are playing a role here. Just as I’m sure the psalmist may have been writing for other people. It may not be one person’s angry words. It may be a sense of what many people can relate to (S-3, B-25).

Vince’s insight was intriguing: the composers of what we know as the cursing psalms, in some situations, protesting, not out of their own quagmire, but as advocates for those who can’t speak for themselves—society’s scapegoats—with the intent of stimulating action in those who would hear the desperate words. One question in relation to Vince’s analysis: advocacy for the voiceless is a role, to be sure, but its flowing from a sincere heart distinguishes it from the task of an actor on stage or screen. It is significant to add that Gloria reported, toward the end of our project, that she had made the decision, after discontinuing out of frustration with lack of results, to re-involve herself in an anti-poverty advocacy group (S-6, Written work). The advocate was inspired by her advocacy. Support of the psalms’ effectiveness in the call to action, of course, is strengthened and authenticated when decisions and plans bear fruit in action.

Our impulse to reject these texts, our unease with them, our being overwhelmed by what they disclose to us become the doorway through which we may enter into a deeper commitment to justice, and to attitudes and actions that extend its presence in the world. “They give voice to the language-shattering experience of suffering.” These moans set us at odds with typical public speech, writes Brueggemann, which is largely “a cover-up...in a stable, functioning self-deceptive culture where everything must be kept running and smooth.” They are words that open us to the reality of the other, by inviting us “to depart from the closely managed world of public survival, to move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy

480 Billman and Migliore, 107.
481 Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 7.
One.⁴⁸² When we experience these ancient poems, we hear the anguish of “all people who find their world torn apart, and can hardly find the words to bring before God to wrap around their pain.”⁴⁸³ More than the prayers of the psalm’s composer, they are about all the tears that ever flowed on the way through death to life.⁴⁸⁴

Rachel agreed in response to a text, “It made me think someone is suffering every day, and they are in this psalm” (S-4, B-42). Belinda, a little later added, “I didn’t think of that ‘story in the psalms,’ but it is a story of a person. It is the story of our lives” (S-7, B-80). Extending that insight into solidarity, Gloria added, “It’s about “your story and our story with the much bigger story. It puts things in perspective. It’s a much bigger picture than just my picture. I like that” (S-7, B-83).

6.2.3 Self

Writing to Marcellinus some 1700 years ago, Athanasius of Alexandria concluded, “For I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter...and nothing beyond these is to be found among [human persons].”⁴⁸⁵ The words of the psalms “become like a mirror” to the one who goes to them, “so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul... So, too, he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him.”⁴⁸⁶

Reminiscent of the fourth-century theologian, Logan Jones says the psalms

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⁴⁸² Ibid.
⁴⁸³ Polan, 42.
⁴⁸⁴ Brueggemann, The Psalms, 27.
⁴⁸⁵ Athanasius, Letter, 10 & 30.
⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 30, 12.
are different. They speak of life in ways other scripture, doctrine, and theological presuppositions are not able. The psalms are poetry. As such they offer a different view of life. The psalms offer a view that is thick, rich, that runneth over. They seek not so much to explain as but as to offer the reality of life in all its messiness, both pain and praise.⁴⁸⁷

Walter Brueggemann concurs, as he speaks of the reluctance frequently experienced in relation to harsh psalmic words. “When we know ourselves as well as the psalter knows us, we recognize that we are creatures who wish for vengeance and retaliation...The capacity for hatred belongs to our personhood.”⁴⁸⁸ Roland Murphy echoes, “The barbarity of which these psalms are often accused resides, not only in the world in which we live, but in our own hearts.”⁴⁸⁹

This insight was articulated by several of the study’s participants. From Blaine in relation to a specific text: “I think the psalm helps us identify violence in each of our hearts, to acknowledge the violence we don’t like to admit is very real” (S-3, B-16). He concretized his remarks when he spoke of a then-recent US outbreak of violence in the wake of a police shooting. “[The street violence] is not something I could do, but I think if the situation were just a bit different, we could, or I could” (S-3, B-6).

Belinda, reflecting on a psalm experience commented, “What came to me was non-acceptance of that part of myself. [Violence] is within us” (S-6, B-69). Earlier, reiterating Blaine’s expression of reluctance, “I kind of skirted around that when I was reflecting. I didn’t want to look at the violence within myself. I looked at it from someone else’s. Another time I looked at the violence in me that was causing harm to others. That was sort of a revelation to me, but I thought, ‘That’s for another day’” (S-3, B-9).

⁴⁸⁷ Jones, 47.
⁴⁸⁸ Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 64-65.
⁴⁸⁹ Murphy, 9.
On another occasion, Belinda wondered about the possibility of our becoming the object of another’s curse (S-4, B-44-45). The psalms of imprecation may give us pause to reflect on our relationships, and our ways-of-being that wound and offend others. Just as our curse may be—to paraphrase Belinda, Phyllis, Vince, and Gloria during a lively exchange—our way of refusing to stay where injustice and disrespect consign us, others’ curses in response to their victimization at our hands, in the process of enlightening us, “bring[s] them up again [from the diminished state we] are putting [them] in. It gives [them] the strength to fight back. It gives people a voice” (S-6, B-75). Then, showing how that newly-discovered strength may be directed outwardly and salvificly, those who get angry enough [at what has been done against them] take the leadership role and they become a shepherd” (S-6, B-76).

These sacred texts, when they are read along with the text of life, not only help people tell their story. Psalm reading, says Endres, has an “expressive function” in helping people more deeply comprehend who they are.490 Schnabl-Schweitzer brings it beyond understanding. When “living stories encounter living word,” the union potentially facilitates an articulation that may be “the most accurate language of the soul.”491 Blaine’s remarks were in keeping with these connections on two occasions when he related a difficult time in his life and spoke of the difference between his experience with the imprecations and his earlier time with the psalms of praise and thanksgiving. The curses, he offered, drove “me deeper into my own experience 25 years ago...I can relate to the psalms because I can recall, ‘Why or why me, God? I’m lost. My career didn’t pan out. Where am I going? What do you have in store? And it seemed there was no answer coming’” (S-3, B-22). In the following seminar, he credited these difficult texts with

490 Endres, 51.
491 Schnabl-Schweitzer, 639.
facilitating having “your own story made more present, to make that deeper immersion [within 
yourself] possible” (S-4, B-42).

One of the fruits of that “deeper immersion” into the self was articulated by a number of 
participants on several occasions. As they explored and reflected upon the reality of the inner 
violence and anger, often associated with imprecation, they wondered if they could be disclosive 
of the presence of fear. In recollecting a pastoral experience with parents of bullied children, one 
of them surmised, “I think there was a lot of fear under the anger:” (Blaine: S-7, B-100) fear for 
their children, fear for their own seeming inability to help.

Blaine mused another day, “I wonder if [the vehement expressions in the Psalter] can 
clear your focus. After you get clear of the rage, get it out in the open...it might give you the 
focus to say, ‘This needs to be done, and now I have the focus to go do it, to start it” (S-6, B-
76). Gloria had raised a similar question when talking of her experience with a group of women 
telling their stories of sexual abuse. Would it be possible, she queried, if such harsh words as 
those in the curses may have been a necessary prerequisite for them to have been able to say 
what needed to be said (S-4, B-40). Phyllis made a similar observation about the language of 
these psalms prompting her to revisit an unresolved estrangement between her and a sibling (S-
3, B-13).

Not only do these texts help us bring into the present unresolved issues from the past. 
Tinsley opines they may enlighten us as to our own possibilities of thought and word, were our 
props and securities to crumble. “For then perhaps we, too, would turn to God and beg...to get 
rid of all those who were upsetting us. And then perhaps, if things were really bad, a sense of
sheer frustration might oppress us and we, too, might find that we did not have any option but to curse."492

Even then, all may not be lost. The curse’s words may, in fact, prove redemptive. Blaine wondered if imprecation may help us recognize, in our calling for fire to be rained down upon another, “No, I really don’t want that to happen, even though I’ve asked for it. In asking for it, I realize I do not want that violence. I do not want an eye for an eye” (S-3, B-11). Our uncensored call for revenge may temper our insistence upon it.

On the other hand, what of stifling the curse? Rachel responded, one day, to several others discussing our shared potential for violence, “Sometimes if I get upset about something, I always think, ‘What will be the result? How will it affect someone else?’ And then I will pull back if I think it’s going to be hurtful, and I think, ‘Oh, I’m not going to say that.’ I suffer it inside” (S-3, B-9). Gloria intervened, “What if we’re not able to manage to keep two steps ahead, and all our defenses are gone? You meet people who don’t have any of those filters around or in them because of life’s experiences. They’ve lost them. They’ve lost it, literally” (S-3, B-9). Not only was this exchange apropos Tinsley’s observation, it suggests an association between self-awareness and empathy toward another.

God, with whom we are safe, our panic room (Rachel: S-4, B-37), who invites, “Come as you are” (Gloria: FI, C-18), able to take our ire (Blaine: S-6, Written work), accepting of our truest self (Gloria: S-3, B-2), whom—in spite of our reluctance—we may welcome into every corner of our lives (See Blaine: S-3, Written work). The disregarded—even unnoticed—other, the scapegoat, the voiceless speaking words seldom listened for or heard, enlightening their

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492 Tinsley, 87.
hearers, prompting them toward attitudes and actions of justice and compassion (See Belinda: S4, B-43). The self: our story made more present (See Blaine: S-4, B-42), informed as to our anger and fear (See Blaine: S-7, B-100), of our solidarity with victim and victimizer (See Belinda: S-3, B-69; S-4, B-43; S-6, B-69), of who we could be, of what needs to be done (See Gloria: S-6, Written work; Rachel: S-7, B-84).

God, others, self: we have looked at how these themes have been addressed in the data provided by this study’s participants through their seven-week experience of the imprecatory psalms. A more extended exposure to these texts may have encouraged a deepening interaction with these ancient words. What follows may indicate some directions that exploration could travel.

6.3 Images and Insights

The responses and reflections from the participants’ experience of the imprecatory psalms provide us with opportunity to add to our understanding of these texts, and how they might continue to find their place in the life of the Christian community. I have selected several of their images and insights for further reflection.

These psalms were likened to a panic room: (Rachel: S-4, B-37) a safe place to retreat and hide, a place to which one flees when there is no place to turn, “until the storms of destruction pass by.” A panic room is a temporary haven that receives us when we are, as Gloria described: unable “to manage to keep two steps ahead, and all our defenses are gone...when [we’ve] lost it, literally” (S-3, B-9). These are psalms of refuge when there is no other place to go, a place where, mindful of Belinda (S-7, Written work), we rail against the

enemy—whoever or whatever that enemy may be—as a way of defying their attempt to have us submit to their definition of who we are. It’s the place where, to paraphrase her, the process of resurrection begins.

Rather than being static descriptions of persons, these psalms, the panic room image helps us see, capture a specific moment in life when the sense of being trapped and overwhelmed is so intense that the niceties of everyday speech are words of a foreign tongue—uncomprehended by the speaker, driven to language incomprehensible to those who hear it. Panic is a passing phenomenon. The words of these psalms are the safe-space needed, as we recall Blaine, to assess the situation and to decide on what needs to be done, so that panic’s residue, anxiety, is less likely to become a way of life. They are the walls within which the plaintiff is able to find the shelter to survive the moment, to gather the stamina to live on. Maybe, if we push the image far enough, we’d discover the panic room’s secure haven is God’s own self.

“In asking for it, I realize...I do not want an eye for an eye” (Blaine: S-3, B-11). The clarity of thought able to be born when, in that safe space panic can subside, helps us recognize these texts as psalms of perspective. They may help us assess an indwelling hypersensitivity that leads to a tendency to overreact. “Was what she did really that bad!??” When our desire for retaliation and revenge is allowed to speak through these howls for redress, we have the opportunity to hear in our own thoughts an exaggerated reaction, helping put our situation, our adversary, and ourselves in a more objective context, our story reflected in the back-story of the psalm, more accurately read and interpreted. It is not to undermine the cry of the poor legitimately expressed and necessarily heard in these troubling texts. It is, additionally, though,

494 See Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 7.
to hold a mirror up to the situations and persons in or own lives and to afford us the opportunity to gaze into it in order to assess the appropriateness of our reactions.

It’s beyond catharsis: what happens in that panic room. “This is our eucharistic moment, when God transforms our reality into something. These psalms have [a] transformative power. We take our prayer to God as full of rage as they are. They come out in some measure of peace on the other side...We’re not the same person who offered it up who gets it back” (S-6, B-68-69). Parallel to this insight, Walter Brueggemann had described the cursing psalms as addressing God “in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared.”

The language of “eucharist” and “transformation” and “offering” leads us back to the place where I was first introduced to these psalms: the liturgy, and their absence there. Acknowledging—and, here, not contesting—the legitimate concerns if these texts were to be unshackled in the midst of the assembly, I am reminded of Mark Searle’s observations in Called to Participate, when he talks of the full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy called for by the Second Vatican Council. Searle observes that while we have focused a great deal of energy on the external dimension of entering into the Church’s communal prayer, the internal aspect has gone largely underdeveloped. An essential aspect of interior participation involves us consciously, in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, offering ourselves—all aspects of ourselves—to God. Maria Boulding relates this to psalmic prayer. These texts and those who pray them, she says—then and now—were and are, albeit if often implicitly waiting for Christ, waiting to be taken up and transformed by him, waiting to be Christified, like all human experience…They were like unconsecrated hosts, destined for a fulfillment beyond themselves… [They] gather up all the inarticulate, chaotic cries…in

495 Psalms and the Life of Faith, 108.
every generation of the world’s history, and the cries of our own lives, [for] much in us… waits to be gathered into Christ’s Easter. 497

Those understandings are in keeping with what Blaine articulated: God takes what we bring, who we are, and gives it back to us, transformed, so that the one who receives back what was given is and—at the same time—is not the same person who gave it. To see these texts—however and wherever they are prayed—as psalms of re-birth, offerings to God of those realities within us that are often most in need of new life, of transformative healing: such adds a profound dimension to what they could be for us, and though us, for the world. 498

God who invites us, “Come as you are” (Gloria: FI, C-18). How often do we have an image of God who accepts us only when we are decked out in our Sunday best? If that is how we see God and God’s acceptance of us—conditional, even grudging—where do we take those parts of us that are messy and far from who we were made to be, for to be sure, those realities will insist on going somewhere? One of the most articulated responses from participants was a sense of these psalms portraying a God of acceptance with whom we can be ourselves, and a sense of surprise at that awareness. Maturity of relationship, freedom to be and to become: all of these may flow from the transformation to which we open ourselves when we have the courage to recognize the hesitancy to be with God in our truth—the truth of our church, our world—is ours, not God’s. Our awareness of God’s welcome to us in our truth may serve as an antidote to a hesitancy that seems to be present both in the literature and in the participants’ responses. In neither case does the issue of whether it is acceptable to direct the imprecations at a person tend to be raised. Enemies were mostly defined as forces and realities, such as poverty or injustice.

497 Boulding, 101.
What of the moments before we are able to be so selective and insightful, when poverty, for example, is indistinguishable from the individual or group whom we see as making us poor? Will considering the hospitality of God help us see that psalmic curses are God’s word to us before they are our words to God?  

God’s word to us, and our response to the hospitality God extends to our word to God: to that relationship we will briefly turn. These psalms reveal a God who is able, Blaine proposed, to take our ire (S-6, Written work). Ire is spoken in words often stinging the ear. Our words to God in the psalmic curses are syllables seldom heard in polite society. What, though, of God’s word to us? This takes us back to the discussion of the effect of the curse upon the one who has elicited it. Blunt language can sometimes be necessary in any loving and maturing relationship. These texts reveal a God hospitable to our unfiltered diatribes. What of our response to God’s truth-telling in the ears of our hearts, our reaction to words we need to hear, but would rather not? Is it in this divine-human conversation, grounded in mutual hospitality to truth-telling, we journey to healing, understanding, and freedom? We and God: each to the other extending the greeting, “Come as you are.” These are psalms of welcome.

“It’s their truth and it really challenges me to receive it” (Gloria: S-3, B-4). There seems in this statement a hint of self-transcendence. As it is articulated, it appears to focus, not first on me, but rather, on the other. What may be voiced is an attention to the plight of another,

501 I recently had occasion to consider this dynamic in the human-divine relationship. At the May 2016 Clergy Retreat for the Diocese of Charlottetown, Dominic Borg, OCD, spoke of three basic answers God gives to intercessory prayer: “Yes,” “No,” or “Grow up!” I was awakened to the harshness of the response, its truth, and the many times my prayer has sought deliverance from reality. “Grow up!” I need to hear it, but my hospitality toward it may not be extravagant.
502 Could we see, in this, the final resolution of the Book of Job?
not because it reminds me of my own pain, but for the sake of the other, whose dilemma trumps the hearer’s discomfort with the words employed to make the anguish known. The hearer may be one who is reluctant to be awakened to the real world from a self-focused and complacent reverie or she may be one whose deeds toward another have inflicted the suffering for which retributive justice is now being demanded. It is a receptivity motivated by a newly-awakened awareness of the other. It is a generous recognition and acceptance of the other for that person’s sake. These are psalms of justice: justice for the sake of justice, solidarity out of respect for the one who has been scapegoated and cast aside.

“I think there was a lot of fear under the anger.” “Like all emotions, anger is never alone. Not only does it cluster with other emotions but it also is a secondary emotion...Because anger is particularly difficult to isolate, it can be misidentified and misunderstood.”503 In the mid 1980’s, part of my work at a family services agency involved facilitating family communications seminars with parents using a popular program of the day, Parent Effectiveness Training.504 Deepening insight was one of the means employed in the service of improved communication. I recall a line-drawing on one of the pages that illustrated an understanding of anger. It was of an iceberg, a structure described as being one-tenth above the surface, and nine-tenths below. A major portion of what lay below the surface of anger was fear. Psalms that articulate what we readily identify as anger, if we dig more deeply, several study participants conjectured, may well be psalms of fear.505

505 See Appendix F for a further discussion of the relationship between fear and anger, a topic of pastoral significance for possible future consideration and research.
6.4 Summary

With weekly seminars over a period of seven weeks, this phenomenological study engaged a pre-existing group of practicing Roman Catholic adults in an experience of the psalms of imprecation. Though all of them were familiar with the Word of God through a combination of church attendance, prayer, formational opportunities, and liturgical ministry involvement, that familiarity did not include these harshest expressions of lament. Their shared experience included situating these psalms in the context of the integral psalter, and engaged them in what was designed to be a dynamic process—thick reading—that included intellectual engagement, with the use of the Nowell book;^{506} the reading, reflection, and prayer of private and group lectio divina; journaling; psalm composition; and group discussion.

In this study, the imprecatory psalms were experienced in the context of the entire Psalter. The entire Psalter gives participants an opportunity to see their reactions to life in the context of each other, the whole self. It does not isolate our fear and anger and distress from our joy and gratitude, highlighting that, as part of life, all are acceptable.

Reading whole books of the Bible as opposed to scattered passages is one of the Church’s ancient traditions.^{507} Nancy Koester writes, “Whole-book study will yield an astonishing variety of life, including some things the group may not have thought of discussing at all.”^{508} The “discipline” of reading through an entire book may respond to “the need to let God take the lead in the conversation as we open ourselves to the unexpected, the disconcerting

^{506} Nowell’s book appeared to strike an appropriate balance between challenge and accessibility, and, with the experiential emphasis of the assignments and group meetings, added to the dynamism of the group’s psalmic encounter. Mariano Magrassi speaks of this balance, while emphasizing that affect and intellect are not in competition. See Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 72-76.
^{507} Magrassi refers to this in contemporary biblical experience, suggesting selecting Books corresponding to the liturgical season for lectio. See Ibid.
and the surprising." On the other hand, “selecting passages here and there…may lose some of the things that make the Bible so interesting—it's unabashed and provoking otherness…[Such encounters] will bring people to places they would not see otherwise. In a whole book study there is a pretty good chance of hearing something that they never heard in church.” The last statement is particularly apropos the psalms.

In order to highlight the importance of the participants’ experience, the researcher—who had declared his bias in relation to these psalms—was minimally directive in facilitating the seminars. Ensuring participants felt welcome, and had the opportunity, to engage in seminar conversations were closely monitored by the researcher. Participants appeared respectful, inviting, and courteous toward each other. While two of the participants seemed to speak less than the others, they—as the others—were given a private opportunity in a final interview with the researcher to add anything they might not previously have included.

One of the women in the group observed that both male participants had used the word “cathartic” (Gloria: S-7, B-87). When the researcher inquired of the group, there appeared to be a broad consensus among the participants that while individual personality and experience may have been influential, gender did not appear to distinguish responses. One of the women offered that she had anticipated a possible gender difference, though she found none (Belinda: S-7, B-88). The researcher, based on anecdotal evidence, concurs.

What the participants shared of their experience has been documented and discussed above. Here, it is presented in summary:

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509 Tasto, 21.
510 Koester, 389-390.
511 In his study with adolescents, Yoder found no gender distinction in participants’ response to these texts.
These texts appear to have been received with ambivalence, echoing a similar reception history observed through the review of the literature. One participant was particularly and persistently vocal about disliking these psalms. Others, though less fervently, also expressed discomfort. The one who found these texts “not all that surprising,” and as such, himself, “the renegade in the group” (Vince: S-7, B-83; S-7, Written work) could be observed waffling on occasion. At the same time, participants’ voiced discomfort did not appear to impede engagement in the process or with the psalms. Without exception, participants articulated a place for these texts in the lives of individual believers and in that of the community. A perceived relevance of these texts appeared to override felt disquiet.

God appears to have been experienced through their engagement with these biblical texts as approachable, engaged, and immanent. These psalms, observed the participants, seem to demonstrate people being their “truest selves” (Gloria: S-3, B-2), feeling “freer to speak” (Rachel: S-3, B-18) in the presence of a Divinity who offers a safe place, (See Gloria: S-3, B-19: Rachel: S-4, B-37), can “take our ire” (Blaine: S-6, Written work), and invites, “Come as you are” (Gloria: F1, C-18).

Others, represented by the psalmist, were seen to be speaking their “truth” (Gloria: S-3, B-4): these discomfiting words, “the word of God in [that person’s] life today” (Gloria: S-3, B-2). We may even be eavesdropping on their refusal to take the place to which injustice and victimizers have consigned them, overhearing their words of enlightenment to their persecutors, by which the latter have the opportunity to discover the effect of their behavior on their victims, and thereby the possibility for a change of mind and heart (See Belinda: S-3, B-44). These words we shudder to hear may be echoes of long-ago seekers after justice, who witnessed the
pain of their brothers and sisters, and cried out on behalf of those who had no voice with which to speak for themselves (See Vince: S-3, B-26). These disturbing texts are “another person’s story,” prompting us to ask ourselves, now that we know, “what do we do with it?” (See Rachel: S-7, B-84; Blaine: S-4, B-35, S-6, B-63). These psalms may lead us to a deeper awareness of the pain that evokes such unedited lamentation, and to heed the call to speak and to act for justice (See Gloria, S-6, B-61; S-6, Written work).

We find ourselves here, agreed the participants. These words are not only a window through which we look out to the world; they are a mirror into which we gaze upon a narrative that tells “the story of our lives” (Belinda: S-7, B-80). Then they become a window again, connecting across time and space, “your story and my story with a much bigger story” (Gloria: S-7, B-83), offering the opportunity to recognize “it’s a much bigger picture than just my picture” (Gloria: S-7, B-83). Then the window reverts to a mirror in which we see “that violence in me that [is] causing harm to others” (Belinda: S-3, B-9. See also Phyllis: S-3, B-7-8.). This time, though, the gaze shortens to a glance because I may not want to look at that violence in me (See Belinda: S-3, B-9). We look into the glass long enough at the truth these words reveal, and that “deeper immersion” into myself may disclose, “In asking for it, I realize I do not want that violence [to befall another]. I do not want an eye for an eye” (Blaine: S-3, B-11). The journey of self-discovery, guided by these texts, may also help us dig below the surface of more readily identified reactions and emotions to what lies beneath.

Stay with it long enough, this study suggests, and ambivalence becomes enlightenment. Resist the temptation to resolve discomfort prematurely, the participants’ experience seems to say, and expand your awareness of God, of others, of self. Gloria, the most adamant and
persistent of the participants in her disquiet about the psalms’ curses, summarized her experience this way in her written work preparatory to the final seminar. Note the presence of God, others, and self in her summary.

Although over the years, I could hardly stomach those cursing psalms, I have begun to understand through this process [of the research project] that they can speak to us in our experiences of betrayal, abuse, pain and hurt and give words to express such deep felt emotions. SO (her emphasis) instead of hurling curses at those who offend us, I also learned that praying these curses to God can provide a safety net for us in expressing the violence that may live within us and that God can handle it! …I know I grew in my appreciation of these psalms from my first reaction, “I don’t really like these cursing psalms” to “this is the expression of a person or a community living through a long time of pain or rejection or abuse or violence. I have never before reflected on the idea that “nothing prayed or screamed is too raw for God’s ears” [quoting Nowell] and to further reflect that this too is God’s word for us…I was pleasantly surprised that so many of us [research participants] found our own stories in these psalms, which seemed to empower us and give us the capacity to revisit former difficult life experiences (S-7, Written work).

6.5 Implications

“Good [pastoral] care is not individualized homiletics…Nonetheless, biblical language remains disclosive speech, opening us to words that invite us to see differently,” and, as such, its “images and stories are as much a part of the tools of pastoral care as good listening skills and accurate empathy.” 512 The first implication of what has been observed through the results of the present study is support for the claim that the Bible—the entire Bible—has the potential to serve as a resource in pastoral ministry. What is needed is not careful excision of difficult passages, but rather the ongoing formation of pastoral ministers, who, acquiring a deepening capacity to “bridge the distance” between the then of the authors and redactors and the now of present day seekers, 513 employ the Word of God as a pastoral resource. What we have with exposure to the

512 Anderson, 209.
513 Kille, 127.
ministers, and seekers after wholeness whose capacity for freedom and formation is recognized and respected.

6.5.1 Ministry Offered

Persons who have had to hide their real feelings from others for extended periods in order to feel accepted, eventually become unaware of many of their own feelings. These repressed feelings produce emotional blind spots…[One’s] emotional blind spots prevent him/her from being inwardly congruent in those areas—from being the self she/he truly is. This keeps the person from relating therapeutically to others in these blocked-off areas.

Bustard observed her CPE students better able to help patients express their reactions to the feelings associated with illness when, through the illumination of the imprecatory psalms, they began to examine these realities in their own lives. In the light of introspection, they may have become better able to relate to the whole person with their whole person. We saw similar introspection in the present study’s participants, as they, for example, explored the effects of their own inner violence on others or pondered how their enhanced awareness of the sufferings of others might prompt them to act.

The imprecatory psalms, as we saw with the CPE group, and as this study appears to support, could be used as part of a formation process for pastoral care givers. We recall Athanasius’ observation “that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul

514 The issue of minister preparedness was brought up directly by one of the participants, who described himself as not competent at present to make use of these psalms in working with the parents of bullied children. Another less directly hinted at the need for formation when she recommended a “grounded introduction” as preliminary to pastoral work with these texts.
515 Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 416-417.
and the movements of the thoughts have been measured out and encompassed” by the psalms, and that they become “like a mirror” to the person vocalizing them.\footnote{Athanasius, \textit{Letter}, nos. 30 and 12.}

Athanasius’ mirror leads us to a further reflection: Look out through a window and see the world. Look long enough and glimpse ourselves. Look steadily enough, in the proper light, and see the two alternate. Out there and in here: the two are closely related, play off each other, even. The two, though, while related, are distinct. We can’t see both at the same time. This analogy, using the imprecatory psalms as a springboard, may help the minister of care, more deeply sensitized to pain through psalmic words, make the necessary distinction between self and other, so that the gift of self can be better offered and received.

Lament is the genre most represented in the Psalms. My own pastoral experience supports the observation that lamentable life-events are the prompt motivating most people who seek pastoral care. It appears fitting that pastoral ministers reflect on what is lamentable in their own lives, what leads to the anger and lashing out, which may be the symptom of fear and other hidden emotional responses. Ministers’ “real feelings about their own life and death, and the life and death of those they cherish most will influence all their” interaction with those who seek them out for care and support. “The way they handle their own [lamentation] will influence their effectiveness far more than their head-level theology.”\footnote{Clinebell, 132.} Hospital chaplain, Gerald R. Nicklas, adds “Dealing with [our] feelings and those of other people is the greatest source of difficulty in our interpersonal relationships in ministry.”\footnote{Nicklas, 37.} The present study suggests that the imprecatory psalms may provide pastoral ministers a catalyst for personal exploration, and a preparation to receive the raw emotion often accompanying the pain of those whom they serve.
“Ultimately, it is the healing energy from our relationship with God that allows us to be used at times as healers.” Because I write as a believer and the present study was developed and entered into from the perspective of faith, Clinebell’s words strike a chord. What is the minister’s perception of God?

This study suggests these texts may help deepen our acquaintance with God. A God who “can take our ire” (Blaine: S-6, Written work), who offers “a safe place” (Gloria: S-3, B-19. See also Rachel: S-4, B-37), who gives us the words to speak the truth of our lives today (See Gloria: S-3, B-2), who extends the welcome, “Come as you are” (Gloria: FI, C-18): such is a God who may seem unfamiliar and inaccessible to those who call down retribution upon the people and the forces seen to be making their lives hell. Guilt may well follow this unbridled lashing out (See Blaine: S-3, B-16); with guilt, a conviction that such language is incongruous with approaching God (See Gloria: S-3, B-17; Phyllis: S-3, B-45); with that, an assumption of God’s irrelevance to issues that elicit harsh speech; and with that assumption—even if false—the conclusion that faith has little to do with the nitty-gritty of life. Will the minister who has explored the protagonists and the God of the imprecatory psalms be better equipped—as suggested to be the case with the CPE group—to give permission for authentic expression to those who may feel such sentiments and language have no place in God’s presence?

Further, what of the minister’s judgment—often subtle—of the faith of the one who calls down curses upon a tormentor—human or otherwise? Is such reaction, as Daly-Denton opined, a throwback to the immature faith of pre-Christian times? How does it square with “Love your neighbour as yourself?” Study data suggests these psalms may facilitate a move toward

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520 Clinebell, 133.
521 Daly-Denton, 166, 168.
understanding those whose pain has forced them to put aside social niceties, thereby allowing, “It’s their truth, and it really challenges me to receive it, rather than say, ‘It’s awful [for them to say that]’” (Gloria: S-3, B-4). To the contrary of marking immaturity or being unfaithful to the vision of Jesus, maybe feeling anger “and not expressing it in any way at all…sounds a little dysfunctional” (Blaine: S-3, B-16), and further, the minister may “come to see it’s very healthy to [express what we feel to God]” (Blaine: S-3, B-17). If the brother or sister who comes seeking relief is seen as acceptable and valid, a God-seeker in the throes of life, might the outreach be more pastoral than punitive, more healing than hurtful?

Pastoral ministers not only have access to the word of God as a means toward personal enlightenment, discovery of God, or understanding of others. Sometimes, they are called upon, as part of their ministry, to help others navigate the Bible. “Provision must also be made for the suitable preparation of [pastoral ministers] who can instruct the People of God in the …Scripture.” Further to that, “it would be a mistake to neglect those passages of Scripture that strike us as problematic.” Given the current awareness of the “thickness” of the biblical text, and the multidimensional ways in which it is most fruitfully approached, the imprecatory psalms could well find a place in the dynamic encounter with the word of God that is part of ministerial formation—preparatory and ongoing.

The results of scholarship have a role; so too, according to current thinking, the experiential. What is the minister’s emotional response to “Take up the javelin and the spear

522 Verbum Domini, 73.
523 Ibid., 42.
524 See Brueggemann, The Re-emergence, 155.
525 Ibid.
against those who pursue me?526 What is the experience of encountering resistance to the text, and being called upon to work it through; to be unsure what to do with it, or to allow it to do to me; to hear in it the cry of the poor; to find myself in the text; to experience a change of thinking through encountering dissonant words; to be left seemingly unaffected by it? Reflection upon these questions would seem to be an essential part of what it is to explore “the interweaving of the stories of our lives with the narratives of the Scriptures,” to discover in that “the identity of all God’s people.”527 Engagement with these psalms serves as preparation to invite others to acquaint themselves more deeply with God’s word, and ponder it as enlightenment for the journey of their lives and the life of the world. Ministers who have become familiar with the texts may be less apt to be fearful of the texts, and thus able to present these psalms responsibly without unnecessary hesitation.

From the findings of the present study, my own formative opportunities, and my experience working with adults in faith formation through weekend retreats, evenings of reflection, seminars, and series, I consider the format of this study or an adaptation of it to provide a workable framework for a parish-based program of adult faith formation. It is presupposed that pastoral ministers facilitating the experience have participated in adequate and appropriate preparation.

6.5.2 Ministry Received

A review of the literature, supported by the reported experience of this study’s participants, suggests discomfort and its attendant ambivalence in relation to these texts, which may initially be seen as misrepresenting the language typically associated with Christian prayer.

526 Ps. 35: 3a.
527 Bennett and Christopher Rowland, Contextual and Advocacy Reading, 189.
The observation made by Billman and Migliore that the imprecations can be "preparing the ways for new understandings of God"⁵²⁸ seems to be supported here. Likewise, we find an affirmation of Tanner’s proposal that these psalms “provide a new way to define true and honest relationship between humans and their God.”⁵²⁹ Further, the participants reported experience of a God who invites, “Come as you are,” gives credence to Brueggemann, who observes these psalms witnessing to a faith that recognizes, “there is no thought that we must be on good behavior in the presence of God. Everything that is present in life is readily brought to expression.”⁵³⁰ Likewise, the study appears to support Silva’s remarks, “God-with-us does not want us to ignore…feelings of anger, rage, and vengeance;” thus, we have no need “to pretend that those who have faith in God are above such feelings.”⁵³¹

The current data appear to support these psalms being helpful to those in our faith communities who seek to grow beyond a view of a God who is punitive, grudgingly accepting our “Sunday best,” approachable only with carefully-edited formulae, a God who is more an added burden, one more hoop in an already-obstacle-ridden world. These texts may help disclose a God who is a readily-available source of healing and hope, an ever-present help in time of need,⁵³² receptive to us, no matter our demeanour, or the words we feel compelled to speak in the midst of our present truth.

We wrestle with what it is to be vulnerable with God, who already knows our darkest secrets and our selfish hearts. It’s scary to think that our toolbox for making earthly friends and being likeable doesn’t apply in conversation with God. There’s no one to

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⁵²⁸ Billman and Migliore, 111.
⁵²⁹ Tanner, 151.
⁵³⁰ Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, 54-55.
⁵³¹ Silva, 222.
⁵³² Cf. Ps. 46:2.
impress and no narrative to spin with the one who created the stars and knit us together.533

Liberating words, these, announcing the God of the imprecatory psalms, who invites us, “Come as you are” (Gloria: FI, C-18). Where do we take our shame, the words we hide as we camouflage the sentiments beneath them—even from ourselves. The participants in this study have given us permission to take tentative steps toward authenticity—with God, with others, with ourselves. It’s not that we patch ourselves together and walk to God; it’s that we stagger toward God, and God lifts us up, heals us, makes us new. These texts have the potential to form a part of any formative activity in relating to God through prayer.

“Whatsoever you do to these the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me…”534

These well-known words on the lips of the Matthean Jesus remind us that Christian vision is directed toward the “other,” particularly toward “the least” of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, who, in him, are our own kin. Life’s burdens sometimes visit us without any apparent cause. The psalmic imprecations bewail the senselessness of human suffering, and attune our ears to its undeniable effects.

Human misery, though, is not always inexplicable. These psalms connect hardship and suffering with greed and oppression, our cavalier exploitation of the other. These psalms are the unabridged “cry of the poor.” Rene Girard speaks of society’s scapegoats, those innocent victims and safe targets, saddled with unjust blame for the ills within and around us. These curses, says Girard, are history’s first permission to “those who would simply become silent

534 See Mt. 25: 31-46.
victims to voice their complaint as hysterical crowds besiege them.\textsuperscript{535} Out of their words of objection, a greater possibility for the recognition of their humanity ensues, providing for the possible interruption of their society’s destructive cycle of violence.

These howls of rage, says Jinkins, are to be encouraged for they remind us of who we are and what we are about as Christ’s community. “Our vocation as Church is not to provide the world with a spiritual novocaine to make the injustice and cruelty a little easier for us to accept…These psalms speak the theological language of outrage because sometimes outrage is the only possible redemptive response.”\textsuperscript{536} Further, we are not permitted, says Nowell, to avoid these words or to omit their echo in our own address to God. She is convinced “that refusing to pray [these psalms] is a refusal to pray in the voice of the poor, to give voice to the voiceless sufferers.”\textsuperscript{537} Awakening us from the slumber of self-absorption, the violent language we pray in these psalms, says Gregory Polan, “becomes an important bridge helping us realize we don’t pray the psalms for ourselves alone, but for all the people who find their world torn apart, and who can hardly find the words to bring before God to wrap around their pain.”\textsuperscript{538} “It’s their truth and it really challenges me to receive it,” claimed one of the study’s participants (Gloria: S-3, B-4) who heard the voice of the oppressed in these words that—she repeatedly reported—caused her no slight consternation.

The study’s results appear to support the appropriateness of these biblical texts as an aspect of pastoral outreach for justice. A seminar sponsored by a group such as the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace; a formative gathering for members of the

\textsuperscript{535} Girard, 116. While Girard gives these psalms a primacy in allowing the unheard an audience, for our purposes they need not have been history’s first such occasion.
\textsuperscript{536} Jinkins, 96-97.
\textsuperscript{537} Nowell, 35.
\textsuperscript{538} See Note 200, p.44.
parish’s St. Vincent de Paul Society; a Lenten series on the season’s tripod of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving; part of the script in a Solidarity Way of the Cross; a consciousness-raising gathering around the lives of refugees and migrants or victims of gun violence; preparation of a parish brief on child poverty or homelessness in Canada; a prayer service for the survivors of the Residential School System; support for a individual who has become aware of a call to a deeper empathy and a more helpful response toward those who suffer: all of these could be occasions for the responsible use of these oft-times unknown or avoided words that may allow deafened ears to hear.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her…The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.539

Injustice extends beyond groups and individuals. As part of a reflection activity on Laudato si, for example, including such Psalms as 8, 19, and 148, what of these demanding words of fearful outrage on the lips of Creation, insisting to be heard above the din of progress and profit?

According to Walter Brueggemann, a God who accepts only our praise does not lead us beyond ourselves or challenge us to impact the world.540 On the other hand, a God “who is available in assault correlates with the emergence of the genuine self...”541 Not only emerging, adds Endres, for psalm reading has an “expressive function” in helping people more deeply comprehend who they are.542 Our contact with the psalms is a means through which “living

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541 Silva, 222.
542 Endres, 51.
stories encounter living word.”⁵⁴³ What may be birthed from the union is “the most accurate language of the soul.”⁵⁴⁴ All of these echo Athanasius’ observation, “The whole of human existence, both the disposition of the soul and the movements of the thoughts have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.”⁵⁴⁵

Comments from one participant, in particular, appear to support what Athanasius and like-minded writers of our time relate. The curses [drove me] “deeper into” a 25-years-ago difficult time in his life. These texts, he reported, facilitate “your own story [being] made more present, to make that deeper immersion [within oneself] possible” (Blaine: S-3, B-22; S-4, B-42).

The literature and the experiences articulated in the present study appear to support these psalms used in pastoral settings as a support toward self-discovery. These prayer-poems could be included in a directed retreat or in a guided meditation activity, with the possibility, as one participant put it, to help “in unlocking the protective doors that prevent many of us from opening up to each other in God’s presence” (Vince: S-7, Written work). The psalmic curses could find a place in working through lingering remnants of past life-story events and experiences. “With a grounded introduction,” offered another study participant, imprecations “may well be helpful for people dealing with difficult life situations as in a faith support group in a parish, correctional centre, anger management setting, lectio divina group, or in any listening situation that is dealing with life’s pain and hurt” (Gloria: S-7, Written work). Often associated with anger, one of the gifts these off-putting psalms may offer is an opportunity to

⁵⁴³ Schnabl-Schweitzer, 639.
⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.
⁵⁴⁵ Athanasius, Letter, 10.
explore not only anger, and its escalation into rage and fury, but more deeply, the fear and other emotions that may lie hidden beneath these, many times secondary, responses.

6.6 Conclusion

About the genre to which the imprecatory psalms belong, Walter Brueggemann has this to say,

[These psalms make] an assertion about God: that this...available God matters in every dimension of life. When this...God is lost because we fail to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God’s vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair, and the world as we have it now becomes absolutized. Our understanding of faith is altered dramatically depending on whether God is a dead cipher who cannot be addressed and is only the silent guarantor of the status quo, or whether God can be addressed in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared.546

What of the risk associated with addressing God in the language of psalmic imprecatory lamentation? The data presented and discussed in this study contribute to a response.

First, in relation to God: Being “bold” (See Blaine, S-3, B-17) before God is not typically the “lingo” (Vince, S-6, C-13) of Christian prayer. “That’s not what we grew up with—not at all” (Gloria, S-3, B-18). The unfamiliarity of the cursing psalms’ language appeared to be no small factor in the “discomfort” and the “dislike” repeatedly expressed—in particular, by one participant, but to some extent by all—save one.547 There is a perceived risk in stepping out of our comfort zone in any relationship—possibly all the more so in the believer’s relationship with God.

547 See the exception of Vince, p.94, above.
The risk to which Brueggemann alludes is deeper, though, than breaching propriety and protocol. The risk escalates to include recognizing a God who is available and matters to life’s totality, a God who cannot be neatly compartmentalized, but issues the invitation, “Come as you are,” (Gloria, FI-C-14) from where you are. On the one hand, we are apt to experience God’s hospitality as profoundly reassuring; on the other, as a threat, for can we not easily relate to excluding God from some attitude or decision or action, neglecting to allow God access “to some corners of my life?” (Blaine, S-3, Written work). When God is recognized as the Universally Relevant One, we step into the risk of questioning our basic premises and modes of being in the world, destabilizing and disorienting us, leading us to experience a liminality that strips away our sense of security—even if false—exposing our vulnerability and need, even our preference for disintegration over wholeness.

In relation to others: Allowing ourselves to listen to the voice of the other in distress unsettles us, exposes us to the threat of having a cacophony impose itself upon the melody we hum in order to block out the cry of the poor. Psalmic curses scream that all is not right with the world, that pain and suffering are not always mysterious, that more times than we may care to acknowledge, they arise out of victimization. Imprecation humanizes those who have had their dignity trampled upon. Our queasiness is trumped by what we “sometimes find difficult to hear in people’s anger…who they are at this time. It’s their truth...God’s word in them today” (Gloria, S-3, B-4). Their truth, God’s word: what of the chance we take by accepting the challenge to receive them?

In relation to ourselves: Listen to another’s refusal to accept the place consigned to them by injustice and the vagaries of life, (See Belinda, S-6, B-75) and hear in those raw railings an echo of ourselves (See Belinda, S-3, B-9; S-6, B-69). The psalms of imprecation invite us into
the risk of honest self-reflection. They encourage us to examine the vulnerability and fear beneath the bravado and bluster of our anger. They help us clarify our deepest reaction, our most fruitful response to mistreatment at the hands of another (Blaine, S-6, B-76). Their shout is the whimper of our own pain, in the recess of past hurts—yet unhealed—or in the denial of a present dilemma. They are the accusation of our own complicity in the scapegoating that helps maintain the status quo for the haves, while decimating the perennially deprived. These sooner-be-avoided texts reveal us to ourselves as both perpetrator and victim, as a source of injustice and its transformation.

The previous association of participants with each other and with the researcher, a possible bias on their part to support the researcher, their level of acquaintance with the Bible:548 all of these may be factors in the participants’ favourable appraisal of these texts as evidenced here. It may nonetheless be asserted that what this study revealed of the participants’ experience of the imprecatory psalms takes what Brueggemann styled somewhat interrogatively, and presents it affirmatively: “God can be addressed in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared.” What has yet to be is a world where railing against pain and injustice is no more, because all has been made new. Along our pilgrim way, the imprecatory psalms—used responsibly and courageously—offer, with bald eloquence, words for our part in the difficult and necessary conversation.

548 Though not with the cursing psalms.
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Appendix A

God Addressed in Risky Ways: An Experience of Psalm 35

A DMin Thesis Proposal
Submitted to the DMin Programme Committee
Toronto School of Theology

Submitted by Keith Kennific
Ministry Base: St. Martha’s Pastoral Unit—Diocese of Charlottetown, PE

____________________________________
Joseph Schner SJ, Thesis Director

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November, 2014

The Background and Context of this Applied Research Thesis

Vocational identity, inspired by the Spirit, flows out of our concept of self: who we are, what we are called to do. I look to a number of life experiences as influential in the development of my understanding of Christian ministry, those I serve, and myself as minister. Much time in my early years was spent in the company of my maternal grandparents on a small Prince Edward Island mixed farm. My grandfather was a farmer who loved his land and his livestock. Some of my earliest memories are of him extolling the virtues of crop rotation, in an era before the practice was the subject of public debate and provincial legislation. On reflection, I recognize him as a man of intelligence and wisdom who had a relationship with his animals, the earth he cultivated, the trees that bordered the fields and filled the yard, and the crops he reaped. In all of that he was mindful of the God to whom he referred as “The Man Above.” The clericalism of the day not for him, he wasn’t shy to question something the priest said or to make up his own mind about issues not discussed in many households of the day. I imbibed from him the value of one’s opinion, respect for what God has made, a sense of the relationship of faith to the everydayness of life, and the importance of finding a balanced perception of God’s immanence and transcendence.

Aside from family experience, another formative factor is my study and work in psychology. After an undergraduate degree in this subject area, I worked for three years as an in-patient psychiatric nursing attendant. Immediately subsequent to this, I completed a two-year MA in School Psychology. This was followed by several years of varied work: as a school psychologist, a counsellor-psychometrician in a mental health clinic, and a counsellor-family psychology.

550 Mixed farming, largely phased out during the early 1970’s, was the agricultural practice of growing a variety of crops and livestock. In many places, it has been replaced by a kind of specialist agriculture, akin to the “factory farm.” For a brief contemporary discussion of the shift and some of its implications, see Michael Swan, “Getting Back in Touch with the Land: Ontario Bishops Weigh in on ‘The Fruit of the Earth,’” The Catholic Register, April 20, 2014.
life educator at a family service agency. The client-centred practice in which I engaged revealed that we desire change, healing, and growth in our lives, even if sometimes—maybe, many times—we thwart the fulfillment of our own deepest longings.

My formal study of theology—a third formative factor—was pursued out of this background. Thoroughly enjoying its academics, I found myself seeking its application to everyday life.

Eight years after ordination, I was granted sabbatical leave to pursue graduate work in Liturgical Studies at an American university, operated by Benedictine monks, many of whom were faculty. In studies prerequisite to the MA, I discovered anew that at the heart of Roman Catholic understanding of the Church’s liturgical prayer is the work of transformation, of change, of growth, of becoming more and more configured—through the Father’s acceptance of our conscious self-offering and the action of the Holy Spirit—to the person of Christ, and of being sent out to live that in the world.

Theology takes shape in a context. A theology of ministry has its genesis in the practice of ministry, the experience of living in community seeking the recognition of our own need for faith, hope, and love, and committing in faith, hope, and love to address those same needs in our brothers and sisters. At the outset, I want to relate my current context.

I have been a Roman Catholic priest for twenty-two years, and currently am the pastor of a three-church pastoral unit in rural Prince Edward Island. Our church-going congregation consists of many seniors and a number of middle-aged couples and singles, as well as a small number of parents and young children. Older teens are largely absent from Sunday worship and
parish activities. It has been estimated that about 60 per cent of our population attends Sunday Eucharist on a regular or semi-regular basis. Income level ranges across low to middle.

The typical week finds me meeting with parish groups and individuals, visiting the local hospital, private homes and various nursing care facilities, attending external meetings, communicating by telephone and email, leading a lectio divina gathering, and facilitating adult faith formation groups. Over the past three years, added to this are the demands of D Min work, which sometimes necessitate the replacement of doing ministry with thinking and writing about it. I also have several diocesan responsibilities including Liturgical Master of Ceremonies, membership on the Diocesan Liturgical Commission and on a committee charged with ongoing development of priests, and as a facilitator with the diocesan adult faith formation program. I also lead occasional reflection days and weekend retreats.

I work with a Pastoral Associate, who is a religious sister, and a number of parishioners, who with us through freely-offered ministries, provide pastoral care to the people of St. Martha’s Pastoral Unit. As pastor, I am collaboratively involved in the various aspects of parish life.

As a teenager, I was first introduced to the Word of God as prayer. During my time in the seminary, and post-ordination, I have had the opportunity to deepen my relationship with the Word through the prayer-experience of silent retreats, often in monastic settings. It was in this milieu that I came to appreciate and appropriate the practice of leisurely reading the Scriptures, allowing the Word to touch and inform life, which the tradition calls “lectio divina.” This formative experience has influenced how I approach the Bible: its relationship to my own life,
and how I respond to it in my prayer, homily preparation, and practice of pastoral ministry. Lectio divina has been part of my life for more than a dozen years, and has provided the interpretive lens for my encounter with the Word of God in preparing and writing this paper.

II. Statement of the Research Problem

My study and work in psychology, my theological formation and ongoing reflection, my study and prayer with the Word of God, my association with the practice of lectio divina: all meld together to stimulate my desire to incorporate the Bible more deeply into my practice of pastoral ministry.

Though my pastoral relationship with the community includes interaction on happy occasions—marriages, the birth of a child, and social activities—many of my individual and family contacts are in relation to the pain and struggle people experience in life. The emotional/spiritual component of these contacts is complex. People come looking for psychological ease and assistance with coping, with discovering their own interior resources, with embracing their potential for healing and growth. They want life to be different. Because they come to the parish priest, they want, either implicitly or explicitly, to find God in their turmoil. I am in solidarity with them for I know of their search from my own times of anguish, my own experience of being “incomplete and on the way.”

Above all trust in the slow work of God. I came upon this work many years ago in an Advent edition of The Catholic New Times. The full text is available at [accessed May 7, 2014].

552 Teilard de Chardin. Above all trust in the slow work of God. I came upon this work many years ago in an Advent edition of The Catholic New Times. The full text is available at [accessed May 7, 2014].
Living in a profound ambiguity, we desire transformation—maturation toward the full stature of Christ—and at the same time retreat from its possibilities. We long to be free of dysfunction, and are afraid of the very freedom toward which we aspire. I relate to this in my own journey, and hear it loudly echoed by those with whom I have shared the relationship of ministry. We often avoid active awareness of the realities in our history, our personality, our responses and reactions that contribute to our often-times self-imposed lethargy. We shy from what we interpret as our darkness. Yet, it is in the darkness that we see light. We are invited and empowered to cultivate the courage needed to gaze upon who we are on the road to becoming all we were made to be.

How can the Scripture help us? I want to explore that question in this research project. Specifically, I intend to begin an exploration as to how the widely unfamiliar psalms of imprecation may find a place in pastoral care.

To this end, my study will ask and address this question:

**How do a group of informed, practicing adult Roman Catholics experience the imprecatory psalms?**
III. The Theological Framework and Assumptions Involved in the Study

Theory at Work in the Study

The Psalms of Imprecation

A window into the early Christian experience of the psalms is opened for us by the fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, in his *Letter to Marcellinus.* The focus of the work is the psalms, and how they can be strategically applied to the Christian life, specifically to Marcellinus, a student of the Bible, during his recuperation from an undisclosed illness. Unique in all of scripture is the Book of Psalms. It, says Athanasius, summarizes the whole of every other biblical text, and encompasses the sentiments of the human heart. It “contains even the emotions of each soul...” He goes on to say, “For I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.” The words of the Psalter “become like a mirror” to the person vocalizing them, “so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.” So, too, “he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him.”

The psalms, writes Athanasius, become the words of those who pray them. “Remarkably, after the prophecies about the Saviour and the nations, he who recites the psalms is uttering the rest as his own words, and each sings them as if they were written concerning

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554 Ibid., 10.  
555 Ibid., 30.  
556 Ibid., 12.  
557 Ibid.
him...[H]e handles them as if he is speaking about himself."\textsuperscript{558} Not only do those who come to the psalms in prayer understand the psalms relevance to them, “the psalms comprehend” those who pray with them.\textsuperscript{559} In other sacred writings, continues the bishop, both those who read and hear read the words relate them as about those of long ago. “By contrast...he who takes up...the psalter recognizes [what is written] as being his own words...And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs as if they were his own songs.”\textsuperscript{560}

That effect—for the hearer and for the singer—is transformation. Through the psalter, we lift ourselves up to God.\textsuperscript{561} “Let him therefore select the things said in [the psalms] about each of life’s circumstances, and reciting what has been written concerning him, and being affected by the writings, lift them up to the Lord.”\textsuperscript{562}

The psalms, “the perfect image of the soul’s course in life,”\textsuperscript{563} facilitate our becoming increasingly configured to the image and likeness of Christ, our coming to maturation, to full stature in him, to the realization of our potentiality.

The psalms: unabridged, as we have received them.\textsuperscript{564} These ancient inspired texts teach what one must say...when suffering afflictions...after afflictions...what the words of those who hope in God are...what one must say when giving thanks...how one must call out while fleeing...what words must be offered to God while being persecuted and after

\textsuperscript{558} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{559} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{560} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{561} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{562} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{563} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{564} Athanasius was not likely considering issues of translation, and the difficulties associated with retrieving the “very words” of the composer. We could apply this to our reception of the entire psalter, according to the various translations available to us.
being delivered subsequent to persecution...what one says to be able to gratify the Lord, and what sort of expressions it is possible to make amends for himself.

“Do not let anyone amplify these words of the psalter with persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice, the things just as they were spoken.” To echo the words of the ancient pray-ers is the precursor to the imitation of their holy lives. To alter the text is, in the worldview and theology of Athanasius, to break communion with the primordial speakers. They recognize their words and join us in our prayer when we replicate them. And not only the ancients: “the Lord who watched over the one who originally said these things” will do the same for those who repeat them. The psalter is to be read in its entirety, “for truly the things in it are divinely inspired,” and “to take benefit for these, as from the fruits of a garden on which he must cast his gaze when the need arises,” the entire crop is required. The hungers are manifold; plenteous nourishment need be at hand.

And if I giving thanks, you wish to learn what it is necessary to offer the Lord, while you think spiritually, chant the twenty-eighth [psalm]...When you...are filled with wonder...sing your praise in the thirty-first psalm...Should you become aware that you are being shepherded and led in the right path by the Lord, sing psalm 22, rejoicing in this.

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565 Letter, 10.
566 Ibid., 15.
567 Ibid., 31.
568 Ibid., 33.
569 Ibid. It has been observed that Athanasius’ perspective may have been linked to a polemic developing at the time against the introduction of non-scriptural hymnody, which became increasingly prominent—especially in the East. Columba Stewart, OSB, “Prayer and the Bible” [class lecture, St. John’s University, Collegeville, MN, October 20, 2012]. His opposition to the move toward liturgical hymnody need not call into question the sincerity of his claims with regard to the words of the psalms.
570 Letter, 32.
571 Ibid., 30.
572 Ibid., 17.
573 Ibid., 18.
574 Ibid., 17.
Athanasius, the pastor, attempts to have Marcellinus come to recognize the psalms as relevant to all situations of his life. All situations in life, including this one:

And again, when the enemies are gathered together from all points, and are both issuing threats against the house of God and forming a confederacy against true religion, lest you become despondent because of the magnitude of the crowd and its might, you possess as an anchor of hope the phrases of the eighty-second psalm.\textsuperscript{575}

Among those hopeful phrases:

\begin{quote}
My God, scatter them like chaff
Drive them like straw in the wind!
As fire that burns away the forest,
as the flame that sets the mountain ablaze,
drive them away with your tempest
and fill them with terror at your storm.
Cover their faces with shame,
\end{quote}
\begin{quote}
till they seek your name, O Lord.\textsuperscript{576}
\end{quote}

If the psalms were to be reformative for the whole self, if the reintegration of the fragmented person was to be accomplished, how could anything but the whole psalter be called upon?

For Christians of the fourth century, praying with all the psalms, using the integral psalter was a given. Gillingham reminds us that, by the fourth century, monastic communities were fully established in Athanasius’ Egypt, as well as in Cappadocia and Syria. While practices varied, these ancient ascetics spent hours every day in prayer, largely nurtured by the psalms. In, for example, \textit{The Sayings of the Desert Fathers}, citations from and allusions to biblical books occur almost three times as often from psalms as from any other Old Testament work.\textsuperscript{577} It was

\textsuperscript{575} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{576} Ps. 82: 14-17. (83: 13-16). Athanasius uses LXX numbering. This psalm is excluded in its entirety from the current Roman \textit{Liturgy of the Hours}. More on this below.
\textsuperscript{577} Susan Gillingham, \textit{Psalms through the Centuries} (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 41.
not unusual for the whole psalter to be read in a week. In Syria, some communities were reported to have accomplished this in a single day.578

While daily prayer synaxes differed between cathedral and desert, the psalms were considered to belong to the whole Church. The Ambrosian rite completed the entire Psalter every two weeks; in Rome, the cycle was completed weekly.579 Benedict followed the Roman tradition,580 arranging the psalms over a week, and allowing that the distribution be altered if another arrangement was seen to be more satisfactory, “but taking care in any case that the Psalter with its full number of 150 Psalms be chanted every week and begun again every Sunday at the Night Office.”581 In Reformation times, we find the tradition of the whole psalter in Luther’s desire to share a vernacular version of the psalms with the laity.582 Pius V’s 1568 revision of the Roman breviary maintained the recitation of the entire psalter over the course of a week.583 This tradition among Roman Catholics continued until the 1960’s.

The Reforms of Vatican II

One of the great boons from the Second Vatican Council was the vernacular celebration of the liturgy. It recaptured the ancient tradition of communal prayer in the language of those who gathered to celebrate it, reintroducing the understanding of the liturgy as the work of the

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578 Ibid.
579 Ibid., 42.
582 Gillingham, 140. Athanasius, it appears, however, would not have been pleased with Luther’s rendering of the Psalms in metrical hymnody: “Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with persuasive phrases of the profane” Letter, 31.
583 Ibid, 155. The Anglican tradition read the entire Psalter over a month.
people in which everyone is called to participate. At the heart of participation—external and internal—and emanating from it was reintegration, transformation, maturation.

Participation eliciting reintegration and transformation, and these forming the root of a renewed way of being—within, and in the world: we are led back to Athanasius’ advice to Marcellinus as to how his engagement with the psalms could help accomplish that rehabilitation. The whole self, though, needed to be brought to the whole psalter. The bishop’s words bear repeating: “Do not let [anyone] attempt to recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice, the things written just as they were spoken...”584 If you are happy, if you are thankful, if you are penitent, if you are frightened, besieged, angry, go to the psalms—all of the psalms—for succour and direction.

The vernacularization of the liturgy posed a problem to following the advice of the fourth-century bishop. “Now, my son,...I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.”585 The whole of human existence: when the less appealing aspects of that reality, the rawness of the experience and the pain of the depths, were honestly articulated, how would they resound in the heart that spoke them; how would they be received by the ears that heard them? It was determined that three psalms, and the verses from certain others would be omitted from the cursus of official daily prayer because they would occasion “a certain psychological difficulty, even though the psalms of imprecation are in

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584 Letter, 31.
585 Ibid., 30.
fact used as prayer in the New Testament...”586 Verses, such as those proposed to Marcellinus for the tribulations of life, were expunged from official prayer.

The process of arriving at the decision was laborious, even confrontational. It is outlined by the Secretary of the Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy, Annibale Bugnini, in a detailed and lengthy volume.587 With certain intrigue, the tale is told of an argument that involves the issues of ancient tradition—on the side of maintaining the integral psalter in the Church’s official public prayer588—and the concern about whether such words could be spoken in Christian communal worship. It adds, as well, controversy around papal intervention: whether that was appropriately sought or correctly interpreted.589

586 General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1983) no131. Psalms 58, 83, and 109 were omitted entirely. The following verses were also excluded: 5:10; 21: 8-12; 28: 4-5; 31: 17-18; 35: 3a, 4-8, 20-21, 24-26; 40: 14-15; 54:5; 55: 15; 56: 6b-7; 59: 5-8, 11-15; 63: 9-11; 69: 22-28; 79: 6-7, 12; 110: 6; 137: 7-9; 139; 19-22; 140; 9-11; 141: 10; 143:12.


588 It is acknowledged that there was selective use of psalmody in the ancient cathedral office. Selection was made, though, on the suitability of the psalms to the time of day, not because the content of the psalm was deemed inconsistent with Christian revelation. See Stanislaus Campbell, From Breviary to Liturgy of the Hours: The Structural Reform of the Roman Office 1964-1971 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press-Pueblo, 1995), 152.

589 Campbell, 300. The difference of opinion as to the appropriateness of including the psalms in question in liturgical prayer is brought into sharp relief by two examples: the first of an Eastern bishop at the time of the revision, the era of the Soviet Union. Bugnini records, “A Father from Eastern Europe said, ‘Our special circumstances require that the entire Psalter be used. Afflicted as we are by a very difficult external situation, we need expressions suitable for use contra diabolum’” (494). In contrast, this from the Carmelite prioress near Dachau, recounting her community’s mid-1960’s experiment with the integral psalter in liturgical prayer.: “In the immediate vicinity of the concentration camp, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into the church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp. It often happens that these people are not only moved by the hideousness and brutality they encounter in the documentation in the concentration camp museum and in viewing the camp itself, but also in their own feelings of hatred and revenge because of the dreadful thing that happened in this place. Our church is the only calming influence in the camp compound...” Erich Zenger, A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 20-21. The prioress is poignant in her observations in this extreme situation. At the same time, in another context, dialogue of the experience with the problematic psalm texts could prove most fruitful. Martin Shannon takes this up in “‘A Certain Psychological Difficulty’ or a Certain Spiritual Challenge” Worship 73:4 (1999): 290-309.
The liturgical implications of the decision to exclude imprecation—which is the deepest expression of lament—from official public prayer has been taken up by many, and lies outside the intent of this paper. Suffice to say, in some circles, the issue is an open one.

The Church’s continuing quest to find a way to integrate the entire corpus of psalmody into its life is highlighted in one of the most recent official teachings on the Word of God and the place of the Bible in the life of the Roman Catholic faith community, Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*. “The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” The word of God is a present event, drawing us “into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the *Book of Psalms*, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God.”

The psalms are a compendium of human reality, for in them—and here he is deeply reminiscent of Athanasius—“we find every possible human feeling expressed masterfully in the sight of God; (sic) joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation.” What of those words of God to us that become our word to God, the so-called *dark passages of the Bible*, among them the psalms, the entirety of which Athanasius saw as relevant to life, and our navigation of its courses? “...It would be a mistake to neglect those passages of the Scripture that strike us as

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591 According to Bugnini, most of those who discussed this issue preliminary to the final decision about the liturgical omission of imprecation, were in favour of retaining—in some way—these verses in official public prayer. The minority opinion was accepted.
593 Ibid., 30.
594 Ibid., 33.
595 Ibid., 24.
596 Ibid.
597 Ibid., 42.
A move away from Paul VI’s view in the time immediately following the Council, when he opined, “Certain expressions of anger, hatred, and cursing...[do] not facilitate union with God or praise of him.” They, according to Paul, represented a lack of maturation in Israel’s understanding of God, to say nothing of their use being inappropriate in the Christian dispensation. “Not so,” claims Benedict.

We need, rather, to learn how to interpret them. Therefore, he continues, “I encourage scholars and pastors to help all the faithful to approach these passages through an interpretation which enables their meaning to emerge in light of the mystery of Christ.” Here, Verbum Domini picks up on the advice Marcellinus received: Recite the psalms “intelligently [for] in this way [we] are able to comprehend the meaning in each, being guided by the Spirit.” It is to an application of Benedict’s encouragement that we now turn.

**Local Theology**

Theology, according to Sedmark, is done locally, maintaining honesty by taking the particular situation, the context out of which it arises, seriously. It is from the bottom up: done by the people and with the people. Local or little theologies—he uses the descriptors interchangeably—arise in concrete occasions and places, and in response to specific needs.

They are especially called for in times of confusion, in times of change when theology has to

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598 Ibid.
599 Ibid., 508.
601 Ibid.
602 Ibid.
603 *Letter*, 33.
605 “Little theologies are not ‘cheap theologies’...Little theologies emphasises theological soundness and situational embeddedness (See Sedmark, 121).
606 Ibid., 130.
respond to a new situation. They help bring a deeper clarity and focus to the unpredictability and dynamism of everyday life.

Since local theologies are here-and-now, “always done by people, who are ‘somewhere,’” they connect to people’s experiences. Nothing conveys the experience of one to another as do stories woven from the fabric of life. These stories both constitute and reveal the reality of being. Brought to the light of communal conversation, meaning can be derived from these true accounts, which in turn can occasion multidimensional growth. Stories are interconnected, and what is related by one—as Athanasius alluded to Marcellinus—can make it possible for another to deal creatively and imaginatively with something, which heretofore had been emotionally and cognitively inaccessible. “Stories can give an ideal, colourful answer to a difficult question or situation. They allow space to move without being forced to give clear answers.”

The psalms arise out of stories. As Brueggemann puts it, “they draw together a rich variety of local traditions.” The communal conversation of which they are a part uses language that is pointed and specific, all the more necessary if they are to convey, not only the details, but the sentiment of what it is to have lived through the event the story attempts to relate.

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607 Ibid., 120.
608 Ibid., 121.
609 Ibid., 16.
610 Letter, 11, 12.
611 Ibid., 155.
612 Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit (Eugene: Cascade, 2007), 44.
613 Ibid., 53.
The imprecations relate stories, says Brueggemann, which narrate the rawness of life: experiences of being overwhelmed, nearly destroyed. He calls these episodes of disorientation: a sense of being uprooted, thrust into the unfamiliar and the painful, the fear-evoking, the anger-eliciting.

Narrative is implicit in every psalm. Sometimes, we can well surmise the back-story, what got us to where we are when the psalm begins. When we hear, “O God, the nations have invaded your land; they have profaned your holy temple...Pour out your rage on the nations, the nations that do not know you,” our awareness of history helps us date the plea to the time of exile: to be sure, one of those moments of confusion and change, of which Sedmark and Athanasius spoke. More often, though, we can have no access to the evocative circumstance. What, for example, were the specifics of the psalmist’s reflection on the devastation of the temple? What person or predicament first occasioned “Save me, O God, for the waters have risen to my neck”? What had been done to conjure the vehemence, “Let those who seek my life be shamed and disgraced...”

The search for meaning, the quest for God, the longing for relief occasioning these stark lines, comments Brueggemann, arise out of events that place us “at the edge of our humanness.” There, polite speech would whimper, would convey nothing of the story—out of which arises the local theology. It would be mere words, “dull and mundane,” the kind, he continues, which describes much of human verbiage, “the normal speech of a stable,

614 Ibid. 4.
615 Ibid., 8.
616 J. Clinton McCann and James C. Howell, Preaching the Psalms. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 16.
617 Ps. 79: 1, 6a. An inclusive language version of The Grail Psalms will be used. (Glasgow: Collins, 1986).
618 Ps. 69: 1.
619 Ps. 35: 4.
620 Brueggemann, 4.
621 Ibid., 7.
functioning, self-deceptive culture in which everything must be kept running young and smooth."622

Resort to that, and the story is never told, the theology is not articulated, never developed. The tradition is forgotten—or worse, suppressed, repressed. Hearkening back to Sedmark, there is no real talk about life, no sense that how we live in the here-and-now makes any difference, no search, in the particularity of the moment, for our identity in the light of who God is.623 In the articulation of local theologies, in the words of the psalms, our lives are brought to God, to the community, to our own ever-deepening consciousness: all of it requiring language that, while it is never able to capture the essence of any of it, is—at least—befitting our most sincere efforts to approach that goal.

“People make sense of their lives through stories they fashion...”624 If we define ourselves through our experience and the narrative we then construct, the ministry of pastoral care always involves an attentive reception of the stories we are told. In order to enter the life of another, we must know them. Awareness of the other arises out of what they tell of themselves. Ministry is always about accompaniment toward maturity in Christ. Autobiographical narrative is the way we frame our lives. “We must know their stories in order to help people reframe

622 Ibid. Brueggemann’s words remind me of those of another: “The American version of Christianity...ignores the inescapable disorder of humanity after the fall narrated in Genesis, or by the classical term, in humanity’s post-lapsarian bent. I’m sad to say that bright-eyed American Christianity is intent on its own righteousness even in the face of humanity’s obvious failures at every turn... I see...Roman Catholics...lip-synching gleeful slogans of good news of Christ’s resurrection without his death, of a kind of salvation with no admission of human sadness and suffering, disappointments and disorder, and effects of sin...” Martin Connell, PhD [Convivium reflection, St. John’s University School of Theology-Seminary, Collegeville, MN., September 13, 2007]. Dr. Connell employs a level of hyperbole for effect. His words, though, resonate with an element of my experience of worship in Canada, where, in my assessment, we tend to project an image of neat, tidy, and middle class. I’ve grown to appreciate a remark made by a friend of mine of the notable absence from our Sunday assemblies of those who are economically poor.

623 Sedmark, 7.

them. The liberating promise of [attending to narrative] is that if our lives are socially constructed, they may also be reconstructed."\(^{625}\) Necessary reconstruction is the hope of pastoral ministry.

The Bible tells the story of God in narrative form. The God-narrative constantly intersects the story of humanity. “It is a script of God’s relentless love for the world, and at the same time observes with ruthless honesty the human struggle to live faithfully in that love.”\(^{626}\)

\(^{627}\) Engaging the narrative of the sister or brother accompanied in ministry alongside and within the biblical paradigm, while taking care to violate the integrity of neither,\(^{628}\) helps people realize the larger context of their interpretation of experience. “Weaving the human and the divine

\(^{625}\) Ibid., 201.
\(^{626}\) Ibid., 202.

\(^{627}\) God’s relentless love is expressed soon after the biblical narrative begins. The Judeo-Christian story begins with the primordial harmony and order of the two creation accounts. I will consider the older of the two—sequentially, the second—which describes a garden where all works together for the good of all, and, in this, the sustenance of the human person-in-community. The first people, the story goes, dissatisfied to leave God at the centre, disrupt the carefully orchestrated plan so profoundly that they find themselves ousted, not by divine edict, but by their own hubris. They exit Eden because the garden is no more. They have hurled its mutuality back into the face of its Source and Summit, and discover, to their shame, their inability to sustain their life as God made and hoped it to be. God’s reaction is instructive here. Finding them bereft of what they need, “the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and his wife and he clothed them” (Gen. 3: 21). Whom do we clothe?: someone who can’t do it for themselves. Why do we do it?: because we love them. I propose that this passage sets the stage and summarizes all that will follow in the Scriptures. Throughout the pages of the Bible, there is but one story, with many episodes and a varied host of characters: God clothes God’s people. Across the Sea of Reeds, through the desert, at Sinai, settling the Land, in the Temple, through the admonitions and reassurances of the prophets, to the definitive fulfillment of their utterances in Jesus of Nazareth, in Paul’s counsel, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rm. 13:14), until the instruction of Jesus that the disciples wait in Jerusalem “until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24: 49): God cares for a helpless people incapable of tending to themselves. In that steadfast love, God desires to transform them into who they were made to be: sharing the divine intimacy, at ease with themselves and one another, at home in creation (compare Gen. 2: 4b-25 with 3:1-12). One might expect such an offer to be readily and gratefully grasped. After all, who doesn’t want a second chance? That neither the transformation of the person nor the ministries that accompany and encourage it are straightforward trajectories should come as no surprise to us, since the story that is the prototype of our story—that told in the Bible—is one of two steps forward and one back. The biblical narrative vividly portrays their mixed reception to God’s desire: “We will do whatever he tells us to do” often not making the transition from word to action.
enables us to hear our own stories retold with clarity and new possibility. With clarity and new possibility comes the hope of growth into becoming who we already are.

**Lectio Divina**

The biblical narrative in dialogue with our own: the “story-behind-the-story” of the imprecatory psalms speaking to the plot of our hearts, opening to us the doorway into deeper awareness, an enriched opportunity for our healing and maturation. Deeply imbedded in the tradition is an attitude toward the scripture, a way of living with and in the Word of God able to support that movement toward the actualization of latent potential: lectio divina.

According to Anderson, “regarding the bible as an authoritative resource for life as well as faith” is of critical import. “Lectio differs substantially from the ordinary act of reading, even ‘spiritual reading.’” That substantial difference has to do with faith: with the expectation—articulated by *The Letter to Athanasius* and *Verbum Domini*—that in the Word a dialogue of divine initiative and human response is taken up. “The text thus serves as a mirror that brings inner realities to consciousness...When we open the sacred book, we also open ourselves; we let ourselves become vulnerable—open to be pierced by God’s two-edged sword.”* Lectio divina—plumbing the multiple levels of the text’s meaning—leads us to a meeting place with God “at our deepest centre [where God speaks] to the most intimate depths of our hearts, to gift and challenge and change us, and to promote genuine spiritual growth and

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628 Anderson, 206
629 Ibid., 203.
630 Maria Tasto roots the practice in the Hebrew approach to the Scriptures, Haggadah. The sacred text was freely interpreted in an effort to have it disclose its deepest meaning and relevance for life. *The Transforming Power of Lectio Divina: How to Pray with Scripture* (Toronto: Novalis, 2012), 3-4. Following his monastic predecessors, the sixth-century Benedict of Nursia prescribes it as a daily practice for his monks.
631 Anderson, 204.
633 Ibid., 106, 108.
maturity. The purpose of lectio is to bring us to the point where we freely give the assent of faith in a manner that is progressively more profound and in continuity with the experience of everyday life. "Sustained lectio" is prayer blending the reading of the sacred text with the reading of the experience of our lives: a help to discover our story in the narrative that is the Word of God. "[I]t is a yearning for an experience of God’s goodness and purposes in one’s life."

In the wake of the Enlightenment, this method of interacting with the bible was largely displaced by emphases that gave rise to the historical-critical method. "While this [latter] approach has achieved many gains, it has neglected an older tradition that viewed the Bible as an aid to the spiritual life rather than chiefly a source of data or information."

The movement of lectio is intuitive rather than intellectual, leisurely rather than structured. At the same time, these methods of encounter with the Word need not be mutually exclusive. There is room—and a need—for both. A deeper emphasis on the Word of God as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council opened the way for a renewed discovery of the place of lectio and its reintegration into the life of the church. This “assiduous reading of Holy Scripture accompanied by prayer realizes that intimate colloquy where, by reading, we

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636 Funk, 2, 3.
638 Wilfrid Stinissen dates the beginning of the diminishment of the practice earlier: to the dawn of scholasticism in the early thirteenth century. *Nourished by the Word: Reading the Bible Contemplatively* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1999), 16-17.
640 Tasto, 53.
642 Tasto, 3-8.
listen to God...and, in prayer, we respond...with confident openness of heart...As a firm point of pastoral ministry, lectio divina should...be further encouraged."643

Lectio divina with the psalter—specifically with its curses—in keeping with our tradition, in response to the invitation of Verbum Domini, as an experience with the Word of God in ministry, as an opportunity to connect our story with the narrative of the Bible: how will it be experienced? What follows is intended to begin the uncovering of that.

Assumptions Operative in the Study

The following assumptions are operative in the study:

1. The Bible has a place in pastoral ministry.
2. Certain biblical passages—among them the imprecatory verses of the psalter—are found to be troubling and disconcerting by many. At the same time:
3. “All scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tm. 3:16-17).644
4. All scripture is ultimately about us and “here and now”—including those passages where God is “addressed in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared.”645
5. Some level of exposure and formative experience is helpful in the process of finding our story in the Word of God.
6. This discovery can be an aid to growth: individual and communal.
7. Lectio divina provides an accessible means to experience and incorporate the Word.

644 This passage, here, is taken as an affirmation that the Bible has a role to play in the pastoral ministry of the Church.
The Action in Ministry

The Action-in-Ministry will be designed to provide the participants in the study with a extended opportunity for a general exposure to the psalms, with specific attention to the psalms of imprecation, using Irene Nowell’s *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013). Reading material on lectio divina will also be provided. The study will take place over a period of six to eight weeks at the Diocesan Centre in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. Participants will be asked to read the text. We will hold several weekly seminars of about 90 minutes each, considering and discussing the various psalm genres, as presented in the assigned reading.

After their context has been established, we will look at the psalms of imprecation. Focusing on Ps. 35 (34) *Contend, O Lord, with my contenders...*, we will spend one meeting exploring the art of lectio divina, and engaging in a process of group lectio divina with the psalm.

As a homework assignment, participants will be asked to do private lectio with Ps. 35(34) for a specified period of time each day for six days. From that experience, they will be asked to compose a scenario out of which the text of the psalm may have evolved. These scenarios will be shared with the group, and discussed at the subsequent seminar.

Over the course of the period before the next weekly meeting, participants will be asked to compose their own imprecatory psalm, using Ps 35 (34) as a model, and out of the imagined experience of the scenario they have developed. These psalms will be shared and discussed in the next one or two gatherings. The final seminar meeting(s) will be comprised of shared
reflection on the participants' experience of Ps. 35 (34), the work they have done in relation to it, and their involvement with the others in the task.

    Context is considered essential: thus, the cursing psalms will be considered in the framework of the complete psalter, and specific verses in relation to a whole psalm.

    I will facilitate the gatherings, having shared and—as far as possible—bracketed my own bias, and explaining to the group that the object of the study is to observe their experience of the particular psalm. Thus, there will be no attempt to shape the responses. I will participate as a disinterested observer of the comments and reflections offered by the participants. It will be my challenge to “set aside [my] experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective” toward what is observed, to allow my curiosity about the participants’ experience to be aroused and sated. It will be my opportunity, being exposed to the participants’ account of their experience, to myself encounter these texts in a new and fuller way.

**The Qualitative Research Methodology Operative in the Study**

*Approach*

    I will conduct my research according to the Phenomenological approach. Creswell opines “the type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon.” This is in keeping with my proposal to discover how participants experience Psalm 35 (34) in the context outlined above.

*Selection of Respondents*

647 Ibid., 61.
The participants will be an already-intact group involved in parish and diocesan life and ministry. All meet the criteria as indicated in the Research Question: adult, informed, practicing, Roman Catholic. Four are women. Four members of the group have experienced some variety of formative training in pastoral practice, theology, and scripture. Two have no formal training. The age range is approximately 45—80 years. I have known three of the participants in various capacities for a number of years; three, more recently.

**Data Collection**

Following informed written permission from participants, and the assurance of confidentiality, the data will be collected according to the Case-study method. Field note observations will be kept. Particular attention will be paid to the gatherings wherein participants’ reaction to Ps. 35 (34) is addressed, as well as their own psalmic compositions. These gatherings will be audio-recorded with the informed consent of those involved. The participants’ psalm compositions will be retained for further analysis following our group discussion. Necessary clarifications will be sought, and follow-up gatherings arranged as necessary. The data—taped sessions, field notes, written work—will be triangulated.

Audio-tapes and all written work will be held confidentially and securely until the completion of the study; then, destroyed. Data will be coded as soon as possible, and the key kept separate from the data. Electronic data will be kept in a secure server environment, password protected, and accessed securely. Hard copy data will be kept in a secure environment with lock-up capability accessible only by the researcher, who will maintain an accurate up-to-date log detailing its use. The secure destruction by shredding and/or burning and erasure of all
identifiable or confidential data will be carried out by the researcher at the successful completion of the thesis defence.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data will be carried out according to Creswell’s criteria for Case study. Texts will be read and recordings listened to repeatedly, and notes made in the process of coding. Common themes and discrepancies will be sought and noted. Significant statements will be highlighted, and quotes from participants used illustratively. Clusters of meaning will be developed, and themes from these—with their description of the influence of the context of our gatherings—used to describe the experience of the participants in relation to their collective and individual interaction with and around the psalms. Common experiences will be used to suggest the essence of the shared experience.

**Time Line**

A tentative time line would have the proposal accepted by February 15, 2015; the research conducted in May-June, 2015; analysis of data and writing complete by November 30, 2015, and submission of the document by December 15, 2015.

**Interpretation and Evaluation**

Careful and thorough analysis of audio and written data, as well as researcher observations will be carried out to render descriptions of “what happened” and how the psalm reflection, discussion, and composition was experienced. Quotations from shared verbal

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648 Ibid., 156-157.
reflections and written work will be used illustratively in support of the descriptions and
conclusions suggested by the gathered data.

**Ethical Issues**

Prior to the beginning of the study, participants will be provided—verbally and in
writing—with its purpose and process, and assured of their individual anonymity, and the
confidentiality in which all research information will be held. Participants will be informed of
the expectation that they hold the content of our gatherings in respectful confidence. Following
this, each will be asked to sign an informed consent. All written and recorded information will
be kept securely locked in the safe of St. Bonaventure’s Parish, and accessible only to the
researcher, and will be destroyed upon the completion of the project by hard copy shredding and
erasure of electronic material. Being an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic community, I will
need to be especially vigilant to ensure that any perception on behalf of the participants of my
looking for a specific response or tenor of response is mitigated. I will attempt to do that by
being clear to the participants that it is their unfiltered reaction to their experience of the psalms
that is being sought. Participants will be made aware that they are free to discontinue their
involvement at any point in the process. At this writing, the decision of the University of
Toronto Ethics Review Board is pending.

**Risks and Limitations of the Study**

I have identified the following risks with the present study:

1. Participants may be influenced by a perception of what the researcher expects or wants to hear.
2. That I will not sufficiently mitigate any perceived “power over” aspect of my relationship with
participants.
3. That I may impose my own bias in relation to the texts being experienced.

4. This experience may generate exploration of personal spiritual / psychological issues in participants. If necessary, names of trained counsellors, who have agreed to provide support will be provided.

I see the following limitation in relation to the study:

The small sample size and their involvement in a specific ministry will militate against the generalizability of the findings to the wider faith community.

**The Contributions of the Study**

The first possible contribution of the study may be to my own practice of ministry through the insight gained from the shared experience of the participants. My perception and appreciation of the biblical texts under review, I expect, will be deepened. My experience of using the Bible in ministry—specifically the imprecatory psalms—will be enhanced through the sustained discussion and reflection I anticipate the study will occasion. Another contribution may be to the participants through their application of the psalm texts to their personal lives, as well as—through their sustained exposure to a particular aspect of the Word of God—to their participation as members of their diocesan group and their larger ministerial involvement. A further cohesiveness within the group may be nurtured. Finally, while work with the imprecatory psalms has been recently chronicled, this has taken place in settings such as
hospitals, and among groups where these texts form part of a therapeutic intervention. I have not seen references to work done with those involved in parish or diocesan ministry.

Appendix B – Seminar Preparation Material

GOD ADDRESSED IN RISKY WAYS: AN EXPERIENCE OF PSALM 35
THESIS RESEARCH
SEMINAR 1
TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2015

It would be good to have read Nowell’s entire book prior to our first gathering. In the first meeting, we will look in detail at the preface and chapters 1 and 2. In preparation for the gathering, it will be important to read the psalms to which Nowell refers in these chapters.

A couple of points of clarification and explanation in relation to the reading material:

You will notice the author makes numerous references to St. Benedict. Benedict lived in what is present-day Italy in the 5th and 6th centuries. He chose to live a life of quiet and prayer, away from what he saw to be a society where God and the teaching of Jesus received little attention. Eventually other men and women of his time—including his own sister, St. Scholastica—joined him as monks and nuns. Benedict is thus named the “father of western monasticism.” He composed a vision of life for his followers, which became known as the Rule of Benedict. This 6th century document followed still by Benedictines today—among whom is Nowell, herself—is sometimes referred to in our book by the abbreviation RB.

John Cassian, referred to on p. 10, was born in the mid-fourth century, in Eastern Europe, possibly in the area of present-day Romania. He was a monk, whose writings about scripture and the spiritual life had become influential by the time of Benedict, and to this day is seen as relevant to the Christian life.

Outline of the Day:

After a brief time when we will do some introductory things, be prepared to provide a 5-minute typed summary of what points made an impression on you from the first two chapters. That would be about one single-spaced page. I invite you, in that summary, to include your thoughts on what Nowell says about the voices and characteristics of the psalms on pp. 5-10. Each participant will have the opportunity to present this summary to the group. Please be prepared to respond to questions and comments from the group, and to address comments and questions to the summaries of others. May I ask you to provide me with a copy of your summary at the beginning of our gathering? As mentioned in the outline of our project, which you received earlier, I will keep these for the purposes of the research.

For the second part of our time together, we will divide into two groups for the exercise outlined on pp. 17-19 in the Nowell book. In numbers 2 and 4, we will choose the option for the group without a shared history. To conclude, we will be invited to share our experience of the exercise.
Today, we will look at chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9 of the Nowell book. It will be important to read and consider the psalms to which she refers. While we won’t discuss chapter 8, please read it, and if you have a point related to it, please bring it to the group.

A couple of points from the reading:

Nowell makes reference to lament psalms. These are the psalms discussed in chapters 3 and 4. We will look at them beginning next week, and will spend the remainder of our time with them, after these gatherings of introduction. These are the psalms for the disruptions of our lives, psalms that express our response to the chaos within and around us. They help us, in Nowell’s words, “cry out our pain,” and “deal with our enemies.” As we see from the readings assigned for today, the laments, too, have a place related to the other moments of life the psalms capture and articulate.

p. 64 “Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians will destroy Jerusalem...” Nowell is making reference here to what, with the Exodus from Egypt, is one of the great watershed moments in the collective story of the Jewish people. It is referred to as the Exile. In the 6th century before Jesus, the Babylonians, a great world power of the day, who lived in what is modern-day Iraq, invaded the land of Judah, and took the leaders and many others of the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon. They destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and left exiles and those who remained at home devastated, even feeling they had been abandoned by God. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel lived and prophesied during this time. The Babylonians fell eventually to the Persians, and the king of Persia, Cyrus, allowed the people to return and helped them resettle and reconstruct their Temple.

Outline of the Day:

Be prepared, as last week, to provide a 5-minute typed summary of what points made an impression on you. That would be about one single-spaced page. I invite you, in that summary, after you have made your own points and observations, to include your thoughts on these specific points:

p. 39. The first paragraph concludes with “If you capture that emotion you will understand the songs of thanksgiving” What are those emotions? What are the feelings associated with the psalms of thanksgiving? Give examples of situations in life that give rise to them. From the same page, discuss “The fragile moment of rescue is the seedbed for the song of thanksgiving.”
“Because thanksgiving is on the way from lament to praise…” and Discussing the psalms of trust “We have moved a step beyond the psalms of thanksgiving and, as a result, we aren’t quite as fragile…” Ponder life’s transitional moments. How do the psalms accompany us in those transitions? Do they have any role in helping us make them? Would one type (genre, See Nowell p. 87) of psalm ever be sufficient for us in the telling of our story, in our desire to hear the stories of others? Comment.

Each participant will have the opportunity to present this summary to the group. Please be prepared to respond to questions and comments from the group, and to address comments and questions to the summaries of others. May I ask you to provide all of us with a copy of your summary at the beginning of our gathering? As mentioned in the outline of our project, which you received earlier, I will keep these for the purposes of the research.

For the second part of our time together, we will look at Psalm 148, which Nowell discusses in chapter 9. The psalmist calls upon all manner of created beings to praise God. How do sun and moon, rain clouds and mountains, wild beasts and tame give praise? How do we praise? Is praise words or _______? Nowell speaks of the similarity between thanksgiving and praise. Might there be distinctions between the two?
Today, we begin to look at psalms of lament. Nowell addresses these psalms chapters 3 and 4, our reading for today. The imprecatory or cursing psalms belong to this category or genre. Recall from our previous reading and discussion how Nowell situates all of the psalm types (genres) as aspects of the story of life: the psalmist’s and our own. We noted from p. 46 that the psalms mark life’s transitions: “...thanksgiving is on the way from lament to praise.” Each psalm genre marks a moment in the story. One type of psalm sets the stage for the other. As in previous weeks, it is important to read the psalms to which Nowell refers in these chapters. What Nowell writes in these chapters will help inform our work for the remainder of our time together.

A couple of points from the reading:

In referring to Ps. 51 (p.24), Nowell refers to King David. David, who lived about 1,000 years before the time of Jesus, was the second anointed king of Israel. He succeeded Saul. He was succeeded by his son, Solomon. David united the southern and the northern kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and established Jerusalem as the capital. He is noted as the greatest of the kings, and has traditionally been named as author of the psalms. More recent research has recognized that couldn’t be true because, for one thing, some of the psalms speak of events, such as the Exile (remember last week’s notes), that took place long after he lived. Still, as according to ancient custom, ascribing psalm authorship to someone as prestigious as David gave these songs deep credibility. The story of David can be found in 1 and 2 Samuel. Suffice to say that while great, David was far from perfect. An adulterer, he arranged the death of his mistress, Bathsheba’s, husband. It is of this Nowell refers in setting the stage for Ps.51.

On p. 24, Nowell makes mention of psalm titles. In some places these titles are called superscriptions. As Nowell notes, these were added by ancient editors to set a context for the psalm or in some cases to provide direction as to how they were to be used in ancient Jewish liturgy. The psalter (book of psalms) we have does not use them. Refer to a Bible if you want to take a look at these texts.

On p. 32, reference is made to psalm collects. Collects are prayers, composed much later than the psalms themselves, that give a Christian interpretation to these Jewish prayers. They are used in the Roman Liturgy of the Hours. They attempt to “collect” and give voice to the community’s reflection and prayer inspired by the psalm.
You will observe psalms noted, for example, (50) 51. This acknowledges two ways of numbering the psalms connected to differences between Greek and Hebrew speaking Jews. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Nowell’s citation of psalms uses the numbers not bracketed.

Outline of the Day

As in previous weeks, please prepare a one-page outline to be shared with the group. In addition to commenting on Nowell’s words, we will attempt, as you began to do this past week, to use them as a spring-board for deeper reflection and sharing. As was discussed at the end of our last gathering, we note that the object of our time together is to reflect on our experience of the psalms. We observed that Nowell’s text uses her experience with these ancient prayers and the experience of those she knows or has encountered. Our invitation is to move beyond someone else’s experience to our own. We also discussed that “experience” refers to a holistic encounter with the psalms: with our mind, our heart, our “gut”, our story—our whole person.

Please consider these points for your summary and discussion:

Nowell discusses several categories of “enemies” in the psalms: ourselves, foes outside of us, and God. How do you respond to her categories?

Choose either Ps. 88 or Ps. 109. Read the psalm carefully. Be aware of your thoughts and feelings. Discuss these. What do you surmise to be “the story behind the story” of this psalm?

Consider these quotes from Nowell, and discuss your reaction to one or two of them. (Remember, it’s ok to disagree with what she says):  
P. 20: We have all been trained not to complain to God; it is unthinkable to shout at God in anger. This is where the laments come in. They give us the words we would never dare say ourselves. P. 22: Are you shocked? Remember, first of all, these psalms are God’s word to us. P. 31: By outwardly expressing through prayer the violence that nests in every human heart, we can rob the violence of its power...Through the lament psalms we are enabled to acknowledge, and thus let go of our very real anger and hatred P. 36: Accusations about God are an expression of faith...Even though the laments make us uneasy (or perhaps because they do) the lament is a healthy prayer.
Today, we continue to move beyond reading about the psalms to experiencing the psalms, themselves. Beginning this week, and for the remainder of our time together, we will dwell on and in Ps. 35: Contend, O Lord, with my contenders... Today, we’ll do that through the process of lectio divina. Remember, as our article will remind us, lectio divina is a way of experiencing/interacting with God’s word through which God communicates with us, and we, with God. Remember, too, Nowell’s connecting all the psalm genres (lament, thanksgiving, trust, praise) with the telling of the story: that of the psalmist, our own.

**Outline of the Day**

In preparation for the coming week,

Read and reflect on the *Lectio Divina* article.

Read Psalm 35 through at least **three** times. After you’ve read it through twice, on the third reading, note the flow or movement of the psalm, as Nowell outlines on p. 21. Note the verses that state the complaint; those that form a description of the suffering; those that pray for help (the curses or imprecations are part of this); those that motivate God to act; the psalmist’s promise or vow. As some noted in our last seminar, and as Nowell mentions on p. 21, “lamenting is not neat.” These various parts, therefore, may be scattered throughout the psalm, repeated, etc.

After the three readings, above, mindful of the steps involved in “Private Lectio Divina,” on pages 3 and 4 of the article, do lectio with Ps. 35 at least **twice** for 15 minutes each time. Do this once a day on at least two successive days.

Write a **one-to two-page** journal entry of your lectio experience with the psalm. Please address these questions in the task: *How are you feeling? How do you account for these feelings? What does it lead you to think about? Account for the thoughts. What do you find yourself resisting? Account for the resistance. What resonates with your story or what you know of the stories of others and the world that unfolds around you? Account for the resonance. Anything else? For this week, we won’t share these articles in the session. I will collect them.*

Our time together this week will involve group lectio divina with Ps. 35, as outlined on pages 4 and 5 of the article.
We continue to move more deeply into our experience of Ps. 35. Throughout our interaction with the psalms, time and time again—as Nowell does in her book—members of our group have used the word, “story,” in relation to these ancient and poetic song-prayers that are the psalms. The psalms give voice, in other words, to lives lived: their moments of anguish, of despair, of hope, of joy, of thanksgiving, of trust, of praise. Psalm 35 laments life’s anguish and pain. It began in someone’s experience, an experience into which God was invited.

**Outline of the Day**

In preparation for the coming week,

The task at hand is to reflect upon the experience out of which the psalm may have arisen. We have, of course, no way of knowing the original psalmist or the circumstances in which she/he lived. *In an exercise of creative imagination, you are invited to create a scenario out of which such words and emotions might arise. You are telling the story. Maybe it is based on your own life experience, the life of someone you know, the life of someone or some situation about which you have read in a news report or of which you became aware through some other media. It may be a combination of all of these or from some other source. Tell it as if it is happening now, and you are observing it, first-hand.*

To accomplish the task,

Please re-read Ps. 35 at least twice, and reflect upon it. Then, see A and B, below:

**A. In 1 to 1 ½ pages**, create your scenario by responding to these questions:

1. Who is the speaker? What is the person’s gender, name, age? Any other characteristics?
2. Where do they live? Include any important details about the place. Describe any significant relationships, or lack thereof.
3. In sufficient detail to make a story, describe the situation in which they find themselves. What has happened/ is happening? Who is involved? Let your words paint a vivid picture
4. What is the speaker thinking?
5. How is the speaker feeling in voicing these words? To get in touch with the feelings, consider: *What is the first feeling that comes to your mind? Now reflect further on that feeling, and dig deeper. “Read between the lines.” What are the feelings behind and beneath the feeling you first identified? Allow yourself to go more deeply into the words, revealing the speaker’s heart. What emotions in the speaker may be hidden there? Describe the emotions and feelings of the speaker in detail.*
6. Are there other details necessary to telling the story? Include them where they fit in.

**B.** Similar to last week, write a **one page** journal entry of your experience with the task.

Please address these questions in your composition: *What thoughts and feelings did you experience in the task? What’s in your “gut”? Describe your experience of digging beneath your first impression of the psalmist’s feelings, of allowing the words of the psalmist to reveal what other emotions live beneath the surface, and may go undetected? What—if anything—do these insights contribute to your understanding of Ps. 35? Anything else?* We won’t share these articles in the seminar. I will collect them.

**Our time together this week** will involve sharing and discussing the scenarios.

****Remember, your scenario will be the basis for the psalm you will be asked to compose as **next week’s task.******
(A) We continue to explore and interact with the psalms. This week, you are invited to return to the scenarios developed for last week, and to use them as the basis for composing your own psalm of lament, based on the structure of Psalm 35. In light of our recent experience of this psalm, it would be helpful to re-read in Nowell’s book, pages 20 to the end of the second full paragraph on p. 23, and p. 30 to the end of the top section of p. 37. These pages deal with lament psalms and particularly with the curses, which are an important aspect of Ps. 35 and the focus of our work during our time together. Your recent experience with the psalm may add a helpful dimension to considering what Nowell has written, maybe not so obvious when it was first read.

As a guide to your psalm composition, I’ll apply, below, Nowell’s observations on the structure of the cursing lament psalms to Ps. 35. She says about that structure or framework on which Ps. 35, and your psalm is built, “Like our lives when we are lamenting, the elements are often all mixed up. Lamenting is not neat!” (p. 21). Have another look at Ps. 35 to see what she means. Your psalm will include—in your own words—the elements that follow below:

**Cry out to God.** Use whatever names for God you wish, and ask God to hear you. In Psalm 35, we find this cry in, for example, verses 1, 3b.

**Cry out against the enemy.** There are a number of parts to this:

(a) *What is being done? By whom?* You are giving that person words to describe what is being done to her/him, and who is doing it. In Ps. 35, we find examples of cries against the enemy in verses 7, 11, 12, 15, 16, 20, 21.

(b) *Describe the distress of the person from your scenario in whose voice you are praying.* Tell God how you, as the speaker, feel in reaction to what is happening. *Speak in the first person:* include the words, “I feel ____” at least three times in the psalm—either one after another or scattered throughout. Remember, dig deeper than the first feeling that comes to heart and mind.

(c) *Express in graphic language how you want God to act in order to change the situation.* It is in this section that the cries to God, called curses, are found. In Ps. 35, note these in verses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 26.

(d) *Try to persuade God.* See verse 10.

(e) *Make promises to God.* For this, see verses 18, 28.

(f) *Ask God to remedy the situation and to heal you, who are suffering.* See verses 17, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25.
Turn to hope. See verses 27, 2

As for the length of your psalm, you decide. Mindful of your scenario, see the above components, include these various ingredients in your own way, and that will be your psalm, the voice of the person in your scenario.

You will be invited to share and discuss your psalm compositions at our next gathering.

From our discussion at the most recent seminar, recall these points to focus your attention in composing your psalm:

1. You are writing from the perspective of the person in your scenario: the man living in poverty, the girl abandoned by her father, the African American woman, the Mexican street-worker, the abused woman.

2. In the scenarios, some of you looked back to the resolution of the situation. In your psalm, you are writing in the present tense; the situation has not yet been resolved. You are right in the middle of it. That is an essential part of the lament psalm, as Nowell presents it. Were the crisis already worked out, your psalm would be one of thanksgiving. Remember, in the psalmist’s story—as in life—while lament is a step toward thanksgiving, it’s not there yet.

3. The invitation is extended to be graphic in the expression of the curses in your psalm. As someone said at the last seminar, “Let yourself go.” You are speaking, in this exercise, for the person in your psalm, giving her/him the opportunity to be heard, to speak of the effect of the suffering inflicted by someone to whom the lament refers as the “enemy.” The depth and extent of those curses will vary with each person. That’s ok.

4. This is an exercise designed to help us experience these psalms from the perspective of one who is using words to describe their situation, their feelings, and their desire for God to intervene and act. Everyone will bring their own perspective to the work. That is a valuable aspect of what we are doing together.

(B.) As in previous weeks, in 1 to 1½ pages, please record your experience of this exercise in a journal entry. How did it feel? What was your gut reaction to it? Where did it feel natural? Where did you feel resistance? What thoughts did it evoke in you? How do you account for your responses and reactions? What else would you like to say about this experience? I will collect these. They will not be shared.
In preparation for our final seminar, please prepare about a 2-page paper—or more lengthy, if you need—considering the following questions. In your consideration, reflect on your experience of the Nowell book, the psalms you have read, reflected upon and discussed, your individual and group lectio with Ps. 35, your written work, oral presentations, your psalm scenario and composition, the role of the group, your thoughts and feelings over the past 6 weeks in relation to your participation, and whatever else you see to be relevant. We will discuss your responses in our gathering.

Below are the questions for your consideration:

1. Nowell (p. 23) speaks of considering the lament psalms in relation to "our three basic relationships: ourselves, others and God." Reflecting upon these three fundamental relationships in your life, please discuss your experience of the imprecatory psalms, and your insights.

2. In your experience of our gatherings, your own reflection and your completion of the assigned tasks, please discuss--giving reasons-- what you found reassuring, what you found challenging, and why. There may be a number in each category.

3. Compare your thoughts and feelings about the imprecatory psalms at the beginning of our seminars with your experience of them now. Was there or was there not any change? Discuss. How do you account for this change or lack of change?

4. From your experience, please discuss whether you think Psalm 35 and similar psalms have a role to play in the life of the individual and of the broader Christian community. If so, what purpose (s) might they serve? How/with whom might they be used? Provide your reasons. If no purpose, give your reasons for this choice.

5. Please include anything else you want to say.
Appendix C - Psalm 35

1 O Lord, plead my cause against my foes;
   Fight those who fight me.
2 Take up your buckler and shield;
   rise to help me

3 Take up the javelin and the spear
   against those who pursue me.
   O Lord, say to my soul:
   “I am your salvation.”

4 Let those who seek my life
   be shamed and disgraced.
   Let those who plan evil against me
   be routed in confusion.

5 Let them be like chaff before the wind;
   let the angel of the Lord scatter them.
6 Let their path be slippery and dark;
   let the angel of the Lord pursue them.

7 They have hidden a net for me wantonly;
   they have dug a pit.
8 Let ruin fall upon them
   and take them by surprise.
   Let them be caught in the net they have
   hidden;
   let them fall into their pit.

9 But my soul shall be joyful in the Lord
   and rejoice in God’s salvation.
10 My whole being will say:
   “Lord, who is like you
   who rescue the weak from the strong
   and the poor from the oppressor?”

11 Lying witnesses arise and accuse me
    unjustly.
12 They repay me evil for good;
    my soul is forlorn.

13 When they were sick I went into
    mourning,
    afflicted with fasting.
    My prayer was ever on my lips,
14 as for a brother, a friend.
    I went as though mourning a mother,
    bowed down with grief.

15 Now that I am in trouble they gather,
    they gather and mock me.
    They take me by surprise and strike me
    and tear me to pieces.
16 They provoke me with mockery on
    mockery
    and gnash their teeth.

17 O Lord, how long will you look on?
    Come to my rescue!
    Save my life from these raging beasts,
    my soul from these lions.
18 I will thank you in the great assembly,
    amid the throng I will praise you.

19 Do no let my lying foes rejoice over me.
    Do not let those who hate me unjustly
    wink eyes at each other.

20 They wish no peace to the peaceful
    who live in the land.
    They make deceitful plots
21 and with mouths wide open
    their cry against me is: “Yes! We saw
    you do it!”

22 O Lord, you have seen, do not be silent,
    do not stand afar off!
23 Awake, stir to my defence,
    to my cause, O God!
Vindicate me, Lord, in your justice, do not let them rejoice.

Do not let them think: “Yes, we have won, we have brought you to an end!”

Let them be shamed and brought to disgrace who rejoice at my misfortune. Let them be covered with shame and confusion who raise themselves against me.

Let there be joy for those who love my cause. Let them say without end: “Great is the Lord who delights in the peace of this servant.”

Then my tongue shall speak of your justice, and all day long of your praise.
“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the human heart” (Hb. 4:12). This New Testament reference, coming from among the very earliest traditions of Christian reflection on the word of God—the Bible—helps us appreciate the esteem in which the first generations of the followers of Jesus held the sacred scriptures. These holy writings, the Letter to the Hebrews suggests, were seen to be a living reality, sharing in the wisdom and power of God’s own self. This ancient insight was taken up, and further advanced in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, which taught that when the scriptures are proclaimed in the Church’s liturgy, the risen Christ is made present in the assembly (SC no.7).

Much of our experience with the word of God happens in our participation in liturgical prayer. In the post-Vatican II revision of the assorted rites, readings from the various biblical books were integrated into all liturgical celebrations. The liturgy, it was understood, enacts and makes present God’s past saving acts, proclaimed in the word, as it beckons toward a future of hope.

Though many remain hesitant about engaging the scriptures, over the past 50 years, this renewed emphasis on the word of God in liturgical prayer has heightened biblical awareness and interest among the people of God. It is now expected that days of reflection and times of retreat be centred on a particular biblical book or personality. Many integrate scripture readings from the Eucharist into their preparation for Mass. In some parishes, scripture sharing is a regular aspect of homily preparation. Frequently, a biblical reading sets the stage for parish meetings. The lectionary is integral to the RCIA process.

The Bible’s influence is not new. For the first centuries, the psalms were the most common source of Christian hymnody. Such familiar church furnishings and decor as stained glass windows, stations of the cross, and crèche scenes originated as means through which the biblical story—Old Testament, as well as New—could be kept fresh in the consciousness of believers, many of whom were illiterate or had no access to the written word.

The Bible has also regained its rightful place in the prayer of individual Catholics. “Regained,” because, while to those of a certain age biblical prayer was not part of their early experience, it is a tradition from the earliest eras of Christian living. Long before the birth of popular devotions like the Rosary or novenas, the Bible—particularly the gospels and the psalms—provided nourishment for believers in monasteries, convents, and homes.

One practice of biblical prayer outside the liturgy is that known in the tradition as “lectio divina.” The term is from the Latin language, and is often translated “holy reading.” It refers to what has been described paradoxically as a “methodless method” of encountering God through God’s word contained in the Bible. It has its origins as a Christian practice in the deserts of Egypt some 1,700 years ago, where women and men sought God in quiet and isolation. They sometimes lived as hermits; in certain locales, they lived in small groups. Several times a day—primarily before dawn and in the evening—they prayed
from the word of God. Most surely, reading resources were limited, so they would come together and listen to a reading or several psalms being read. Then, as they went about whatever work they may have done to support themselves, they would ponder and reflect upon the words they had heard. This meditative pondering was likened by some of the early writers to a cow or sheep chewing the cud. The first ingestion of the word was in the gathering where it was read. Later it was regurgitated repeatedly, a few words at a time, or the same words time after time, more and more of its potential for nourishment consumed. This practice, in the days before the printing press, led to large tracts of scripture being committed to memory, and readily accessible all hours of the day or night to these God-seekers.

While these early Christians set the stage for a life-giving biblical spirituality, we know lectio divina is meant not only for them and their monastic descendants. It is the heritage of all Christians. In the Church’s most recent official teaching on the word of God, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Benedict XVI has this to say. “[There is a need] for a prayerful approach to the sacred text [the Bible] as a fundamental element in the life of every believer...” Particular attention was paid to lectio divina as the means of this.

Present-day writers remind us that lectio divina is a distinct kind of reading. It is not reading to get information, as we would read a newspaper or an article on the Internet. Its motivation is simply to spend time with God, believing that God wants to be in dialogue with us, with each of the partners in the dialogue—God and us—alternately talking and listening. Lectio divina is the initiative of the Holy Spirit, who is the deepest origin of the Scriptures through the cooperation of human authors.

As with all divine initiative, lectio divina invites our response. There’s nothing magical about it. There’s nothing about lectio divina that puts it out of our reach. It requires, above all on our part, the desire to encounter God; then, a belief that God has something to say for our well-being and through us for the benefit of the world; a Bible; a place to read, to listen, and to pray; and the time to give to it.

Lectio divina is not Bible-study. It’s not about knowing the history of biblical books or “figuring out” obscure passages. Nor is it about trying to “understand” the Bible as we usually perceive “understand.” In fact, the notion of “understanding” may intimidate us and discourage our interaction with the Bible. The understanding we seek in lectio divina is that of more deeply appreciating the relevance of God’s word for our lives and the life of our world, of recognizing the ancient stories and people we find there have something to say to our own story, and that of the church and world of which we are a part. Bible study may well complement our lectio divina; it though, is not lectio divina. Study is primarily an activity of the mind. Lectio divina engages the whole person. It has to do as much with feeling as thinking. It is intuitive more than logical. It is a dialogue engaging heart and mind, where the heart has primacy. Lectio divina inspires us to rediscover our creative imagination, our ability to be still and to listen. It is a response to the belief that God, in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, wants to be in relationship with us, to speak to us in the words of the Bible. Maria Tasto puts it this way, “Lectio divina is a way to nourish our relationship with God that can have a transformative effect on the faithful practitioner.” She continues,

“Finding time each day to ponder the meaning of the Scriptures [Remember what was said above about the word “understanding”], to listen attentively, and to allow the word of God to speak leads us to discover the deeper meaning of Scripture and opens us to an intimacy with God that knows no words. It slowly changes how we think and how
we respond to life’s challenges. It puts us in touch with the very ground of our being, where we are one with God’s Spirit within us. This transforming power of lectio divina frees us from our falsity and slowly draws us into our truth in the light of God’s word. We are shaped into the word of God we were created to be; we become not only made in God’s image but like God: ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ (Galatians 2: 20).”

Ordinarily, much of our reading is done in haste to glean information. We value speed reading, a method through which we read as much as possible in as short a time as possible. The electronic age and our penchant to place a high value on variety and entertainment discourage the meditative pondering that is lectio divina. It is, in our day, a somewhat counter-cultural practice. It’s not about quantity of text; it’s about quality time with, even in, the sacred text. This holy reading is not about needing to finish a chapter or a book to meet a deadline. It’s about leisurely being present to the word of God, and allowing that word’s presence to disclose itself to us.

We will notice, in our interaction with the word, what have been referred to, even from ancient times, as the various “senses” of the scripture. First, the literal sense—the words on the page: What happened? Who was there? What did they say or do. The literal sense tells us the story. It provides us with an entry point, a doorway. The second has been called the symbolic sense: What may be deeper meanings of what the passage tells? Of what does it remind us in our own lives, in the life of our church, our world? Where are we, who are we in what we are reading? A third sense has been referred to as the moral. How do we respond to what we read in our thoughts, words, and deeds? How can the word shape our lives in witness to the person and message of Jesus Christ? How does the word reassure us / challenge us? How do we take the word from the pages of a book and make it flesh in our own time and place?

With all of this in mind, let’s look at practicing lectio. What follows is a compilation of suggestions from various authors that I have adopted and adapted over the years, and now suggest to you.

**First, private lectio divina:**

Set aside a specific time each day, a time that best suits your own particular rhythm. Ongoing fidelity to the practice, as is the case with anything we value and seek to develop, is key.

Find a quiet and comfortable place. Relax.

Briefly call upon the Holy Spirit.

Select a biblical text. It could be one of the scripture readings for the day’s Mass. It could be a specific book of the Bible that you will make your way through, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. Many writers suggest beginning with a particular gospel or the psalms, and discourage opening the Bible at random each time. Biblical books were compiled with a specific story to tell or insight to share. Carefully selecting a book and sticking with it helps us recognize and appreciate that.

Read slowly. Remember, there’s no rush. Some suggest reading the text aloud softly, in order to engage our ears as well as our eyes, on the way to our hearts.
If a word or line or image stands out, stay with it. Ponder why it was noticeable. Does it remind you of anything or anyone or some situation? This may be a place where we sense the biblical story integrated with our own life-story. Stay with it as long as it feels helpful and natural to do so. Are we reassured by the words? Challenged? Then move on, reading and reflecting as we go, listening and speaking to God with our hearts as we feel drawn. Don’t force it. Move beyond the temptation to work at “getting something out of it.” Don’t be discouraged by distractions. Maybe they can be integrated into the reading and prayer.

When our time has concluded—maybe initially after 15 minutes or so, and as time goes on, a half-hour—quietly give thanks for the time; be mindful of one image or word or verse that stays with you, and take that along as you step back into what’s going on around you.

Now, for lectio with a group:

Sit comfortably in a circle.

Provide any necessary instructions or reminders at the beginning, thus avoiding as much as possible the need to interrupt the process with directions.

The leader/facilitator leads a brief prayer to the Holy Spirit.

One person reads the previously selected passage. Depending on the group, each person may have the text in front of them, or they may listen without following the written word.

After a period of silence—the length of which is appropriate to the group: a benchmark could be that it is long enough to be a period of silence, and not so lengthy as to be distracting—another person reads the passage aloud.

After another period of silence, each person has an opportunity to share a word or phrase or image that they particularly noticed. No further comment or elaboration is offered at this point.

Following a further silent interval, a third person reads the passage aloud.

A time of silence is followed by each person sharing why they chose the passage they did.

This may be followed by a reflection—private or shared—about what the passage may call us to think, say, or do after we leave our gathering.

The time may be concluded by a general discussion of the passage and what arose out of the sharing.

In each of these milieus, we note the emphasis on silence. Like many other realities in life, our capacity for silence grows as we experience it.
You may decide to go to one or more of these passages to get a feel for lectio divina. In this Easter Season, the resurrection stories invite a closer look. They are to be found at: Matthew 28: 1-20; Mark 16: 1-8; Luke 24: 1-53; John 20: 1- 21: 25. Psalm 23 is a favourite to many, while Psalm 118 is frequently prayed in the Easter Season. The Acts of the Apostles is another possible choice. A suggestion: Use a Bible that has been published after Vatican II. The Jerusalem Bible, The New American Bible, The New Revised Standard Version (this is the translation we use in the liturgy in Canada) are all more recently published. Some like the Good News version. While the choice is a matter of personal preference, the language of older Bibles, with their “thee’s” and “thou’s” can be distracting.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading:


Appendix E

Letter of Introduction

*God Addressed in Risky Ways: an Experience with Psalm 35*

Keith Kennific

February, 2015

Dear ___________

Thank you for considering participation in the study, entitled, *God Addressed in Risky Ways: an Experience of Psalm 35*. As you are aware from our previous conversation, this study is part of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree from Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, at the University of Toronto, toward which I am working. It is important that you are aware of the particulars of your involvement prior to being asked to provide your signed informed consent.

The study, which will take place over a period of six weeks at the Catholic Pastoral Centre on North River Rd., will be designed to provide the participants with an extended opportunity for a general exposure to the psalms, with specific attention to the psalms of imprecation, using Irene Nowell’s *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013). Participants will be asked to read the text. This and all reading materials will be provided to you free of charge.

We will hold weekly seminars of about 90 minutes each, beginning Monday, May 5, and concluding Monday, June 8. These meetings will begin at 1:30 pm. There, we will consider and discuss the various psalm genres, as presented in the assigned reading. If necessary, we will hold an additional meeting.

After their broader context has been established, we will look at the psalms of imprecation. Focusing on Psalm 35, we will spend one meeting engaging in a process of group lectio divina with the psalm. Lectio divina is a way of reading and praying with the Bible with which we will become acquainted. As a homework assignment, participants will be asked to do private lectio with Psalm 35 for a specified period of time each day for 6 days. From that experience, you will be asked to compose a scenario out of which the text of the psalm may have evolved. These scenarios will be shared with the group, and discussed at the subsequent seminar. Over the course of the period before the next weekly meeting, participants will be asked to compose their own imprecatory psalm, using Psalm 35 as a model, and out of the imagined experience of the
scenario they have developed. These psalms will be shared and discussed in the next 1 or 2 gatherings. The final seminar meeting(s) will be comprised of shared reflection on the participants’ experience of Psalm 35, the work you have done in relation to it, and your involvement with the others in the task.

These gatherings will be audio-recorded in order for me to analyse them following our time together. You will also be asked to provide me with your written work for analysis essential to the study. All recorded and written material will be locked and accessible only to myself; electronic data will be held securely through encryption; then, immediately destroyed following the successful completion of the thesis defence. Your anonymity will be assured, and confidentiality respected. You, in turn, are asked to respect the privacy of other participants by holding what is shared in the group in respectful confidence.

The study is designed to address this question: “How do a group of informed, practicing Roman Catholic adults experience the imprecatory psalms?” There is no desire to shape the responses. Be assured that your responses and observations are an essential aspect of our work together. We are not looking for any particular answer or interpretation. There is no desire to restrain the self-expression of anyone involved. Your thoughtful and candid feedback is essential to the work being undertaken.

You are free to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Up to the final seminar, you may decide to withdraw your data. After that point it will be included in the study.

At the conclusion of the thesis project of which this study is an essential part, you will be provided with the results of our work together.

If you are in need of clarification, I will be happy to provide it.

I may be contacted at 902 676-2253 or frkeith@eastlink.ca. My thesis adviser, Dr. Joseph Schner SJ, may be reached at 416 978-4039 or dmin.director@utoronto.ca. The University of Toronto Ethics Board may be contacted at 416 946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

(Rev.) Keith Kennific
Appendix F

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: God Addressed in Risky Ways: an Experience with Psalm 35

Investigator: Fr. Keith Kennific

1. I, _______________________am willing to take part in a study conducted by Fr. Keith Kennific, Doctor of Ministry candidate at the Toronto School of Theology. I understand this study is examining my experience of the psalms of imprecation. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the ways Roman Catholic Christians respond and relate to these biblical texts.

2. I am willing to participate in six weekly group gatherings of approximately 90 minutes in length. These gatherings will be facilitated by Fr. Keith Kennific, the researcher. I understand that if necessary I may be contacted again on one occasion, after the completion of the gatherings, if further clarification is needed.

3. The gatherings will focus on sharing my unique experience, thoughts and feelings regarding the psalm texts to which I will be exposed.

4. I am also willing to have any written journals or other written work read and interpreted by the researcher as part of the study.

5. I understand that I am free not to answer any questions nor discuss anything that I do not wish to disclose.

6. I understand that the data will be coded and analyzed by Fr. Keith Kennific, with the purpose of supporting the study. All the data will be discussed anonymously. Should I be directly quoted in the written thesis or an article, a pseudonym will be used and any specific identifying data will be altered to protect my identity. Moreover, any persons to whom I refer during the interview will be provided with pseudonyms should they be mentioned.

7. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty. Up to the conclusion of the final seminar, I can decide to withdraw my data. After that point, it will be included in the study.

8. I consent to the tape recording of the gatherings, with the understanding that I can decide on the disposition of my data, should I choose to withdraw, and agree to keep in confidence the information shared by other participants.

9. All tapes and written material will be kept private and secure during the study, and destroyed at the completion of the study by shredding, burning and/or erasure.

10. I know that no remuneration will be offered to respondents for participation in this study. I understand that a written summary of the research findings will be made available to me upon request, when they are complete.

I have read this statement and I consent to participate in the study.

Participant’s Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________
Appendix G

Psalms of Fear?: A Further Reflection

Fear is an experienced arousal that alerts us to the presence of perceived danger to our well-being or that of another. It has physiological and psychological manifestations that prepare us for fight or flight. It “issues a dual warning: the setting is not safe and our resources are not adequate.” While fear may be situational and salutary, it may also become habitual: leading us to view every unexpected or unfamiliar situation—external or internal—as fraught with danger, leading apprehension to become the acquired stance toward life. This consequence of habitual fear evokes in us a sense of vulnerability, of being unable to manage and contain that which we perceive as needing to be kept at bay, to be controlled and directed.

Whitehead and Whitehead point out that fear can save or destroy us. That which saves alerts us to real dangers; destructive fears “are those that prevent our responding adequately to reality.” This inadequate, and often inappropriate, response not only causes needless anxiety, but immobilizes us, preventing us from utilizing situations to promote our own maturation and the consequent enhancement of those around us. We see danger where danger does not exist, and flee—physically or emotionally—rather than engage.

If fear, whatever its source, leaves us feeling vulnerable, the bravado of anger helps make us feel impervious to the threat—often camouflaging its true foundation. Anger involves a

650 Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, Transforming our Painful Emotions: Spiritual Resources in Anger, Shame, Grief, Fear, and Loneliness (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 163.
651 Whitehead and Whitehead, 168.
desire to take action, to respond to the source of fear.\textsuperscript{652} Anger is fear’s antidote in its generation of courage, the energy of mind and body necessary to confront what holds us in the bondage and immobility of trepidation, hesitancy, even dread.

In exploring strategies to deal with our anger, Saussy encourages listening to the voice of anger, deciphering its word from the clamour of competing voices. “Every surge of anger has a message to convey...Befriend your anger. Learn to stay with it, to play with it, to leap back to its roots. There you’ll find a child in fear...”\textsuperscript{653}

In discussing her therapeutic work with couples, Gisela Schubach De Domenico writes, “When clients are encouraged to explore the actual nature of their anger and hatred, they frequently discover that their anger and rage actually masks their own deeply rooted existential fears and insecurities.”\textsuperscript{654} Emotional well-being and the healing of relationships are facilitated through the acknowledgment and experience of the full range of fear and rage. In that, the “softer parts” of the personality are “awakened,” and greater freedom can be exercised in individual pursuits and relationship.\textsuperscript{655} The fear that thwarts growth is addressed by recognizing its presence in the guise of anger.

Fear is associated with a threat, and its response of anger—both expressed and generated in the psalms’ raging curses—the inspiration for the necessary physical response of fight or flight. If fear undergirds anger, what may we unearth in relation to fear? It may go beyond a reaction toward an external enemy.

\textsuperscript{652} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{653} Saussy, 140-141.
\textsuperscript{655} Ibid., 11.
Humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow, observed an indwelling ambiguity common to all in relation to our capacity for holistic growth: in his theoretical framework, self-actualization. In spite of an innate tendency toward actualizing our potential in the concrete actions of who we are meant to be, our development is thwarted by our own hesitancy. Our defense against our own maturation, he labeled the “Jonah complex.”

Human beings, Maslow opined, fear our own greatness, evade our destiny, retreat from our best talents. While attracted to our own possibility, fear motivates our disengagement. In relation to ourselves, others, and the world around us, we feel drawn to the truth of who we are and—even if in ways hidden from us—seek it. At the same time, we are afraid to know the truth in whatever sphere it presents itself to us, because of that to which truth will call us. We are fearful of a direct confrontation with the god-like within us. In a sense, we are in awe of

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656 Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 34. He attributes the label to a friend, Professor Frank Manuel, with whom he had discussed his observations. “Jonah” is in reference to the reluctant Old Testament prophet.

657 Walter Wink speaks of an experience in his life, supportive of Maslow’s observation: “It was convenient to slough off responsibility for my life by blaming [Dad]. To love Dad would mean the wrench of finally giving up all that. And it also might mean giving up the inner dictators and their concentration camps, from which I was always trying to escape. After all, those dictators are helping me maintain that old psychic structure. They even represent to a degree my resistance to liberation...God, in short, seems to be trying, against my stubborn resistance, to make a more whole person out of me.” *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 284. Wink’s experience speaks, as well, to that of the Israelite Exodus, below. I am further reminded of a military courtroom scene in the movie, *A Few Good Men*, in which the character portrayed by Tom Cruise questions the officer played by Jack Nicholson. Cruise’s character demands, “I want the truth [about a previous decision]!” To which, Nicholson’s retorts, “The truth? You can’t handle the truth!” Directed by Rob Reiner, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1992.

658 I was recently reminded of this internal quandary by an engaging narrative an acquaintance had published in a local periodical. He recalled his many-years-ago journey towards acceptance into law school. After a series of rejections, he described his reaction to the eventual letter of invitation. “What had been a crushing fear of failure became a terrifying sense of success.” Gary Evans, “You can Always Come Home” *Red: the Island Story Book* 12 (2016): 52-54. I would go on to propose that we find what could be seen as Evans’ fear of his own potential in some of the most familiar biblical narratives. First, the paradigmatic account of the Exodus: to Jews and Christians the primordial story of the journey from bondage to release, from opportunity to realization. The narrative is anything but one of unmitigated progress. No sooner had they walked away from slavery than the Israelites, who had groaned under their bondage and cried out for deliverance (cf. Ex. 2:23), began to reassess their plight, and wonder if an Egyptian grave might be preferable to one in the wilderness, if service to an old master might be more attractive than the challenges of life without chains (cf. Ex. 14:10-12). Fish, in Egypt, free for the taking (Nm. 11:5): eventually, confronted with the work of liberty, slavery seemed a small price to pay for security, however false. When Caleb and Joshua attempted to help them see things in a more hopeful light, things turned violent: “the
ourselves. This awe is “intrinsic, justified, right, suitable, rather than some sickness or failing to be ‘cured of.’”659 Rather than fleeing the awe, our invitation is to embrace it. “This is the best path I know to the acceptance of our highest powers, and whatever elements of greatness or goodness or wisdom or talent we may have concealed or evaded.”660

When we explore the relationship between anger and fear, we may recognize that all situational fears touch an existential fear, which, Maslow theorizes, dwells within the human person. Fear gives birth to anger in perceived threats to our physical safety or that of those we hold dear, and beyond that to any reality that compromises our sense of security and well-being—including our venture into the unknown domain of the journey toward the discovery of our deepest self, the realization of our potential.

whole congregation threatened to stone them” (Nm. 14:10). So abject becomes their resistance to the Lord’s plan for the freedom for which they had ached, that neither the generation which escaped Egypt nor Moses, their leader, ever lived in the land of their desire. Mark’s account of the Transfiguration (9:2 ff.) extends our reflection. “Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here’...He did not know what to say for they were terrified.” Terrified: of what? Surely of the unexpected spectacle: Maslow, 37, makes room for such interpretation in his hypothesis. Terror in the face of such a “peak experience” is “partly a justified fear” of being torn asunder, of being lost and consumed by that which is utterly beyond us. Here too, I offer, as in the Exodus narrative, we get a glimpse of what Maslow conjectured and Evans experienced. They wanted to “build three tents” to capture the moment, so appealing was Jesus revelation of himself to them. But then, they saw more: in the illumination of Jesus’ glory, a glimpse of their own, and to what that called them; and they couldn’t get out of there fast enough. On the heels of their mountain-top revelation, Jesus further develops their understanding of the encounter by speaking to them of what awaits him—and, by extension, them, who had seen themselves in him. Their reaction: agitation, aggression, and arguing among themselves about self-made greatness, distancing themselves all the more from the cause of their fear: the fact of their capacity to live true greatness in being last and servant (cf. Mk. 9:30-35). Ambivalence to our own maturation, rooted in fear, and oft-times its ensuing frustration expressed in anger. As a parishioner once put it to me, “I want to grow up and stay a child at the same time.” Frederick W. Norris discusses the relationship of the Transfiguration of Christ to the transformation of the whole Church. See “The Transfiguration of Christ: the Transformation of the Church” in Charles A. Bobertz and David Brakke, eds., Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002): 188-198. As the transformational aspect of the transfiguration applies to the community, might also the resistance? If resistance to the action of God thwarts the maturation of the individual member toward the full stature of Christ, what will be the impact of such on the entire Body? I propose that Mk. 5:1-20, the story of the town’s reaction to Jesus’ expulsion of the demoniac’s legion is an example of communal fear of reaching out toward potential. Mt. 14:22-33, telling us of Peter’s sinking after being summoned by Jesus, is an evangelical example of individual fear in the face of the opportunity for maturation and growth, as is the Beloved Disciple’s hesitancy with entering the empty tomb in Jn. 20. On the other hand, Gn. 12: 1 ff, Mt. 1:18-25 and Lk. 1: 26-38 give evidence of courage in liminality.

659 Maslow, 36.
660 Ibid.
The angry words of the imprecatory psalms being explored and revealing the fear—at all levels—that underlies them: inviting us to rename these texts “psalms of fear.” Interestingly, when asked if that would alter how these psalms were seen, one of the participants who had made the connection between the psalmic words and fear replied that fear would be as difficult to acknowledge as anger. Sensitive pastoral efforts, employing these psalms, need to attend to that possible reluctance, and how these ancient prayers—in the company of many texts and traditions—may support us toward maturity in Christ, toward magnifying the glory of God in our becoming ever more fully alive.