

Who is this God to whom we pray?

While our Lenten theme is prayer, I want to begin with God.

Abraham Heschel says, “The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.” (Quest for God, p. 58) Prayer is an issue, and I want to get to that, but I’m convinced by Heschel’s insight, so first, God.

And since our pattern is to propose a conventional script followed by a counter script, this is what I propose:

You have heard it said (the *script*) that God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable and impassible, but I say—and I think the Bible says it too, but not in these words—I say (now the *counterscript*) that God is **pathetic**.

What do these words mean? We know the omni’s, don’t we? Omnipresent – God is everywhere. Omniscient – God understands all “science”, i.e. everything. Omnipotent – God is all powerful. And what about immutable? God is unchangeable. Impassible? God doesn’t experience pain or emotion. Or passion; God is above the fray, really quite Other than us with our human compulsivity and unpredictability.

Of course these words aren’t from the Bible, and the developed ideas themselves come from a time in Christian history when it was important to define, describe and defend God. Yet the ideas do have a basis in scriptures that portray God as exalted, eternal, reliable, and though mysterious, as present to human creation, as we hear in our Lenten confession. So then the *script* that I’ve articulated, while conventional, is not wrong, so much as simply inadequate; it doesn’t say it all, and in fact it may mislead. Which brings us to the *counterscript*.

As a counterscript, I say God is *pathetic*; perhaps that word is a little odd. I could say *empathetic*, but I don’t mean just “capable of feeling what others feel”; I mean really feeling something. I mean feeling *pathos* (pathetic—pathos): pain, grief, sorrow, maybe even anger. It’s not the dominant image of God, and yet often enough God is pictured that way, especially in the Old Testament: actually vulnerable to the complaints, demands, and stubbornness of the people He made. And isn’t that what we’re shown in the lament in today’s Gospel reading, Luke 13:34f? Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that! – that’s pathos.

So, who is this God to whom we pray?

On the one hand: (Ps.86:8-10 CEB)

My Lord! There is no one like you among the gods!

There is nothing that can compare to your works!

⁹ All the nations that you've made will come

and bow down before you, Lord;

they will glorify your name,

¹⁰ because you are awesome

and a wonder-worker.

You are God. Just you.

On the other hand: (Gen.6:6-7NRSV)

And Yahweh was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. "I am sorry that I have made them." *Is God repentant?*

(Hos.11:8-10 NIV/NRSV)

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again;

for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come in wrath." *A change of heart—and mind?*

So here are two perspectives of God from the Hebrew scriptures: God as sovereign, powerful, awesome, and God as compassionate, grieved, even repentant. And of course, this is not a full picture—as if that were possible!—but it lays the groundwork for how we pray to this God.

I'm not going to offer a script-counterscript for prayer; that's too hazardous. Even Jesus didn't do that; he merely said that prayer that is showy and made up of many empty words is simply ineffective (and its own reward), though he did commend persistence in prayer.

In many ways the OT reflects an oral culture, and in such cultures, prayer is speech. In our literate culture, we are fond of broadening the concept of prayer, to include contemplation and silence, for sure, if not all of life! There were certainly mystics and contemplatives in the OT, and we are not wrong to cultivate wider disciplines and understandings of prayer, but I think we will benefit from a renewed exposure to the underpinnings of our own prayer disciplines, which we find in the Psalms of the OT.

Prayer as speech is assumed in the Psalms, and it tends to be either speech of praise or speech of lament; perhaps we have things to learn about both. In either mode, says W. Brueggemann (my guide in these matters), Israel's prayer is

daring, outrageous, and adventuresome: “limit-language”, he calls it, that pushes to the edge of social and religious permission and acceptability. Doesn’t that sound just a little bit exaggerated? How many daring, outrageous Psalms have you read lately? Or is it that we’re not doing prayer as speech, but “prayer-as-mumbling” or “prayer-as-dozing off”?

O MY SOUL, BLESS YAHWEH! WITH ALL MY BEING BLESS GOD’S HOLY NAME! O MY SOUL, BLESS YAHWEH! DON’T FORGET A SINGLE BLESSING!

That’s Ps. 103; have you prayed it lately? How did you pray it?

Or what about Psalm 100? ON YOUR FEET NOW—APPLAUD GOD!
SHOUT FOR JOY TO YAHWEH ALL THE EARTH! All together:

One more time!

That’s called “yielding”, “surrendering”—surrendering our speech, yielding our voices, our bodies, to the praise of God. It’s daring and outrageous, not just because we’re not used to shouting in church, but because of what we’re shouting, and that we’re shouting it, not just thinking it:

O my soul, bless Yahweh; with all my being, bless God’s holy name! (ps.103)

Would it make any difference, to our identity, if we said this out loud every day? Or shouted it?

(Ps. 100) Know that Yahweh is God—God made us; we belong to God.

We are God’s people, the sheep of God’s own pasture.

Because Yahweh is good, his steadfast love lasts forever;

God’s faithfulness lasts generation after generation.

In Ps. 100, we yield ourselves to covenant language: the promises of God that are really quite outrageous in themselves.

“Limit-language”, daring, outrageous, risky. Shouting these words is not what makes it daring, but rather embracing them, or being embraced, so that they actually infect our identity and behavior. Let’s look at Psalm 27.

(Read vs. 1-6)

I’m told this was a favorite Psalm of the early Anabaptists. I imagine it was so because it offered some assurance for those who lived in dangerous times, where there assuredly were people and circumstances to be frightened of. “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? Surrounded by enemies...[yet] I will sing and praise Yahweh.” The act of praise, the practice of voiced praise, can move us beyond our fear, our anxiety, our self-sufficiency, even beyond our precious rationality to entrust ourselves to the “One who cares for us more than we care for ourselves”. (Brueggemann, PsLF, 51)

Voiced prayer in the Psalms is risky. One could lose oneself in the extravagance of praise—and there are congregations that practice this (e.g. El Shaddai, our sister congregation). But there is another extravagance, that of lament, and that involves other risks. The book of Psalms has many prayers of lament, protests, complaints, wails for vengeance, cries for help. We see a brief one in Ps. 27:7: “Lord, listen to my voice when I cry out—answer me! Don’t push your servant aside! Don’t leave me all alone!” We don’t exactly relish these, do we? We don’t recite them often in worship. There must be something risky, daring, outrageous about them. What is the risk?

Let’s try a communal one: (from Ps. 74—you repeat the lines after me:)

“God why have you abandoned us forever?
 Why does your anger smolder at the sheep of your own pasture?
 How long, God, will foes insult you?
 Why do you pull your hand back?
 Why do you hold your strong hand close to your chest?
 Don’t forget the lives of your afflicted people forever!
 God, rise up! Make your case!
 Remember how unbelieving fools insult you all day long.
 Don’t forget the voices of your enemies,
 the racket of your adversaries that never quits.”

The risk here has several faces. One is our reluctance to be self-assertive with God, to be presumptuous enough to wrangle with God, who our script tells us is omnipotent and immutable. But no, the laments of scripture tell us that in fact Yahweh is not totalitarian and unchangeable, but compassionate, committed, unguarded, present and above all, faithful.

Perhaps the bigger risk, though, is to our own pride. How ready are we, as individuals, as families, as a community, let alone as a society, to admit being at our wits end? How humiliating to concede we might be at the limits of our power and control! When/how do we acknowledge that the power of chaos and darkness is larger than we can manage? American exceptionalism and Enlightenment hubris find that very difficult to admit, and I fear something of that spirit infects the church in North America. We can’t be weak or desperate.

To be concrete, I wonder if the danger of climate change doesn’t pose for our ecosystems, our social structures, in fact our earth—a limit-situation. And does that, and the accompanying social crises, call for voiced prayers of both praise

and lament, affirmation of God's wonders and pleas for help? It's not that these prayers are only for crisis times; they are the prayers of God's people shaped over centuries, for all times and situations, to nourish the precarious communion of God and God's people. But perhaps we've neglected them, and now we need them—and the God who inspired them.

More can be said—needs to be said—about the crises we face in our times. My plea today is that we renew our perception of God, El Shaddai—God Almighty who does wonders—who is also a God of pathos who is utterly faithful and receptive to our self-abandoned praise and our plaintive or self-assertive cries for help.

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?
I will sing and praise Yahweh.
Yahweh, listen to my voice when I cry out—answer me!
But I have sure faith that I will experience the Lord's goodness
 in the land of the living!
Hope in the Lord! Be strong! Let your heart take courage!
 Hope in Yahweh! (Ps. 27)

Keith Kingsley
Fellowship of Hope
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Heschel, Quest for God, p. 58

Brueggemann, "The Psalms as Prayer", The Psalms and the Life of Faith, pp.50-51