

<i>Date Preached</i>	21-Mar-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	09-Mar-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Lent 5, Yr B

" Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise. "



"Wherever and whenever hatred or bigotry rises up and is directed at any child of God, we who follow Jesus of Nazareth and therefore stand for love, must act," Curry said. "We must stand up, speak up and show up. Today we do so with and for our Asian American and Pacific Islander brothers, sisters and siblings."

Once, long ago, in a different time of my life and in a different denomination of Christ's Church, I served on a pastor nominating committee. It still pains me to say we took four-and-half-years to complete our work (that is a story for another day ... or several), and so I had the pleasure of interviewing *a lot* of clergy. Most of those interviews have receded from memory, but I will always remember one candidate's answer to a question about a typical day for him.

He started most days, he said, sitting at the big piano in the sanctuary and playing and singing hymns, one after the other, all by himself. Some mornings he would have certain hymns in mind: words and tunes that his heart needed to hear, that his soul wanted to dwell in for a while. Other mornings—most, in fact—he would randomly open the hymnal and play whatever he'd turned to, trusting in some combination of God's graceful pointing and his unconscious need to be fed by thoughts and ideas he hadn't originated—and all toward a wider, deeper experience of his God and his faith.

What Dave had to say about sampling the hymnal could, I think, readily be said about the Book of Psalms, the primary hymnal of the People of God. There are psalms for just about every posture you might be in on a given day: psalms of praise and psalms of petition; psalms of joy and psalms of despondency; psalms of quiet and psalms of action. Sometimes we seek out a particular psalm, maybe the twenty-third or the hundredth, because we know we need them to speak in and to us that day. Sometimes, however, it's good just to open up the psalter at random and allow it to speak its wisdom and experience to us, in full assurance that *any* time we spend in the company of the word of God nourishes and upbuilds.\*

And *then* there is Psalm 119. One-nineteen is one-of-kind in a couple of ways. For one thing, it is huge: one-hundred-seventy-six verses; the longest single chapter in the entire Bible. For another, for all its length, it basically expresses one thought over and over again. Its only subject, verse-after-verse-after-verse, is the commandments of the Lord. As we heard in today's tiny snippet, the "promises" and "statutes" and "judgments" and "decrees" and "words" of the Lord are mentioned in almost every single verse: how the psalmist seeks to study and know and learn and live and understand and treasure them; how he seeks to live out *all* of the requirements and

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\* This is, to a degree, the pattern of the Daily Office psalter. The daily lectionary is not random, but it does mix-and-match ... and, over the course of weeks, months and years, steeps us in the fullness and richness of the entire psalter.

prohibitions of God's law—and in ancient Israel, there were thousands of them.† To my ear, when I began dwelling in the psalms on a daily basis, the psalmist sounded almost priggish in proclaiming his devotion to this holy pursuit.

But over the years, I experienced a gradual revelation. Chewing on pieces of Psalm 119 time and time again, I realized the psalmist is not singing about becoming an expert or do-gooder or even a conscientious Jew. The "statutes" and "commandments" he sings of may be verbally expressed as laws—*thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s—but these are merely the *means* to a greater, more fundamental, more live-giving and life-changing experience of God in the psalmist's life. By immersing himself in God's word ... by continually applying himself to God's presence *in* his pursuit of the law, the psalmist develops and nurtures a *relationship* with a God he can't see or touch or converse with.

As Christians, our 'means' to God is not the law, but Jesus. Through His incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension, He has sealed and perfected our relationship with God and, much like statutes and commandments did for the ancient Israelites, *also* taught us how to be *of-God*. So, I wondered, what if, each time the author of Psalm 119 wrote "commandment" or "statute," I substituted "Jesus" or "Your Son"?

"With my whole heart I seek you;  
let me not stray from **Jesus**.  
I treasure **Your Son** in my heart;  
that I may not sin against **Him**.

...  
I will meditate on **Jesus**  
and give attention to **His** ways."

I kept experimenting and playing with this, each time a portion of Psalm 119 was appointed in daily worship, week after week, month after month, and you know what? It worked! By following the psalmist's paradigm but using the teachings of Jesus—both word and deed—as my means, I, too, could apply myself to the psalmist's holy and spiritual quest: being in never-ending, life-permeating continuously growing love with God, through God's Son Jesus Christ.

Contrary to initial appearances, this psalmist's call is neither to excellence of effort or mastery of material ... but to transformation and renewal; to a refreshing of our spirit, a deepening of our hearts and a widening of our charity ... by tuning our whole lives to That Which is our Beginning and our End. The call of Psalm 119—and, by extension, of *all* scripture—is to be brought into a closeness with Christ such that we cannot help but see Him in every person; discern Him in every decision; and live Him in every moment.

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In today's collect, we first admit to God that we are incapable of ordering our "unruly wills" and sinful "affections." Such is our frail but stubborn human condition that, with the psalmist, we must commit ourselves one-hundred-seventy-six times in a row to centering our existence in our relationship with Christ. Admitting our consistent failure in this quest is the call of the Lent we're in the midst of.

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† Both those recorded in the Torah but also the hundreds and hundreds more that were developed, over the centuries, by Judaism's scholars and commentators.

But what truly arrests me in this collect what we *seek from* God: "to love what you command and desire what you promise." By dwelling in God more and more—through Holy Scripture and worship and service and charity—we anchor our lives in Jesus' teachings and example, and eventually, we come to crave nothing more—for, indeed, there nothing more the world could possibly provide—than the all He has already given us. And recognizing the joy in this quest is the call of the Easter we stand on the verge of, thanks be to God.



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