

We are using the psalms as markers for our journey through Lent and today we are guided by Psalm 95.

As you listen, there’s such a strong resemblance to so many of the others in the psalm family: singing to the Lord, come into his presence with thanksgiving, make a joyful noise, worship and bow down, we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.

We can be forgiven if we claim the “stop me if you’ve heard this before” justification for not going all the way through this psalm.

And some readings for devotions or prayers do this – they end with verse 7 – and leave verses 8 through 11 out in the cold of biblical never-read.

Some scholars believe these were two separate psalms that were fused with the phrase between verse 7 and verse 8 that says, “O that today you would listen to his voice!”

So let us listen to the whole of Psalm 95 and pray we listen for God’s voice in these words.

(Read Psalm 95)

If someone did choose to join these two fragments of psalms, why?

One is so happy, filled with the joy of worship, and one seems to be so wrathful?

Perhaps the first seven verses were especially beloved of one of the psalmists. And maybe he wanted to sing it at a worship service; and maybe he was a Presbyterian psalmist and knew that the joy of worship should include some sort of confession and repentance.

So he needed to add something stern to make it fit. And so he did.

But why not marry the last three verses to some other cranky psalm — certainly there was no shortage of them. What on earth do verses 1 – 7 and 8 – 11 have in common?

Those last verses are so different from the joyful hymn of praise that comprises the rest of the psalm.

For one thing, they are in the first person — suddenly, it is God who is speaking! And not applicable of anything that verses 1 - 7 were about, either.

These last verses include a little history lesson when God speaks about those forty years in the wilderness.

That’s our passage from Numbers. God was wanting to install the people of Israel in the Promised Land – makes me think Moses was a Presbyterian – he formed a committee.

And in good Presbyterian fashion, they came back with a split report.

The majority report was to the point: “We can’t take the land...we can’t go in there! We saw the people there...they’re giants; we felt like grasshoppers next to them!”

The minority report: “Let’s go, let’s go possess the land right now! God has given it us!”

The majority won. They didn’t go. The people of Israel had surely snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

In software installation terms, when it came time to click ‘finish and restart; they clicked ‘cancel’.

Instead of being installed in the Promised Land as children of God, God took them back into the wilderness for 40 years, for that generation to pass away before they were brought back to the Promised Land.

And that leads to the story of Meribah and Massah: *“Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day of at Massah in the wilderness.”*

Meribah and Massah were places where the people of Israel argued with God about what he had told them to do.

All I can think of is that both parts of this psalm are about trust, in a way — trusting in God, those first seven verses of being in the presence of God, of who God is, and what it means for how we live, and then those last three verses about angering God by not trusting.

That’s the force of God’s words in this psalm, *“For forty years I loathed that generation...in my anger I swore they shall not enter my rest...”*

At Meribah and Massah, just as it had been when they twelve scouts returned with the report on the Promised Land, the people of Israel had angered God by not trusting God’s promises for their future.

The marker of Psalm 95 directs us to a choice about our future: We must decide whether to trust God to be trustworthy.

The entire book of the psalms is introduced with that choice. Psalm 1 all about the happiness that comes from trusting God, living for God, following God’s ways, and living to fulfill the purposes of God.

Or we can choose the futility, the instability, and cursed outcomes that result from trusting something else.

And the psalms guarantee that whatever else we choose to trust and build our lives around will never, never, never match God’s purposes for our lives.

The great theologian Jürgen Moltmann said it this way, “Whenever we base our hope on trust in the divine mystery, we feel deep down in our hearts: there is someone who is waiting for you, who is hoping for you, who believes in

you... God is our last hope because we are God’s first love.”

We’re in the midst of March Madness. And I am reminded of a story of a basketball player: Picture a 7-foot tall player who loves to shoot 15-20 foot jump shots, and when he does play near the basket, he always brings the ball down to his waist before going up for a shot.

The frustrating thing about this player (if he’s on your team) is that he wastes his natural advantage of being tall. He ought to be playing near the goal, down low as they say.

Other players on his team who are my size can shoot 15-20 foot jump shots and with his height, depend on him to get the rebounds.

And when he brings the ball down to his waist, he becomes, in effect, no taller than the 6-foot guard who can strip the ball from his hands.

The phrase for this kind of player is that ‘he is a big man playing small.’

But isn’t that the truth for you and me – we ‘play small’ when we play away from what God believes about us; we play away from our strengths when we don’t live as the person God created us to be; when we don’t listen to his voice!

This psalm challenges us to answer some fundamental questions that lie at the heart of life: Are we trusting God or not? Are we living for God or not?

The children of Israel were playing small, not living up to God’s promise for their life.

Standing on the banks of their tomorrow, their faith gave way to fears and they wandered in the wilderness until that generation died out.

I like the way someone put it: “They died on the horns of their hesitation.”

The challenge today is not to know with complete certainty what lies ahead; the heart of living turns on whether you and I trust God.

Yes, we all have to be wondering about the choices we have to make as we look out on a world that makes less and less sense to us.

The issue is not what kind of job we have, but what kind of living are we doing?

The issue is not who we are impressing, but who are we living to impress most?

The issue is not what kind of investments we own, but what have we invested in that will make life more pleasing to God?

Living on God's terms, trusting God's ways, and dedicating ourselves to fulfilling God's purposes in the world is why we are here. But it is also what so many people find hard to accept.

Remember that wonderful song from "The Man of La Mancha":

*To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go
To right the unrightable wrong*

*This is my quest
To follow that star*

*To fight for the right
Without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell
For a heavenly cause*

*And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star.*

We are tempted, constantly and in various ways, to live on our own terms, define our own ways, and dedicate ourselves to purposes that are self-serving and self-righteous – unable and unwilling to claim tomorrow as the children of God.

Living for God means to trust God. No matter who we are, sooner or later we decide whether to live on God's terms, trust God's ways, and dedicate ourselves to fulfilling God's purposes or not.

The Christian faith is both that simple and that complicated,

Trusting God determines how we live, how we treat the poor, how we treat people who cannot protect themselves, how we treat those who mistreat us, how we face trouble, sickness, discouragement, success, failure, triumphs and tragedies

It determines who we truly are now, and how we stand with God always.

There's a scene in the play *Green Pastures* when the character Noah surrenders to God's promise and plan for his life.

Noah says, "Lord, I ain't much, but I'm all I got!"

God takes us as we are, where we are, and gives us our purpose, our power, our path for living as the person God created us to be.

Whenever anything or anyone else directs how we live, the way we live, and the purposes for which we are living, we are back at Meribah and Massah.

So as we stand on the banks of our own tomorrow: Listen to God's voice and trust God's word, and the world will be better for this.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.