

Pause

Spending Lent with the Psalms

ELIZABETH F. CALDWELL

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“Elizabeth Caldwell’s small, soulful volume is like a prism through which the gentle and passionate light of God reflects through selected psalms. Each chapter invites readers to pause and linger with the ancient words, through a variety of translations and paraphrases, in order that the words can help us uncover layer after layer of personal meaning. Like a relationship that ripens with time, Caldwell’s pastoral heart and invitational style gives us a trustworthy companion for our Lenten journeys. Pausing in this way is indeed, as the author states, countercultural. It is also a gift. This book is one I will return to year after year.”

—**Eugenia Anne Gamble**, pastor and author of *Words of Love: A Healing Journey with the Ten Commandments*

“While Elizabeth Caldwell has done all the research and provides guidance for individuals as well as lesson plans for groups, her invitation is open and gentle, compelling, not burdensome. She invites us to join the long line of pilgrims who have turned to the Psalms to find their way into God’s presence. She is a trustworthy leader for a Lenten pilgrimage that will change your life.”

—**Laura Mendenhall**, President Emerita,
Columbia Theological Seminary

“In a hurried, often reactive society, ‘pausing is truly countercultural,’ writes Elizabeth Caldwell. Rich with scriptural voices, personal stories, wise insights, spiritual practices, and teaching tools, *Pause: Spending Lent with the Psalms* is a holy handbook that will help you take a breath, take a break, and find rest for your soul.”

—**Rachel M. Srubas**, pastor, spiritual director, and author
of *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*

“From time to time, the Holy Spirit helps me see something in a new way. In this beautiful, thoughtful book, Caldwell helps me see the season of Lent and the Psalms anew. With wisdom and grace, she invites us to open our eyes and tend to our hearts and pause so that God may do what God does best—draw us near and make us more faithful. I am deeply grateful.”

—**Rodger Y. Nishioka**, Senior Pastor, Village Presbyterian
Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

“In a world of unwelcomed interruptions that leave us stressed out and exhausted, this book invites us to make intentional interruptions in our routine—weekly or daily pauses—as a path to find relaxation and refreshment. May these pauses lead us to more faithful living during Lent and beyond, and may they help us to renew our commitment to build a world where everyone is allowed to pause.”

—**Magdalena I. García**, pastor in Chicago and freelance writer

“Caldwell invites readers into the riches of biblical poetry through close reading of the Psalms and furthers that invitation to include stepping out of the ever-increasing pace of our modern world to intentionally pause during the season of Lent. Including spiritual practices both ancient and modern, Caldwell introduces readers to practical activities that can help Christians grow closer to the Divine. *Pause* is an immersion in divine poetry, while also being an excellent resource for personal devotions or small group studies during the Lenten season.”

—**Kara Eidson**, pastor and author of *Stay Awhile: Advent Lessons in Divine Hospitality* and *A Time to Grow: Lenten Lessons from the Garden to the Table*

“Renew your faith journey. Listen to the Psalms. Elizabeth Caldwell guides us to drink deep of the wisdom of the Psalms. She invites us to attend to the text, probe its meaning in light of our lives, and connect with God’s call. Honoring with integrity the meanings of the Psalms, she draws us into their power to transform us as we move through the season of Lent.”

—**Jack L. Seymour**, Professor Emeritus of Religious Education, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

*With thanks to dear friends who listened, read,
and helped me bring these words to life.
For my siblings, Bill, Andy, and Cathy, and their families,
who surround me with the music of their lives,
their faith, and their abiding love.*

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Introduction

Consider these words:

running to the next thing

to-do list

pause

interruption

wait for it

slow down

keep going

stop

Which of these define the pace of your daily life, either by describing your current reality or expressing what you most need?

Lent is the season of the church year that follows Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. While Advent invites us to prepare, to wait to receive again the gift of God taking human form in the birth of Jesus, the season of Lent offers a different invitation: one of pausing and observing, reflecting on our lives as Christians. As we engage with the Gospel texts in worship, which tell the stories of Jesus' journey with his followers—stories of teaching and healing, parables and miracles, invitation and challenge—we are invited to enter into this path of discipleship by embarking on the Lenten journey for forty days.

Perhaps you grew up experiencing this season as one of repentance, fasting, and preparing for Holy Week. You may be familiar with the practice of giving up something for Lent, fasting from something you really like. This practice of fasting helps some people to connect with Jesus' life of sacrificial love and his invitation to follow him and do as he does, choosing to live in response to his teaching by practicing surrender.

In addition to the practice of fasting as giving up, there is also a Lenten practice of *taking up*. This can work well for individuals or families with children who are looking for a way to engage thoughtfully and practically with the Lenten season by finding something new and creative to do for forty days—like being especially aware of taking care of the environment or adopting a weekly practice of sharing bread or cookies with a church member or neighbor they don't see very much. One practice I take up during each week of Lent is to have a phone call or video chat with a friend or family member whom I don't see very often. After receiving ashes, I begin making a list of these people on Ash Wednesday. Including these friends and family in my weekly prayers also provides a centering practice for me during Lent. Rather than subtracting something, this practice of addition can be deeply meaningful during Lent—finding ways to turn your attention to a new form of practical service or toward a creative outlet. You may find combining the two practices to be helpful.

Maybe you are well versed in both of these Lenten practices. Or maybe you have little experience with this season of the church year and wonder what it's all about.

The intention of taking up something new usually helps me the most to move through Lent thoughtfully. But sometimes it can become another overly ambitious to-do list. I have a stack of multi-colored paper I use for my at-home task list. I'm always adding more things that need to get done during the week. When I was working full-time, the list of things to do usually had to wait for a weekend. "Always busy" would be the label for me—always planning and thinking ahead, always focused on the next thing to get done on my list.

One Lent I decided I wanted to be really focused with a spiritual discipline that I would follow beginning with Ash Wednesday,

moving through Lent and Holy Week. I selected two practices, the first involving the online devotional D365 (D365.org), which has original music as background for focusing on a biblical text, reflecting, and praying. It is still one of my favorites. To this I added a practice of following the daily lectionary during Lent. A reading from the Old Testament, another from the New Testament, and a psalm are provided for each day. And so I began. After the third day, I gave up. I realized I was just trying to get through the three lectionary readings. It felt like a race, and I wasn't getting to the finish line—as with so many other things on my to-do list. It was too much, and it just wasn't working for me. So I paused and decided to start over by listening to the online devotional and reading only the psalm for each day. It worked! And it made me think that maybe one can *take* up a new practice in Lent by *giving* up—by doing less.

That's what this book aims to help you do on your Lenten journey. Are you a busy parent who can barely find any time for your spiritual life? Are you retired and now have more time, leaving you with choices about how you will use the hours in each day, or are you busier than ever with social events and volunteering? Are you someone who is seeking a way to move through Lent faithfully, whether or not you've tried this before?

The culture in which we are embedded doesn't invite or encourage us to pause, to lay aside our perpetual activity. It values adaptability to constant change. It requires immediate and constant attention. It expects rapid response. Our connection to devices has, of course, intensified these demands. Meals and even conversations are interrupted with the dinging of a text message that must be read immediately—now, not later! It seems that we are always rushing to the next thing. Pausing is truly countercultural.

The season of Lent offers a limited time frame for taking up a spiritual practice that can help you to focus more deeply on your life of faith, the convictions and the questions that you sense are emerging, by slowing down and being present. We know from research that brains can respond to the many demands for their attention for only so long before a break is required, a space of refreshment. Just as Jesus needed to get away at times to pray, so, too, do his followers, especially in a world requiring our attention in so many different

directions. Think of Lent as a refreshing pause in your life to nourish your soul.

So what is your intention for Lent this year? Do you feel drawn to taking something up by doing less? While many resources for Lent lead readers through stories about Jesus from the Gospels, this book is different. It invites you to pause and engage with the Psalms, either individually or with a small group in your church or community, just as countless worshipers and people of faith have done before us—ancient Israelites on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or in the temple, monks in monasteries, and Christian churchgoers of every denomination over the centuries. We will be drawing on that rich meditative tradition to mark these forty days with a simple practice of reading and reflecting with just one psalm each week or holy day, beginning with Ash Wednesday and continuing through the five weeks of Lent and the days of Holy Week, which include Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. The psalms that you will read and learn about have been selected from those that are read in the Revised Common Lectionary (Years A, B, and C) and heard in worship by many Christian congregations, so you may also hear them read in worship services.

As you read the psalm of the week or of the day, you'll begin to see how an ancient poem/hymn can connect with your own life and circumstances. Interpretive background work will help you attend to the form, meanings, and translations of the psalm, as well as what it reveals about the psalmist and the psalmist's beliefs about God. One thing to note about these psalms you will be reading is that many of them are ascribed to David. Scholars do not think David is their actual author, though at times they do speak to circumstances in the narrative of his life. One way to think about this collection of hymns is that David is the sponsor, "the royal figure who authorized worship and its use of psalms in Jerusalem."¹ It may be helpful for you to imagine these words being written by someone just like yourself who is experiencing both the challenges of life and the hope in God's abiding presence.

A few selected verses will then help you focus on a "theme word" to connect with the psalm more deeply. Finally, you will be invited to pause with a simple spiritual practice that you can take with you into

the week as you explore new ways to nurture your life of faith during the Lenten season.

This invitation to pause with the Psalms begins with Ash Wednesday and focuses on Psalm 51 and the theme “A Clean Heart.” The rest of the chapters pair psalms with the following themes: “Paths,” “Faces,” “Blessing,” “Tables,” “Waiting,” “Thanksgiving,” “Listening,” “Being Alone or Abandoned,” and “Hands.” Each psalm and each theme invite you to engage with your head and your heart. This study invites you to step into a psalm—to use your brain to hear it in new ways, to encounter new scholarship, different translations, and paraphrases, but also to find space for renewal, refreshment, and prayer. Each chapter closes by inviting you to take up a spiritual practice such as a breath prayer, walking or moving along a path or labyrinth, or reviewing your day using a prayer called the Examen.

May this Lenten journey be a welcome interruption in the rhythms of your daily life. May you find the space and the time for just a few minutes each day to let God’s Spirit awaken and renew your spirit.

Reflection for Ash Wednesday

Psalm 51: A Clean Heart

When I lived in Chicago, I loved to go downtown for a mid-day Ash Wednesday service at my church, Fourth Presbyterian. For a brief moment during the service, I would pause to take in all the crosses on foreheads around me—some sharply defined, some just a smudge, some slightly hidden by hair, some clearly visible. When they received their ashes, these cross-bearers may have heard the words “From dust you came and to dust you will return” or my favorite rendition, which comes from my friend Rev. Abby Mohaupt: “From topsoil we come, to topsoil we return, and always we belong to God.”

As I walked out of the church, I saw the faces of people who had just left their own Ash Wednesday services and were headed back to work or home or other places and were wearing a sign of their faith. I joined the cross-marked pilgrims walking the sidewalks on Michigan Avenue, wanting to ask them the questions I wrestled with: What does this mean for you, this chalky black symbol you are wearing? How will the next forty days make a difference in your life of faith?

Attend to Psalm 51

The season of Lent in the Christian calendar begins with Ash Wednesday. Psalm 51 is often included in services on this day. As you read the psalm, pay attention to particular words, to the requests of the

psalmist, and consider how this psalm connects you with the Lenten season as it prepares you spiritually to move with Jesus toward the events of Holy Week and Easter.

Psalm 51 (Common English Bible [CEB])

Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon

For the music leader. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him just after he had been with Bathsheba.

- ¹Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!
 Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great
 compassion!
- ²Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
 purify me from my sin!
- ³Because I know my wrongdoings,
 my sin is always right in front of me.
- ⁴I've sinned against you—you alone.
 I've committed evil in your sight.
That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,
 completely correct when you issue your judgment.
- ⁵Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
 from the moment my mother conceived me.
- ⁶And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;
 you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.
- ⁷Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
 wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Let me hear joy and celebration again;
 let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.
- ⁹Hide your face from my sins;
 wipe away all my guilty deeds!
- ¹⁰Create a clean heart for me, God;
 put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
- ¹¹Please don't throw me out of your presence;
 please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

- ¹²Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.
- ¹³Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,
and sinners will come back to you.
- ¹⁴Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,
so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness.
- ¹⁵Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.
- ¹⁶You don't want sacrifices.
If I gave an entirely burned offering,
you wouldn't be pleased.
- ¹⁷A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.
- ¹⁸Do good things for Zion by your favor.
Rebuild Jerusalem's walls.
- ¹⁹Then you will again want sacrifices of righteousness—
entirely burned offerings and complete offerings.
Then bulls will again be sacrificed on your altar.

The season of Lent invites us to look closely at our lives, our words, and our actions. Psalm 51 is read on Ash Wednesday as we prepare to undertake this examination for the next several weeks because it reveals the writer's deeply personal struggle with faithful living in response to God's mercy, compassion, and faithful love. This psalm has been described by biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann as a psalm of disorientation, one that describes a life that is in disorder and the desire of the writer to return to a new life with God. It is identified in the Bible as written by David. Biblical scholars do not think David directly wrote any of the psalms. Rather, they believe that as the book was being formed, editors assigned psalms to David to fit particular times in his life. Psalm 51 is a good example of that. Attributed to David in its title, this psalm invites the reader to peer into David's anguished soul and confident faith, even as it reveals the kind of self-examination and affirmation of faith that can also be our practice during Lent. To emphasize this personal connection and

journey, I will sometimes refer to David as the writer of a psalm that has been attributed to him.

At the center of the psalm, the writer makes his request to God for “a clean heart.” The dark mark of an Ash Wednesday cross stands in sharp contrast to the imagery of a heart that is clean and open to God’s love, God’s mercy, and God’s compassion. When we receive the ashes, we are reminded of our humanness, the ways we mess up, the things we do that grieve God’s heart, and our dependence on God’s loving mercy. And then right in front of us in this psalm we find the opposite—a clean heart.

One way to connect with why the editors of the book of Psalms assigned this one to David is to remember the history of David’s life. He had been on a path that was not leading to good outcomes (a bit of an understatement!). After seeing Bathsheba at a distance, claiming her for his own, and impregnating her, David sent her husband Uriah to the front lines of battle, assuring his death and clearing the way for David to marry Bathsheba without being found out. When God’s prophet Nathan confronted him about his actions, David experienced deep distress and a crisis of conscience. This psalm provides us with a glimpse into the writer’s soul as we read these words of confession of his sin and his affirmation of God’s presence. Psalm 51 is one of seven psalms attributed to David that are described as penitential because of the way he expresses remorse for his sins.

As you read it, notice what the writer is saying, and consider how it connects with your life of faith. In verses 1–5, we hear a confession of sin and a request for God’s mercy. The author understands his sin to be the things he has done that are wrong and that have caused his profound guilt, even to the extent of identifying his actions as being evil in the sight of God. Within this confession, the author also provides a glimpse of God, who will forgive his sin, who will “have mercy.”

Verses 6–14 comprise the middle of the psalm, where the author makes his request of God for restoration. Notice the words he uses to describe what he knows to be true. He wants to be clean (“purify me,” “wash me”). He wants to know joy and happiness again. He wants forgiveness (“hide your face,” “wipe away”). Rather than feeling separated from God and God’s spirit because of his sin, the writer wants to return to a time when he knew God’s presence was with him.

Verse 10 forms the centerpiece of his request to God. The psalmist doesn't just want forgiveness. He doesn't just want God to turn away from his sins. This person wants to start over, moving on from the place of sorrow and distress in which he has been living. The only thing that will make that possible is for God to give him a clean heart. This clean heart the author desires is one that will be filled with God's "new, faithful spirit."

Throughout this book, we will be exploring different translations and paraphrases of selected verses from each of our psalms. You may have a favorite translation or a beloved Bible. Or maybe you don't know where to begin to make a choice about which translation to read. It's not unlike going to the grocery store to buy cereal and being overwhelmed by so many choices. Different translations offer us the chance to see how different biblical scholars interpret a text as they read it in the original language—in this case, Hebrew. Paraphrases are different in that the author doesn't rely on the original language but rather works to make the text understandable in a contemporary culture. Both help us to engage in seeing similarities and differences in the text and discovering how they speak to us. Pause for a few minutes with three translations and two paraphrases of verse 10:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 and put a new and right spirit within me.
 —*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*
 (NRSVue)

Create a clean heart for me, God;
 put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
 —CEB

Create for me a pure heart, Holy One;
 renew in me a spirit of purposeful direction.
 —Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete Psalms:
 The Book of Prayer Songs in a New Translation*

I need a new heart and a fresh surge of courage.
 —*The Manhattan Psalter: The Lectio Divina
 of Sister Juanita Colon* (paraphrase)

God, make a fresh start in me,
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.

—Eugene Peterson, *The Message*
(MSG) (paraphrase)

The first three translations from the Hebrew describe the author's petition to God as asking for a right or faithful spirit, or a renewal in him of a "spirit of purposeful direction." If we think about this psalm in relation to David's life, it makes us wonder about the recent changes he experienced and how his sinful actions were right in front of him, at the heart of his confession, stirring in him the desire for something very different. He must have remembered a time in his life when God's spirit was alive and well in him. It is that which he wants to be renewed.

The paraphrases of Psalm 51:10 provide additional perspectives. Here we see two interpreters describing the psalmist's request for a "fresh surge of courage" and a new beginning like "a Genesis week." Both describe David's desire for a chance to renew his relationship with God, one that would require living in fresh ways so that his spirit would embody the creative energy of God's spirit of mercy, compassion, and faithful love.

In verse 11, David asks for God's presence, God's spirit, to be with him. In addition to desiring his own spirit to be more faithful to God, he wants God's spirit to be present—to be near, accessible, alive in him.

This psalm concludes in verses 15–17 with a promise to praise God and a reaffirmation of what the author believes God desires. Verse 15 may be familiar to you, as it is often used as a response in worship: "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise." This psalm begins with a confession of sin, moves to a petition for forgiveness and a chance to begin again, and concludes with a promise of praise to God. These last verses reveal a much different spirit within the writer.

Confident in God's faithful love, mercy, and compassion, the writer is now able to praise God and proclaim with assurance the kind of spirit that God wants. It is described as "a broken spirit." It is interesting to consider what the writer means here. "Broken" often has negative connotations, but one possible interpretation is that this is describing a spirit that is broken open, ready to receive. Perhaps a

broken spirit is also one that is not perfectly formed, that is still growing, ready to attend to the kind of spirit God embodies. Maybe it is a spirit that is a bit rough around the edges. Maybe, knowing that it is imperfect, it is one that waits.

In reading this psalm, it's easy to hear the psalmist's singular voice of penitence and petition to God. But it's important to remember that the psalms were an expression of a worshiping community. The hearers of this psalm in worship in the temple would have known that the confession and offering of praise to God require a response, both individual and communal. And we are left to wonder what kind of communal responses the worshiping communities of Israel might have offered.

Hearing this psalm at the beginning of Lent is an invitation for each of us to consider our responses in gratitude for God's faithful presence. What words and actions would give evidence of God's indwelling spirit in your heart?

Connect with a Clean Heart

Receiving a cross on my forehead on Ash Wednesday is still a practice that helps me center my attention on beginning my journey through Lent. I wear the smudged cross on my forehead all day until I look in the mirror at night. Slowly I wash it off. And I look and think. What paths will I take this Lenten season? What intentions do I have for moving into this season with my whole heart, however smudged it is? Is there a spiritual practice I'd like to begin? Is there something to take up and continue for these five weeks, something that speaks to my heart? How can I make space for God's breath, God's spirit to fill my heart?

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Psalm 51:10—"shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life"—provides a way for us to hear this ancient psalm in new ways. Imagine the beginnings of this good earth as told by the author of the creation story in Genesis 1:1–24a. God's breath, God's spirit, God's wind blew, and the world came alive, and it was all good.

I hear again the words that marked me this day: "From topsoil we come, to topsoil we return, and always we belong to God." This

blessing uses the translation “topsoil” from Genesis 2:7 in the CEB, rather than that of “dust.” It is a reminder that God created humans not from dry dust but from the richest, darkest, most fertile soil. Only the best for God’s creation! And in this blessing is also the promise that in our entire life span—the living we do between our beginning and our last breath—always and ever we belong to God.

Recalling all those smudged faces I saw walking around, I wonder now about the difference those dark marks of soil made in individual lives. And I wonder, too, about the difference they made in the congregations where those persons received the ashes. And then how did those marks of ash move those communities of faith into actions of justice, mercy, and kindness in the world?

Pause with Your Heart Each Day

I was sharing lunch with a friend who is Muslim. While we were eating, her phone dinged with what I thought was a message. She told me she kept reminders of prayer times on her phone so that she would remember to stop and pray. After I asked if she wanted to attend to her prayer, she said she would pray after our meal together. I realized then how much I didn’t know about her prayer tradition. I learned from her that Muslims pray five times a day: sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night. These prayers are called *salat*, and they can be said alone or with others. The intention of this practice of prayer over the course of a day is to help the faithful remember their connection with God.

What helps you remember your connection with God? Over the course of a day, do you ever pause with a simple prayer of praise or thanksgiving or confession or petition? I think sometimes Christians don’t know how to pray, or they think prayers have to sound like the ones they hear in worship. Or perhaps many wonder about the efficacy of prayer—does it make a difference?

For me, prayer is a way of connecting my heart with God. It’s an opening, a window to wonder, a pause within ordinary time to let the holy find room. Two simple practices of prayer during this season of Lent will help you remember and maybe discover again ways that you are connected with God’s spirit.

A heart prayer is a simple way of connecting your spirit with God's life in you. Place your hand on your heart. Feel its beating. Notice the rhythm. Reflect on the words of this psalm and the images that are evoked for you as you read it. Consider the places in the psalm where you connect with the psalmist's words. This writer knows God to be merciful, loving, wise. Think about the ways you know God, the ways that you experience God's presence in your life. Pause as you notice both your breath and the beating of your heart.

A breath prayer is another simple spiritual practice that can be used with this psalm. This simple prayer form is one that invites you to say a prayer that can be repeated in one breath. There are two verses in this psalm that lend themselves to this kind of prayer: "Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!" (v. 10) and "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise" (v. 15).

Try a breath prayer by breathing in while saying silently, "Create a clean heart for me, God." Then breathe out while saying, "Put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me." Or do the same with "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise."

Find a time and place today and each day in the beginning of Lent to pause. Perhaps it's before a meal, or on a walk, or as you wake with your water, tea, or coffee, or before you go to bed. Or just maybe you want to find more than one time a day! Let this breath prayer be on your lips. And when a day seems busy or when you notice a moment of God's loving-kindness, stop and simply put your hand on your heart and breathe. Open your heart to God's spirit dwelling within you. And remember that always you belong to God.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the psalmist describe God's character in the opening verses?
2. What is the psalmist saying about himself? What is he asking God to be or do?
3. What confession is on your heart this Lenten season?
4. What would a clean heart look like for you?

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