

Pastors, Chaplains and Congregational Leaders Workshop MCEC

NEW NORMAL – FACING OUR GRIEF AND LIVING WITH OUR ANXIETY

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Presentation 1 of 2

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Outline

- Emotions: What We Instinctively Know
- Prejudice and Challenges
- Theological Insights
- A Concluding Look at the Psalms

Instinctively, we know emotions help us navigate life. There are things that we love, situations that anger us, moments that move us, events [not this one 😊] that bore us, and a host of other elements mixed with emotion that affect us, giving us meaning and character.

And yet, there are old prejudices with respect to emotions that persist.

warning: scary picture in the next slide 😊

EMOTIONS: WHAT WE INSTINCTIVELY KNOW



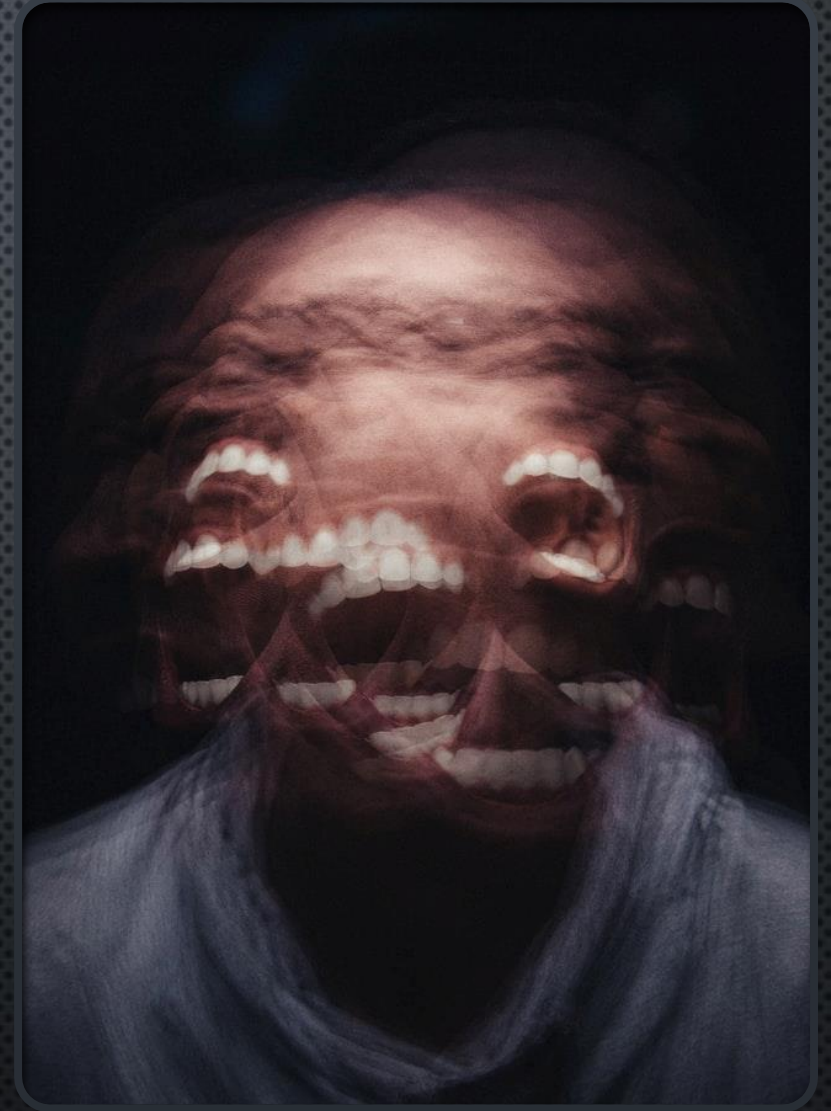
EMOTIONS: WHERE INSTINCTS MEET OLD PREJUDICES

Prejudice 1

Emotions are not
rational and are
better left out

Prejudice 2

Emotions are
disruptive of
order



Moving beyond the
“good vs. bad”
paradigm.



In other words,
emotions are not, by
default, good or bad.

Also, moving beyond
“emotions are just
feelings” idea.



In other words,
emotions have
integrity.



WILL MORE READING
HELP US TO OVERCOME
PREJUDICES ABOUT
EMOTIONS?

MAYBE, MAYBE NOT...

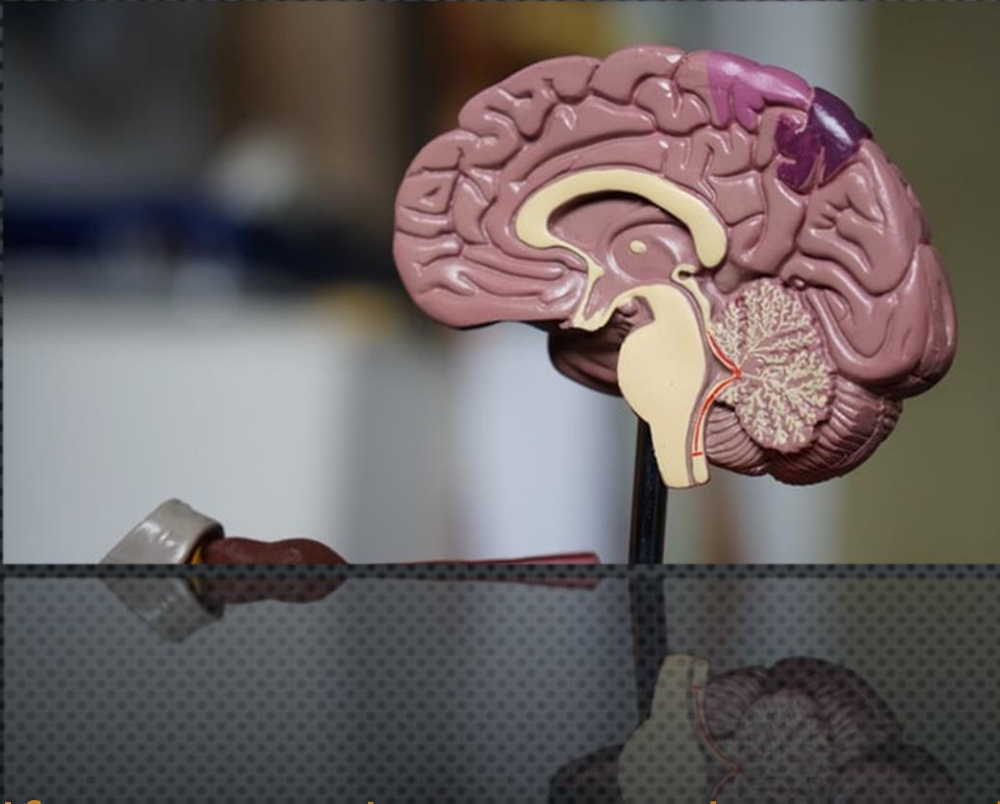
If only more reading
solved the world's
problems, right? 😊

*Okay, get ready to respond to
a question...*

Question (let's take 1 or 2 responses)

What's the problem with this *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of emotion?

An emotion is “a brief subjective, behavioral, and physiological response that occurs rapidly when a person is confronted with a situation of great personal significance.”



Other Challenges

Unhelpful Cartesian
Dualism
(Mind vs. Body)

If we are to move beyond “I think therefore I am,”
can turning to Bible and theology help?

Surprise, surprise...yes!



Before I give it away, here's a
clue from a Carolina Wren,
singing a song...



“Bless the Lord, O my **soul**, and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Psalm 103:1).

“Soul” is popularly understood (with its Greek philosophical connotation) as **an entity that exists independently of the body**.



“Bless the Lord, O my **soul**.”

What’s interesting is the Hebrew word that is translated as “soul”—**nephesh**.

nephesh is best translated as **throat**, denoting a **corporeality** and **materiality** that is vital to **who we are** as human persons.

The Hebrew Bible resists Cartesian dualism. We get this sense in one of the most important theological instructions that the Jews call Shema:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your *nefesh*, and with all your might” (Deut 6:5).

The word *nefesh* occurs over 700 times in the Bible.

A person stands on a beach at sunset, arms outstretched, facing the ocean. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and blue, with clouds. The water reflects the colors of the sky. The person is silhouetted against the bright sunset.

IF
we are to love God with all
of our heart, *nefesh*, and
strength,
THEN...

...

we are to bring our whole
selves, including our
emotions, to God and to
each other.



EMOTIONS AND THE BIBLE

(things get really interesting!)

In the Old Testament, “emotions” are not simply “what people feel” in this or that time. Emotions include wide-ranging actions.

In short, when dealing with emotions in the Bible, we are dealing with a wide range of emotions and a wide range of actions—all intertwined.

Let's look at two concrete examples, but first an overview of how emotions are actions...

- Organs such as belly and lips described as experiencing shaking (Habakkuk 3:16)
- my loins are filled with anguish (Isaiah 21:3)
- Heart and bowels melting due to fear (Joshua 7:5; Psalm 22:15)
- Losing control of the bladder or bowels as a result of intense fear (Job 18:11)
- “pangs seize me like the pangs of a woman giving birth” (Isaiah 21:3; 13:8).

Pharaoh's Daughter and Moses: Exodus 2:1-10

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, **she hid him three months**. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. **His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him**. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He **was crying, and she took pity on him**. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. **Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages."** So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. **She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."**



Solomon, Simeon, 1840-1905. Mother of Moses, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57539>



Jonathan & David and Saul: 1 Samuel 20:33-34

But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death. Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him.

An Emotional God?

It's not just persons who are emotional. God is consistently portrayed in emotional terms. A good example is...

Exodus 34:6-7: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”



Almost done with this first session, but not before looking at a thing or two from the Psalms...

Expressing God's Closeness and Distance in Anxious Times (either-or vs. both-and)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”

Psalm 22:1

“The LORD is near to the broken hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit”

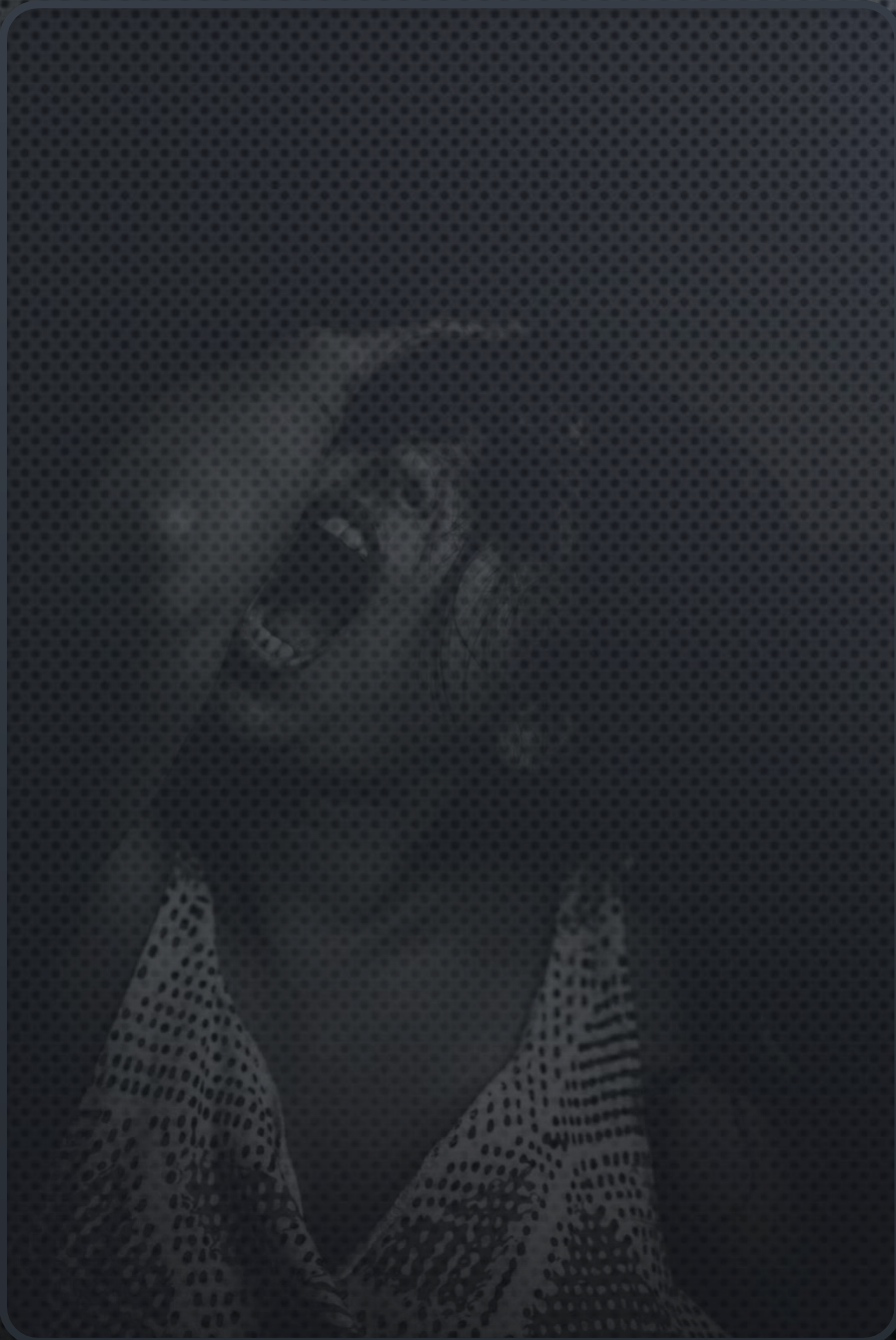
Psalm 34:18

FEELINGS LIKE RAGE ARE ALSO EXPRESSED IN THE CONTEXT OF A GATHERED COMMUNITY

Community (Holding Space) Care

An example from **Psalms 137**, in the context of anger against those responsible for destruction and exile.

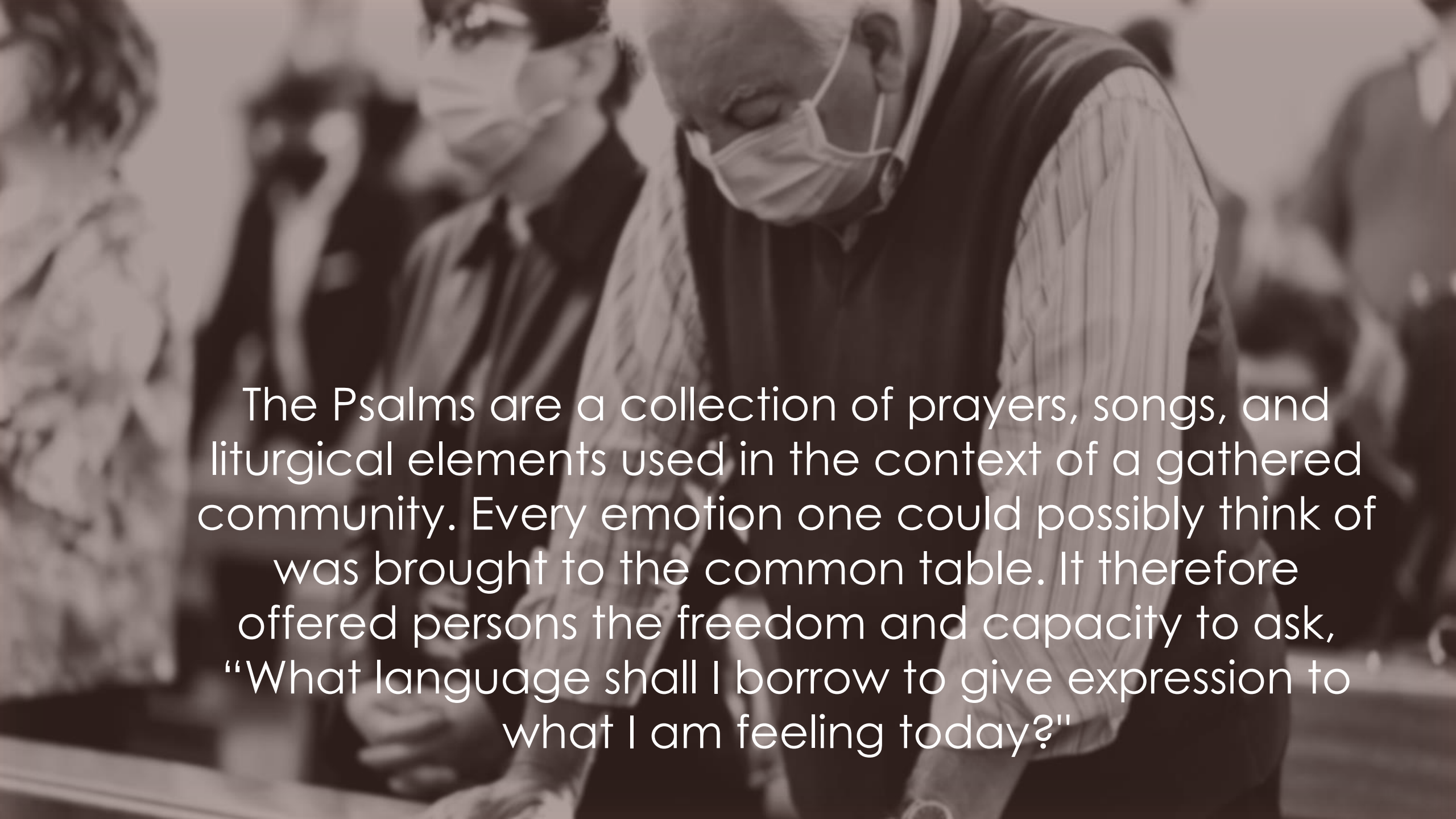
“How they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”



A close-up, artistic photograph of a person's eye. The eye is looking slightly downwards and to the right. The eyelashes are dark and long. The skin around the eye is fair. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record?”

Psalm 56:8

A sepia-toned photograph of a group of people, likely in a church or community setting. In the foreground, an older man with white hair, wearing a light-colored face mask and a dark vest over a light-colored shirt, is looking down at a table. Behind him, another person wearing a face mask and glasses is also looking down. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in the same setting. The overall mood is solemn and focused.

The Psalms are a collection of prayers, songs, and liturgical elements used in the context of a gathered community. Every emotion one could possibly think of was brought to the common table. It therefore offered persons the freedom and capacity to ask, "What language shall I borrow to give expression to what I am feeling today?"

THOUGHTS,
COMMENTS,
QUESTIONS?



Bergmann, Meredith, 1955-. Statue of Phillis Wheatley, The Boston Women's Memorial, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=53991>

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The World Health Organization reports that the number of persons who have died due to the pandemic is now 5,570,163.

That's more than five-and-a-half-million.



Untimely Deaths, Unjust Deaths

Pandemic related death and loss is heart-stopping.

Adding to all this loss, the last couple of years have really brought to the centre other kinds of deaths.

*I'll pause for 20 seconds at each of the next two slides.
I'll invite us to emotionally register these losses and
then invite us into a brief moment of silence.*

*Feel encouraged to recall a name, a place, or a
situation in a mood of prayer.*



The Children Who Could Not Come Back Home



A faint, stylized flower graphic is centered in the background. It has a dark, textured center and several layers of light-colored petals. The flower is semi-transparent, allowing the text to be seen through it.

A MOMENT OF SILENCE TO REMEMBER
THE DEAD



Notice, in this representation of Jesus, the wounded hands continue to remain scarred even in the post-resurrection body of Jesus. We'll return to this after our break, when I'll have a prompt for small group discussion.

In the Biblical witness, Jesus wounds continue to remain after the resurrection. This physical memory of loss engenders an accompanying theological register that we could engage as pastors, chaplains, and congregational leaders.

Death and loss cannot be theologized

In scripture, we find a theological opposition to death. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, and other major characters of the Torah did not believe in life after death. The “life” they knew was life before death. The “death” they knew was final.

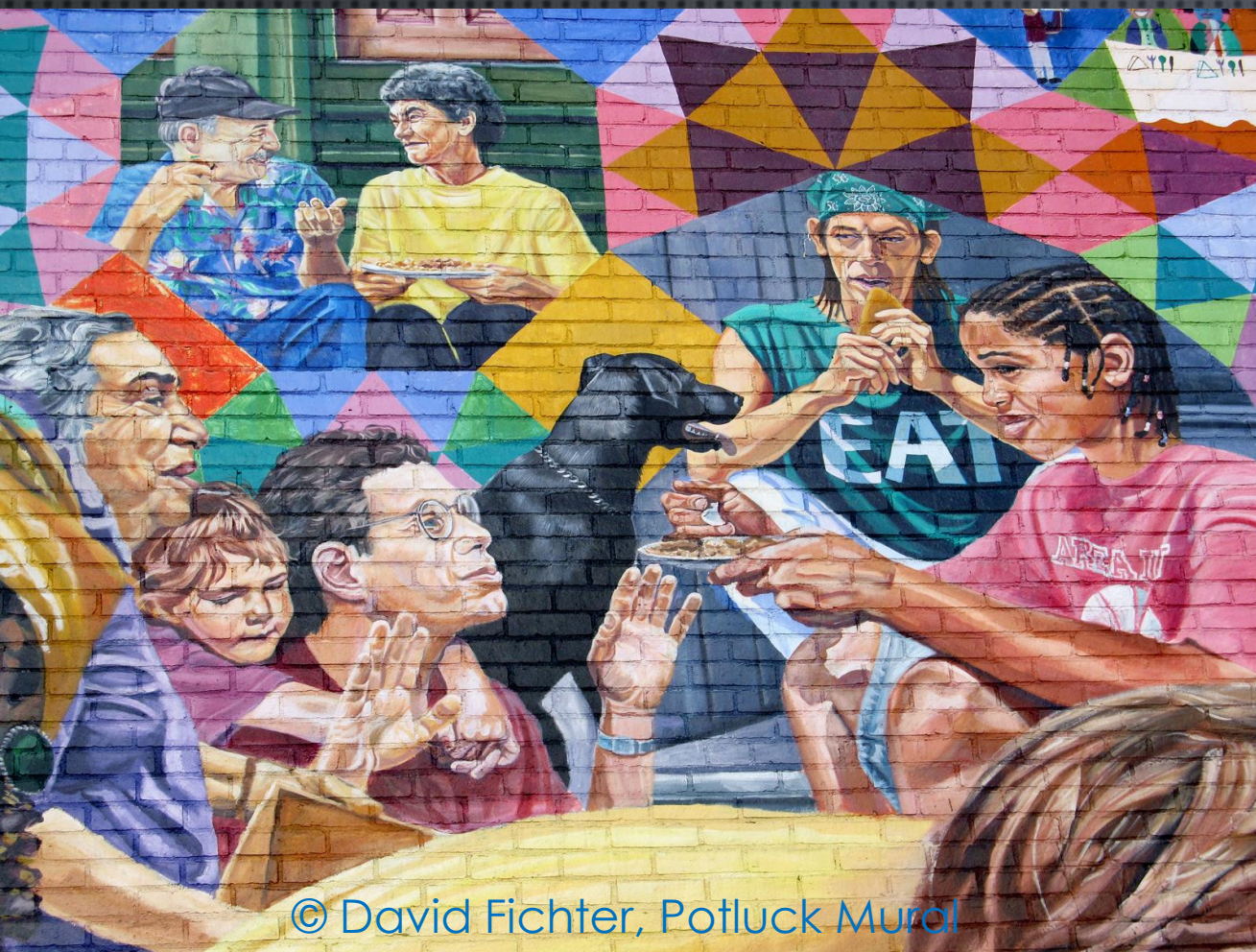
It was only later in the context of extreme injustice and murderous tyranny of powerful empires that a belief in an afterlife emerged.

An example in the next slide...

A theological opposition to death may be found in the lectionary reading in Psalm 30. In Psalm 30:9, the Psalmist asks God, "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?"

What one sees here is the Psalmist's challenge and plea to God to do something when there is still time in this life, on this side of death.

We can, in turn, offer this plea to each other as well, to form bonds of community and solidarity with those who suffer loss.



© David Fichter, Potluck Mural

Imagine a world in which we
stop at every news of death.
When we come together as
communities of faith to re-
envision and reorder our
lives.

This is our opportunity.

A Community Constantly Re-Ordered By Loss

In the Torah, the people of Israel are exhorted to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and that remembrance has a political value in and for the present.

In Leviticus 19:34, for instance, the people are exhorted with the message, “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Similarly, Isaiah seems to privilege that memory tradition: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Some Questions

The pandemic ignited by COVID-19 has jolted the world. Our daily rhythms have been thrown out-of-sync and we have been forced to become observers of the cultures we have created and/or inhabit. What are our observations, then?

Human persons are certainly bonded by a shared creatureliness that makes us dependent on each other. How might such mutual bodily dependence aid in forging bonds of solidarity during this pandemic and beyond?

Okay, trigger warning...

The next slide is on the lighter slide. Some of you may not find the slide amusing. Bear with me.

“Nevertheless, (s)he persisted”... 😊

Oviraptor – A Case Study (thanks to my daughter ☺)

Egg hunter

Oviraptor means "egg hunter." This small dinosaur was given its name because its bones were found among eggs. At first, people thought that the dinosaur must have been stealing them.

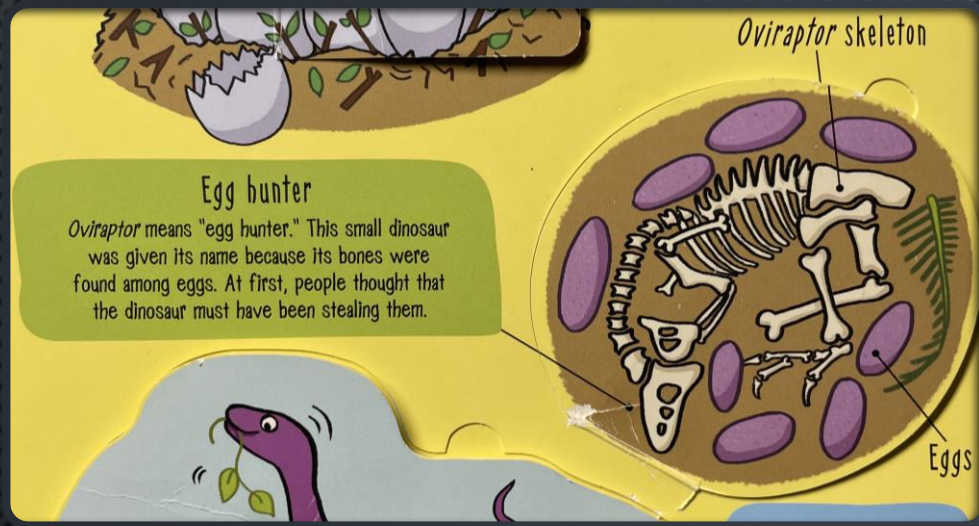
Oviraptor skeleton



Eggs



Oviraptor – A Case Study



It was discovered that the oviraptor was actually protecting its eggs, and died doing so.

Long before humans came on to the scene, we see that caring for others is part of the DNA of living breathing beings.

In our emotional registers, for now, let us register the ancient and longstanding affect of care for others, especially the vulnerable.

I am speaking to an enlightened audience. So, I'll only briefly note that from the earliest times humans appeared on earth, there is emotionally moving archaeological evidence that communities cared for those with physical and mental vulnerabilities.

Source: Andrew Curry, "Ancient Bones Offer Clues To How Long Ago Humans Cared For The Vulnerable," <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/06/17/878896381/ancient-bones-offer-clues-to-how-long-ago-humans-cared-for-the-vulnerable>



Crises such as this pandemic have a way of revealing the deep fractures of our societies. This might be, for those with open hearts, be a moment of reckoning.

This realization, instead of freezing us in states of guilt, is to move us towards creating, sustaining, and furthering habits and structures that lift up and privilege those who are most vulnerable.

What Can We Do? Attending to Wounds and Anxiety

Remember the story of Elijah? Elijah challenges Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 19. Ahab decides to kill Elijah. Elijah runs. We may take the figure of Elijah as a placeholder for those who are anxious and looking for positive change in the world.

Divine figures encounter Elijah in his desperation and provide food and encouragement. When Elijah is tired, afraid, and ready to give up, an angel appears and says, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you” (19:5, 7). “I have had enough” (19:4).

Divine help comes through the form of a whisper that says, “Get up and eat.” That’s one clue for us.



SMALL AND LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION



What we Christians believe about Christ's wounds evidently has implications for our disposition towards the world.

In other words, what we say about Christ's wounds affects how we deal with the wounds of the world.

So, what do you say?