

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, September 2, 2007
9:30 a.m.

“Psalmbling”

For those of you who are dying to know, a “sniglet” is a word that should be in the dictionary, but *isn't*, a made-up word to describe a thing or concept that doesn't have a name but really should. While the term itself was invented by HBO comedian Rich Hall twenty years ago, these rhematic ditties have enjoyed great popularity over the years.

Want some examples? You won't find these in Webster's Dictionary, but you'll resonate to their meaning!

- Execuglide: The act of using your wheeled office chair to move from one place to another. (Hall 1985a: 31)
- Furnidents: The indentations left in a carpet after moving heavy furniture (Hall 1983)
- Glackett: The ball inside an aerosol can that clacks like crazy when you shake it. (Hall 1984: 38)
- Toastaphobia: The fear of sticking a fork in a toaster even when it is unplugged. (Hall 1985a: 83)

You see how it works? So what about *Biblical* sniglets, words or phrases that describe theological-type things? I searched but couldn't find any, so I made some up some of my own—I've listed them on your insert.

BIBLE SNIGLETS (Compliments of Pastor Cindy)

1. Chrittle – The mud and spit mixture that Christ used to heal the blind. Haven't you ever wondered what that was?
 2. Caiaphobia – A fear of powerful religious leaders (like Caiaphas)
 3. Apoca-let-iquette – A code of good manners for the End of Time
 4. Judalocity – The speed at which a person can be turned toward sin (as in Judas)
 5. Lazarist – Someone who is Born Again
 6. Caveheart – A nickname for the Prophet Elijah
 7. Oceanoptimist – A person who thinks he or she can walk on water.
 8. Goatocracy – A government ruled by the unrighteous, as in the goats cast to Jesus' left. (I'll restrain myself.)
 9. Knee Sighs – Heartfelt prayers uttered from a kneeling position.
- And my personal favorite:

10. Psalmbling – Seeking comfort from a random reading of the Psalms.

It's the last sniglet I want to talk with about this morning—"psalmbling." It's a great word, don't you think? How many of us in moments of trial or consternation do just this—set the Bible on our laps, flip open the Psalms, and whisper as our fingers turn one papery-thin page after another, "Speak to me, Lord!"

Psalmbling is not urgent like a "Bible Dip," that form of divination in which the Holy Book is cast open and with eyes closed an index finger is jabbed verse-ward to discern God's will. Psalmbling is a gentler art; as its name would suggest, it is a spiritual ramble, a holy excursion through the most cherished literature on earth.

The Book of Psalms, in Hebrew called the *Tehillim*, is a collection of collections, a compilation of 150 songs, sung during worship from the time of King Solomon to the present day. The text is divided into five sections with a Psalm of Praise or "doxology" at the end of each one. Though lots of Psalms are associated in their headings with King David, many were actually composed by temple musicians and poets over the three great periods in Israelite history—the reign of David, the Babylonian exile, and the period after the Exiles returned. Their antiquity is breathtaking—when you rest your spirit in these sacred works, remember, some of them are over three thousand years old!

There is no obvious rhyme or reason to the organization of the Psalms though scholars certainly have their theories! What is important to know is that there are five kinds of psalms—prayers for help, songs of thanksgiving, hymns of praise, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Embedded within these categories are devotional themes that reflect every human emotion, from anger to anxiety to disappointment to discouragement to grief to gladness and everything in between.

Many Psalms can seem daunting, inscrutable really. The secret to reading a Psalm, however, is to understand the nature of Hebrew poetry. The Psalms do not rhyme, and they do not employ the intense metaphors of modern poetry. Instead, they rely on something called "parallelism" to express ideas. Parallelism is merely a repetition or furthering of an idea in new form. Take Psalm 95, for example:

**Come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us give a joyous shout to the rock of our salvation!**

“Sing” in line one is parallel with “joyous shout,” in line two, and “Lord,” is parallel with “rock of our salvation.”

Not so hard, really.

The Jewish poets expanded this technique in larger and more complex ways. The point is this: if we understand parallelism as a poetic tool, we won't be tempted to search for profound meaning in each individual phrase. Instead, in the words of one scholar, “we [can] let the parallels roll over us like ocean waves, each powerful in its own way; each washing over us the grace of God, but each fundamentally the same.”

So how exactly how does one go “a psalmbing?” Let me suggest four ways:

- 1. Test drive whatever you are reading. Do you feel an innate connection with the emotions of the Psalmist? Do you find yourself saying, “Yeah, I can relate.” If the answer is no, by all means move on! After all, not everyone feels everything at the same time. If the answer is yes, sit with that connection, draw comfort from knowing that others across time have walked in your shoes.**
- 2. Try saying the psalm as if it were your own prayer. Does it help you make a direct connection with God? Is the psalmist literally “putting words into your mouth?” This can be especially helpful when the psalm expresses something we would *like* to express, like gratitude and praise. A lot of days, I just don't feel all that thankful to God. When I make a Psalm my own, however, I recognize that this is exactly what I wanted to pray!**
- 3. Recognize the difficult psalms for what they are, honest expressions of human rage and vengefulness. A seminary professor of mine called these “texts of terror,” and they can, indeed, stop us in our tracks. Think of them another way. When Psalm 137 wishes Babylon destroyed and its babies “smashed against the rocks,” imagine what kind of terrible situation in your life would evoke that kind of anger. Maybe you've already been there. As one author writes, “If you're interested in merely**

becoming religious, avoid the Psalms. If you are interested in becoming more deeply human, . . . more vitally connected to God, praying the Psalms will help.

4. Bask in each Psalm you encounter. Don't try to work on the text; let the text work on *you*. God moves through these magnificent words, they are shot through with the Divine. So let the poetry wash over you, suggesting thoughts and feelings you weren't even aware you had. Keep the process simple. Keep it calm. And if it's one of those days when "psalmbling" doesn't work for you, when there are just too many distractions for concentration or comfort, set your Bible down full in the knowledge that *every* excursion with God, no matter how small, is a holy one.

(Choose random psalms . . .) It just works.

Amen.