

# Which Lens: Gratitude or Lament?

## *The Psalms of October*

By MARY KAY WHITACRE

Imagine checking our news feed one morning and finding it had nothing tragic to report. How would news agencies fill their space? If the news did not involve suffering, would we consider it worth our time to keep reading or listening?

We have been conditioned to expect more stories of violence than of goodness, and to assume the worst about each other. Likewise, there are more psalms of lament in the psalter than any other type. Is that because there are more reasons to complain than to be grateful? Or is it the lens through which we are choosing to filter life's events? The Book of Psalms has much to teach us about seeing with eyes of confident and hopeful gratitude, even in our darkest moments.

**October 1 | Psalm 25** Even as we dare to remind God in this psalm of the enduring covenant promise to love us compassionately, faithfully and unconditionally, we struggle to believe that God's love can really redeem the most hopeless situation. Can fragile marriages, broken by infidelity, be healed? Can embattled political forces, enflamed by derogatory rhetoric, be united? Can peace be negotiated after years of gruesome and terrorizing war? If we remember God's mercy, we can dare to view these situations through the lens of hope. This psalm of lament assures us that it is never too late to ask God for forgiveness, which is given to us the moment we return to God. However, because we remember God's mercy, we are also challenged to offer forgiveness just as freely to others.

**October 8 | Psalm 80** Since the vine symbolizes God's people, this psalm can be read as a communal lament teaching us how to pray during national disaster. Even as fear and injustice seem to be winning, we are urged to view such unfortunate circumstances through lens of love. Once again, we presumptuously retell the



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story of God's care for us throughout all of human history in order to stress God's responsibility to care for us today. In the midst of terrible distress, we cling to a God, who has never let us down. Embraced in God's loving care, we are, in turn, called back to the faithful love we promised to God.

**October 15 | Psalm 23** The only difference between this psalm of confidence and a psalm of lament is that it emphasizes how God can and will protect us. It reflects the assurance of one who has known real danger, but has also experienced the security of God's love. It can be witnessed in the lives of wise grandparent figures who encountered many personal challenges: were married during the Great Depression; sent sons off to fight in World War II; wrestled with job loss and financial insecurity; buried children and spouses. Today these people are facing the daily battle of aging bodies. Those who have learned how to age gracefully, reflect an inner peace built on a long history of walking with God through many storms. They can see the future through the lens of confident trust.

**October 22 | Psalm 96** In the awe and wonder of this psalm, we, as a community, express our gratitude

that God is in charge; and we publicly proclaim that God is the only power on which we can ultimately depend. It is time to do a soul check to make sure our loyalty is to God. Are we serving God's justice, which brings true peace, or are we distracted by human power which tyrannizes? Do we let our boss bully us into a work schedule that threatens our health and family? Are we letting messages of fear convince us to take unchristian political stances? Is shock reality TV and news numbing us to the ways evil is infiltrating our culture? Through the lens of praise, we radically declare that God is the ultimate power; and our prayer begs this divine force to defeat the reign of chaos in our world.

**October 29 | Psalm 18** Praying this psalm, we put on the lens of thanksgiving. Facing the fragility of life, we acknowledge our dependence on God for everything; and we thankfully embrace a God who fills our weakness with divine fortitude. Empowered by the strength of that divine love, we gratefully use our power to care for each other, especially the most vulnerable.

Suffering is an unavoidable reality, but we can choose the lens through which we filter it. We can live in the hope of God's healing forgiveness or harbor grudges and resentment. We can be embraced by God's love, or build protective walls. We can confidently walk with God through life's storms, or we can retreat into bitterness and anxiety. We can serve God's justice or contribute to the world's chaos. We can be empowered by God's strength to care for each other, or face the loneliness of self-reliance. Which lens will we choose — gratitude or lament?

Mary Kay Whitacre earned a DMin from Seattle University, has 40 years of pastoral ministry experience in the Catholic Church, and is a spiritual director. She is currently a campus minister at Avila University, Kansas City, Mo. and is on the staff of the Souljourners Spiritual Direction Formation Program, Atchison, Kan.