

EPIPHANY III, YEAR A

22 January 2023

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

What is your favourite song? For some of us the answer comes quickly. For others, there are just too many good ones to choose from. Whatever came to your mind when I asked that question, I'll bet that it's a piece of music that you feel connected to.

Songs are kind of incredible. I bring this up today because I want to spend some time with Psalm 27. The Psalms are the songs of our Scripture. In many ways the qualities of the music that accompanies our day-to-day lives can also be said of the Psalms that we recite together Sunday after Sunday:

Songs are embedded in our memory.

Have you ever caught yourself singing along to a song on the radio that you didn't even realize that you knew the words to? There is almost a passive quality to how we digest and retain words set to music. Similarly, we have a remarkable ability to remember lyrics to songs that we haven't listened to in ages. I'm endlessly amazed by the capacity of my brain to recall words to songs that were popular in my adolescent years. If a pop song from the mid-90s makes it into rotation, I could probably sing along to the entire thing, word for word, more easily than telling you what I ate for breakfast.

Songs articulate that which we cannot.

There may be songs that you feel a deep connection to because they resonate with your emotions or experience. Though the words are written by someone else, the song becomes personal, as if it were our own, because it so accurately describes a feeling or longing that we have. In difficult times, some find music healing for this reason: songs can help us to articulate and process our lived experiences. In seasons of life where we are at a loss for words because we are so overwhelmed by love, joy, sadness, grief; a song can give voice to that part of us that is silenced.

Songs become part of our story.

Are there moments in your life that were accompanied by music, and now when you hear that song, you are transported back to that time? Maybe it's the song that was the first dance at your wedding. Or you may be thinking of a 'song of summer' that you listened to on road trips with the windows rolled down and music blaring. Perhaps you thought the funeral of a loved one and the hymns that spoke to you through your grief. Or maybe you're thinking of a song that your child liked to listen to over, and over, and over, and over again; when you hear it now, you can vividly remember them at that age.

Each Advent, I secretly hope that the Music Director will choose *Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending* to sing during one of the four weeks. I have always liked that hymn. When our oldest son William was born in mid-November, the poor boy was very colicky. It was difficult to take him to church in those early months because he would cry, a lot, and loudly. Advent started when he was just a couple of weeks old and in my feeling overwhelmed about being a new parent and caring for a crying baby, I really fixated on feeling sorry for myself that I would likely not get to hear *Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending* that year.

One Sunday morning, when I when my husband (also a priest) was out officiating a service and I was at home with William, who was of course fussy, I decided to sing the hymn at home, for myself, more loudly than William was crying. Miraculously, he stopped crying. As long as I was singing, he was soothed. I can still feel my sense of relief that after weeks of not knowing how to help him, we had discovered what would calm him down. Whenever I hear the hymn now, I live in the memory of walking around the house, rocking my baby; and incidentally I still sing it quite loudly!

Just like the music that accompanies the story of our lives, as I've just shared with you, the Psalms function in the same way. They are the poetry of our narrative. The Psalms are embedded in our memory. Think of the words of Scripture that you have stored up in your heart, that you cling to when you need words of truth or comfort:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...;

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; (Psalm 23)

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; (Psalm 42)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19)

More than a song, these words are embedded in us and are recalled not by circumstance or coincidence, like hearing music on the radio; rather, these words are recalled by the Holy Spirit when God needs them to be on our hearts and minds.

Again, like a song, the psalms articulate that which we cannot. We've all at times in our lives experienced longing, either briefly or in a sustained way. It would be safe to assume as we gather here in community, there are those in our midst who feel a lack at present, and are robbed of peace as a result. Maybe you feel this way today.

Often when we feel the absence of peace and determine to turn to God in prayer, we come before him with both the problem and solution in one. But are we presenting God with our true need? Have we articulated our lack accurately, or do we only manage to tell God what we *think* that we need?

These are a few examples of God answering prayers of perceived needs with that which is *truly* enough:

A friend of mine was worried about the financial health of her church, so she prayed about this, asking God to please let her win the lottery. If she could just win that jackpot, her church would be okay. The Lord heard her prayer, and shortly thereafter a group rented the church, providing ongoing income for the parish. When she reached out to the group to get the name of their contact person, it turned out to be Mr. Lottery.

God worked in a similar way in the church that I served with in Regent Park. The congregation included a number of young families and also single women, I being one of them at that time. In our longing for companionship, we used to pray for the Lord to send a bunch of men to the church. God heard our prayer. In the years that followed there was a baby boom among the young families. Almost all the children were baby boys.

In both of these stories, God heard and answered prayers. Instead of being more specific with our prayer requests to achieve desired outcomes, we need to clarify what our actual needs are; this enables us to see how God is meeting them. The psalms help us pinpoint and give voice to our longings and articulate the truth; that God is faithful and gives us enough.

Finally, the psalms, like songs, become our story. Furthermore, they enfold our stories into the story of redemption and salvation found in Scripture.

My real-life example of this is a personal one. At the end of my first year of university my parents separated. Not long afterwards, the family home that I grew up in was sold. It was a difficult season for this to occur in, as I was ‘flying the nest’ for the first time. Though I continued to have great relationships with my family members, I mourned the loss of home.

In my prayer life, I really fixated on petitioning God to remedy my lack of home. The solutions that I presented him with were either some ownership (i.e. control) over a permanent dwelling place (I was a renter), or a partner with whom I could rebuild the stability of family. The Lord heard my prayer, and in this season he answered with the words of Psalm 27: **One thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life.**

To be honest, I did not want to want my sole petition to be this: **one thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life.** No; I wanted a home. But the Scriptures shaped my understanding of my need, and I came to understand that a house or a person could not satisfy the longing that I felt. Because here is the truth: the only answer to our lack is God. The only source of true peace is the Lord. When we come to understand this, Psalm 27 becomes our prayer; it is our story.

For what do we find in the House of the Lord, but God? It is his dwelling place. He creates safety for us in his presence, a sanctuary. Instead of giving me a home address or a significant other, God led me to minister in Regent Park. I can tell you with certainty that the Lord is present and active in this community. He allowed me to dwell there in his presence.

We know that the psalms are poems written in Hebrew. The remarkable thing about the Hebrew language is that words often have complementary meanings. Instead of a word meaning either this *or* that, it means this *and* that. In Psalm 27, the house of the Lord means the dwelling place of God, but house also means household or family. Think of when Matthew writes of Jesus descending from the house of David, for example. So, God answered my longing for home and family with a petition for a home and family found in him. You are beholding how he has unfolding things: God set me in this house, the Church, with his family; that's you, for you are children of God.

He has a home and family prepared for you too, for as much as this has been my narrative, God has entered the story of your life as well. The Lord has gifted us with his truth revealed in the Psalms, so that we can order our prayers and the longings of our heart in spirit and in truth. May they accompany our lives, wherever life takes us. Let us depart from here with Psalm 27 sealed to us, as we pray:

One thing I ask of the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord, all the days of my Life.

Amen.