

How Can We Keep from Singing?

Psalms 27, 98, 130

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ September 6, 2020

We usually have a hymn sing on Labor Day weekend. But we're in unusual times, and group singing is not really safe these days. What we can do is turn our attention to the Psalms, the songs and poetry of the Hebrew people, the prayerbook of the church, the school of prayer.

Do you have a favorite psalm? Why does it speak to you?

Jesus prayed the psalms. He cites Psalm 22:1—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—in his prayer from the cross (Matthew 27:46).

From early on the psalms have been part of Christian worship and devotion. In the sixth century, St. Benedict (c.480-543), founder of Western monasticism, established the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours, consisting of eight daily services beginning with Vigils at 4 a.m. and concluding with Compline at 7 p.m. The psalms are at the center of all of these services. Many monastic orders today chant all 150 psalms every week.

For the reformers of the sixteenth century, the psalms were a rich resource. In the introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote in 1557: I have been accustomed to call this book...An Anatomy of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexes, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."

Not all emotions are distracting, of course. The psalms can help us express the emotions of joy and gratitude. There's a brutal honesty in them. They help us say what we're reluctant or fearful to say, even can't say. They're real. The psalms are rich in images, metaphors, symbols. We find both masculine and feminine references to God in these songs and many ways to describe the life of faith.

In Reformed congregations in Europe during the Reformation, only psalms could be sung in the church, no other hymns. This was especially true for the Church of Scotland. One of the earlier worship resources for the kirk was the Wode (or St. Andrews) Psalter, a musical setting of the psalms, written by a former Catholic monk who became a Presbyterian and lived and worked in St. Andrews in 1559-1560. The Presbyterians were known for their singing of the Psalter and paraphrases of the psalms. The Free Kirk in Scotland today still sings mostly psalms. Our middle hymn today is a good example of a paraphrase, "I To the Hills Will Lift My Eyes," a setting of Psalm 121, to the tune DUNDEE, from the *Scottish Psalter* of 1615.

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) said the book of Psalms was the prayer book of the church and the psalms were a schoolhouse of prayer. In 1940, Bonhoeffer wrote a tiny book about the Psalms, *The Prayerbook of the Bible*. When it was published the

German Reich Board for the Regulation of Literature issued Bonhoeffer a fine for fail failing to submit the manuscript for review. The fine was eventually repealed but then he was banned from publishing anything again. Because the Jewish boy, Jesus, learned these prayers every Christian should learn them too, which was quite a statement given the fact that the Nazi Reichkirche, that is, the German Christian movement, sought to “de-Judaize” the Bible.¹ Bonhoeffer wrote, “Wherever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.” Bonhoeffer believed, “The more deeply we grow into the psalms and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become.” The Psalms gave him courage. “I read the Psalms every day,” he said, “as I have done for years; I know them and love them more than any other book.”² And the Psalms remain an enormous spiritual for us for the living of these days.

I would like to lift up selected verses from three psalms: 27, 130, and 98. These are among my favorites. I invite you to listen or read along and try to be aware of what they touch in you. Notice the feelings emerge in you when you hear these words.

Psalm 27: Listen to how it affirms the presence and nature of God. The psalmist clearly states the presenting situation, the crisis, the concern. Then moves toward assurance: the psalmist remembers who he is, who God is, and boldly, courageously demands God to act:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
For God will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
God will conceal me under the cover of God’s tent;
God will set me high on a rock.
Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent

sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
 be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek God’s face!”
 Your face, LORD, do I seek.
 Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
 you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
 O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me,
 the LORD will take me up.
Teach me your way, O LORD,
 and lead me on a level path
 because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
 for false witnesses have risen against me,
 and they are breathing out violence.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
 in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;
 wait for the LORD!”

Or, listen to Psalm 130, one of my favorite texts: Out of the depths—*De profundis*—out of the depths of the soul we cry out to God. Our life in God, our prayer life, our relationship with God, emerges from within the deep inner life of the soul. This psalm is a call to pay attention to, live from, and respond from the depths of the soul or the heart. Pay attention to the desires of the heart:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
 Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
 to the voice of my supplications!
If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
 Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
 so that you may be revered.
I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
 and in God’s word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD!
 For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with God is great power to redeem.
It is God who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.”

Finally, perhaps what I love most about the psalms is that they help us to praise and worship God. They provide the words when we can't find the words or when it's difficult to offer praise. These words can become our words offered in response to the grace and goodness and faithfulness of God. There's a marvelous poem by W. H. Auden (1907-1973), from 1940, honoring the life of William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), [*In Memory of W. B. Yeats*](#). What Auden said about Yeats could be said of the writers of the psalms. Auden wrote:

*Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;*

*With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;*

*In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.³*

That's what the psalms do. They persuade us to rejoice. They teach us how to praise—how to praise God.

And so, we close with Psalm 98:

“O sing to the LORD a new song,
for God has done marvelous things.
God's right hand and holy arm
have achieved victory.

...

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy

at the presence of the LORD, for God is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.”

May it be so. Thanks be to God.



The Wode (or St. Andrews) Psalter, St. Andrews, Scotland, 1559-1560.

*The sermon title is drawn from the hymn “My Life Flows On” (1869), text and music by the American hymn writer and Baptist minister Robert Lowry (1826-1899). Refrain: “No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

¹Cited in Laura M. Fabrycky, *Keys to Bonhoeffer’s Haus: Exploring the World and Wisdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 116. See also Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1970). First published in German as *Das Gebetbuch der Bibel* (MBK Verlag, 1940).

³W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940).