

Text: Psalm 25  
Title: What Song Shall We Sing?  
Date: 02.21.21  
Roger Allen Nelson

Jack, our grandson, is almost a year and a half. Cute and curious, he loves trucks, tools, and music. He jabbars away making engine noises and he bounces and bobs to whatever music is playing or being sung.

I often hear Sandi ask Jack, “What song shall we sing?”

She could be keeping him busy in his car-seat, tucking him in at night, or puttering in the kitchen, “What song shall we sing?” And then out comes something about the wheels on the bus or monkeys jumping on a bed. “What song shall we sing?” And then we’re all singing about “my sunshine, my only sunshine.” When I start to sing it’s usually some obscure folk-rock song from the seventies and Jack just looks at me as if to say, “That’s not what we sing.”

What song shall we sing?

It’s a crucial question. In the middle of a pandemic, when we’re isolated and frustrated, what song shall we sing? When our social fabric feels torn and tattered and partisan politics dominates the news cycle, what song shall we sing? When all manner of normalcy is disrupted, when health is fading, or life is overwhelming, what song shall we sing?

I don’t mean this metaphorically. This not a rhetorical tool to get at something else. I literally mean, what song shall we sing? What song sustains you? At crib side or death bed, on the mourner’s bench or alone in the night, what song would you sing?

Singing seems essential to humanity. Every class, creed, and culture sings. We put love, loss, and longing to song. We sing when we’re joyful and when we’re broken. We put words and music together to express the most mundane to the most mysterious. Bono, front man for U2, gets at it this way:

*Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do—they introduced me to God, not belief in God, more an experiential sense of GOD. Over art, literature, girls, my mates, the way in to my spirit was a combination of words and music. As a result, the Book of Psalms always felt open to me and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the book of John.*

Dear friends, the Psalms were given for us to sing. They’re songs of praise and lament, blues and ballads, regal anthems of joy and desperate lonely cries. They’re songs of protest and melodies of love. The Psalms give expression to the whole range of human experience and emotion, and in that, they are the songbook of our response to God....

If the Torah, the prophets, and the gospels contain the Word of God directed toward us, then the Psalms offer a word directed toward God. They sing the words that we can’t get out or the truth that we can’t articulate. They give our side of a dialogue with God.

It's as if God seeks after us, and then knowing our frailty even gives us the syntax (or the song) of response.

Martin Luther, the great reformer of 16th century, puts it this way:

*The Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.*

What song shall we sing?

Well, dear friends, during Lent we're going to sing the songs God has given us. We're going to sing psalms. Each week there will be a psalm at the center of the service that gives voice to confession, lament, hope, human spirituality. And each week there will be a line or two, a stanza, or a phrase that I hope you'll sing for the next week. More about that later...

This morning we're singing Psalm 25.  
(Okay, here I mean metaphorically not literally....)

The opening line of Psalm 25, "In you, Lord, my God, I put my trust," is probably better translated, "To you, Lord, I lift up my soul..."

What's lost in our translation is the sense or image of our arms outstretched, lifting up. Think: the birth of Kunta Kinte in "Roots," or the birth of Simba in the "Lion King." The psalm images us lifting up our lives, our identities, our hopes and fears, our very selves. We would offer up our lives to God.

That's the opening of Psalm 25 and that same theme is echoed in the last lines:

*Guard my life and rescue me;  
do not let me be put to shame for I take refuge in you.  
May integrity and uprightness protect me,  
because my hope, Lord, is in you.*

Those verses frame this psalm and the rest of the psalm follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 25 is an acrostic – each letter starting the next line. It's meant to suggest the fullness of life: from A to Z,

from alpha to omega,

from aleph to tau....

It is the totality of life that we would lift up to God.

Years ago, Gary Meyer wrote a piece for the Calvin College alumni magazine in which he told the story of how a rough-cut farm boy from South Dakota found his way to be a student and a teacher. He told how his big hands, made for pushing a plow, ended up pushing a pen. The story turns on Gary getting a freshman term paper back from a professor with this note:

*I am giving you a D- on this paper, Gary, only because I am so disgusted with what passes for college caliber these days and I am fighting it almost single-handed, but don't kid yourself - this is nothing but an F paper. Rewrite!*

Gary goes on to recount how he learned to write at Calvin but more importantly how he was also given a vision for what it meant to live as a Christian. Then Gary ruminates on the Calvin College symbol – a picture of a heart being held out in a hand surrounded by these words: “My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely.” Gary ends his essay with these lines:

*Here is my question about the motto: Whose hand is holding the heart? I always thought that it was my hand offering my heart. Now I am beginning to see that it may be better seen as me placing my heart in God's hand.*

That's a wonderful nuanced distinction. And, that's the spirit of Psalm 25. We would offer our hearts into God's hand: take me and teach me. Psalm 25 is not an invitation to some new self-help technique. It doesn't cut corners like the student who only wants to know what will be on the test. It's not written by one who thinks he/she knows better what they should learn, but gives voice to the longing that in offering up our lives, God will teach....

What song shall we sing?  
The psalmist responds:

*Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are my God and Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.*

The alphabet of Psalm 25 offers the beginning place for a full-orbed spirituality. In deep trust of God, we would offer our lives: take me and teach me.

Now. There are a lot of ways that people look for and long after God. There are a lot of songs that we're given to sing in our search to be human, happy, and whole. But you would be hard pressed to find a simpler, more elemental song. Listen again to these lines from our Psalm.

*Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are my God and Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.  
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love.*

So, one last thing!

It seems worth noting that the psalmist offers up his/her heart in order to be taught, because of the God's “great mercy and love.” In Hebrew those two words are *raham* and *hesed*....

The word *raham* (compassion or mercy) is linked to the Hebrew noun, *reham*, which means “womb.” God’s mercy is tied closely to the concept of “womb love,” the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child. It is a mercy that comes from the womb of God. *Hesed* is God’s covenantal love. It gets translated as unfailing love, loyal love, lovingkindness, faithful love. A love that never fails, runs out, or walks away.

What song shall we sing?

Dear friends, let us offer up our lives to God because of God’s great mercy and unfailing love.

A young woman who grew up at Hope reached out this week. She’s been watching on-line and asked about fasting during Lent. I responded that rather than taking something away we were going to add something this year. If the idea is to turn toward God, if the goal is faithfulness and renewal, then we’re going to focus each week on a line or two from a Psalm, that we might sing the songs of God.

Therefore, this week, I invite you to read Psalm 25 each day, or put verses 4-6 up somewhere you’ll see again and again, or sit with it in silence, or end each prayer you offer with that line, or memorize it, or color it. Turns out adult coloring books are a thing and each week there’ll be a coloring page in the worship resources that we email out.

This coming week, as we offer our hearts to God, let us live with these few lines:

*Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are my God and Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.  
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love.*

May that be the song that we sing.

Amen.