

THE PSALMS' GREATEST HITS

1) Absence

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We live today in a culture that is often informed and inspired by the music that it listens to. In a world in which there is a growing sense of separation and division, our music has the potential to bridge the divide and close the gaps. Our music often provides us with a common language that enables even a diverse people to gather in a concert setting and discover, even if briefly, a sense of unity and harmony. Perhaps you've been to a concert with people you recognize to be so very different from you and yet, you've been able to find a bond in your love for the music that is shared.

This bond that I reference is often formed not only out of a shared love for the music that is played, but also the shared experience of the human condition. When you listen to Adele sing of the pain of a lost love or John Legend sing about a better world, you can share together in the common experience of the human condition, with all of its fear and its hope, its sorrow and its joy. There is something about the music that we listen to that can provide both a sense of personal comfort and community connection. Our music gives voice to the experience of being fully human.

This, of course, is not exactly a new phenomenon. In some respects, it has always been that way. If you were you to open the Book of Psalms, you would find the lyrical and musical witness of an ancient people to the experience of living through the midst of the ups and downs of life. The Psalms, of course, were written to be shared by the people of Israel in the experience of worship.

These were not just pretty words that were neatly pieced together to please God. No, these poetic and powerful words gave voice not only to the experience of joy and thanksgiving, but also to the experience anger, bitterness, loneliness and fear. They were often expressed without regard for proper etiquette or decorum. They simply expressed to God the feeling that welled up within the writer—a “no holds barred” approach that simply told it like it was without the need to be nice or even civil. In this sense, then, the Psalms tend to be brutally honest about whatever the writer happened to be experiencing as a human being.

It is with this understanding of the Psalms in mind that Luke and I begin a series of messages that consider the witness of various Psalms and their contemporary connection with some of the music that we listen to—music that, likewise, gives expression the experience of being fully human. Each week, we will select a specific Psalm that expresses the Psalmist's experience of life and God—from absence to presence, from confession to absolution, from fear hope. We will then pair that Psalm with its more contemporary expression in the music of U2, Van Morrison.

Our hope, in taking this approach, is to invite you to consider the timeless ways in which the ancient Psalms speak with a contemporary voice to the experience of living in our 21st

century world. In more ways than we might realize the Psalmist speaks to the present condition of life as we have come to know and experience it.

So it is that we begin, this morning, with a Psalm that speaks to the perceived absence of God. Psalm 22 might easily be overlooked were it not for the fact that the opening line is the one that Jesus chose to express while experiencing the agony of the cross. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

More than most Psalms, this is one that cuts to the chase. There are no opening pleasantries here, no gracious words of praise—just the plaintive and angry insinuation that God has abandoned the Psalmist. God is missing in action and not to be found anywhere. This opening question is followed by another: **“Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”** Once again, the point is driven home: God is absent!

You will note, however, that, as is often the case, the Psalmist then shifts gears a bit by offering words of praise mixed with hope. **“You are holy...In you our ancestors trusted and you delivered them...to you they cried and were saved.”** In the midst of his personal agony and distress, the Psalmist will not yield his fundamental faith that God will ultimately deliver him from his despair.

This alternating mixture of both protest and praise continues over the course of the 31 verses of this Psalm which finally concludes on a note of trust in the God who will surely provide deliverance. It’s fascinating to consider the emotional swing that ranges from the depths of anger and abandonment to the heights of faith and trust. It’s almost as if these contrasting feelings are at war within the Psalmist, each competing for the place of prominence in the Psalmist’s heart. It is significant to point out that all of these emotions are real and authentic—all of them honest expressions that the Psalmist offers to God.

There is no pretense or posturing, not phony faith expressions to provide a cosmetic cover up for the real emotion that lies within. No, this is real, honest anger and it is real, honest faith offered to God without apology. And therein, I believe, lies its power. There is, you see, no substitute for an “honest to God” faith.

In his book, **“The Message of the Psalms,”** theologian Walter Brueggemann observes that in our current culture with its emphasis on success and affluence, we are inclined to avoid the reality of the darkness that is an undeniable part of life. We would prefer instead, to believe that enough power and knowledge can tame the terror and eliminate the darkness.

But here is precisely the problem. Despite our best efforts, we cannot move around the fact that the darkness is real and often, beyond our control. He notes that **“The remarkable thing about Israel is that it did not attempt to banish or deny the darkness from its religious enterprise. It, instead, embraces the darkness as the very stuff of new life. Indeed, Israel seems to know that new life comes from nowhere else.”**

(The Message of the Psalms / p. 53 / Walter Brueggemann / Augsburg Press)

I am intrigued by this premise it is only in naming the darkness, only in the choice to acknowledge its reality that we are able to move beyond it to the experience of new life. This, I believe, is precisely what the Psalmist is doing in Psalm 22. He is naming his darkness. He is giving voice to his anger, his fear and his profound sense of abandonment. He is holding nothing back, but chooses, instead, to let God have it.

It is then and only then that he is able to move beyond his fear and his anger to experience the “new life” of trust and hope. It is then and only then that he is able to experience the transforming power of God’s love at work in his life.

There is, I think, a marvelous illustration of this premise in the film, “Forrest Gump.” Many of you will recall that Forrest’s friend, Lt. Dan came back from his stint in Vietnam a bitter and angry man. After losing both of his legs to a land mine, Lt. Dan was angry at Forrest for saving his life and angry at God for allowing it to happen. Eventually, he is reunited with Forrest on a shrimp boat in the Gulf of Mexico. Still nursing his grudge against God, he is fixing for a fight and, as we shall see in this brief clip, he finally realizes his opportunity to have it out with God.

So Lt. Dan lays it all in the line with God—expressing all of his pent up anger, frustration and bitterness. Holding nothing back, he is able to name his darkness. And it is because he is able to do so that then experiences the release of the load of bitterness that he had carried for years. In the next scene, Lt. Dan experiences the transforming power of God’s love at work in his life.

Not only did Lt. Dan make his peace with God, but, in the process, he made his peace with himself and others as well.

There is power—transforming power—in our ability to express our deepest and darkest feelings to God. The darkness that surrounds us in our lives is real. I don’t think that I need to convince you of that fact. There are times in our lives in which not only is the darkness real, but it threatens to engulf us and destroy any hope that we might have of a better life.

Perhaps you can remember a time in your life in which you felt the depth of that darkness, a time in which you felt overwhelmed by the circumstances of your life and depressed by the prospects going forward. For some of you it may have been a time in which you experienced the brokenness of a relationship. For others, it may have been the experience of a debilitating illness. For still others, it may have been the loss of a dream or the experience of failure. I think that it is probably fair to suggest that we have all known those times of God’s absence; those times in which it seemed to us as if God had forgotten us and abandoned us all together.

It is, I think, important for us to remember that we are not alone in the experience of this absence. This feeling is one that Jesus, likewise, knew as he lingered between life and death on the cross. In that moment, he felt abandoned. In that moment, he felt forgotten. In that

moment, he felt completely alone. And he did not hesitate to express his feeling directly and powerfully to God.

This feeling of abandonment is captured in Van Morrison's version of the African American spiritual, "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child." As you listen to this recording, I would invite you to reflect upon your own experience of the darkness...your own experience of the points and places in your life in which you felt the absence of God. And, as you do so, you may want to name the fear, the anger, the frustration and the despair that you have known. You may simply want to tell God...to let God know of whatever feelings that you have had...whatever feelings that you still may be carrying with you. For it is, I believe, in the naming of these feelings, in the choice to be open and honest with God, that we often discover the transforming grace of the God who is present and has, indeed, been present all along.