

Staying Alive¹

Psalm 22

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

March 19, 2017

Pastor Dave Carver

I'd like to ask you to think for a moment about the power of music in your life. How does what you hear shape who you are, what you feel, and how you look at things? I would suggest that for most of us, there are some songs that mean so much to us that when we hear even a snippet of them, we are reminded of something that is much larger, much more important than the few bars of music we encounter.

And, at the risk of losing you for the entire sermon, I'd like to show you what I mean. Listen to this (play a few seconds of "Gonna Fly Now" from *Rocky*):

If you know and like these movies, I bet that right now you are aware of the truth that there are no odds that are insurmountable; you know that you have to stay strong even in defeat; and that you can push yourself – you are reminded of these things simply because you heard a couple of lines of music.

Let's try it again (play a few seconds of "Hedwig's Theme" from the *Harry Potter* series):

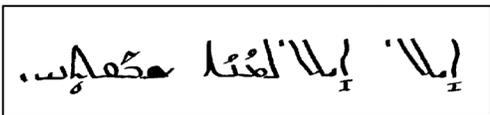
Again, some of you are transported to a place where things are not always as they seem, and where innocence matters, and where self-sacrificial love is the most powerful force in the universe... And the rest of you? You're just Muggles, that's all. Nothing to be ashamed of.

¹ I am deeply indebted to Carol M. Bechtel's *Kerygma* Bible Study on "The Bible and Handel's Messiah" for much the structure and content of this message.

We could go on, but you know where I'm heading... I can tell a lot about you simply by looking at your playlists or seeing your music collection.

Why does this matter today?

Because we are in the season of Lent – a time of reflection, repentance, and preparation that leads us to Holy Week, where we commemorate the suffering, death, and ultimately, the resurrection of Jesus. And as we approach that week, we do well to note that both Matthew and Mark go out of their way to tell us that Jesus was thinking about a



particular song when he died. In fact, each of these Gospels indicates that the last intelligible thing Jesus uttered prior to his death was “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani”. Those words form the Aramaic translation of the beginning of Psalm 22, which you heard (in English) a few moments ago.

It was customary in Jesus' time, as in our own, to use a few phrases from a song or scripture text to bring the entire passage to mind. Because Jesus died singing Psalm 22, we often look at that scripture and say, “Wow – that song really is all about Jesus: it talks about his death, and his rejection, and the ways that his clothes were divided...”

And when we do that, it's unfortunate because if we make Psalm 22 some sort of a magic incantation that predicts specific details of Jesus' life and death a thousand years into the future, we will lose sight of some important truths in both the Psalm and in Jesus' life.

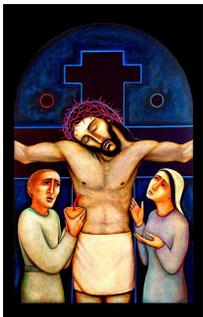
Psalm 22 is not about Jesus. Jesus was about Psalm 22. The fact that this prayer, this song, was present to him as he endured such torment *and* that he chose to make that song present to those who waited with and watched him die makes that song important to us this Lent as well.



²Like many other Psalms, this particular scripture is a song of lament. There is a structure. For instance, if you remember anything about poetry, you'll remember that a *Haiku* consists of seventeen syllables arranged in lines of five, seven, and five. A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem traditionally written in iambic pentameter. The structure of these poems informs the meaning, and vice-versa.

A typical lament has five parts: there is an invocation, a complaint, a statement of trust, a request for God to act, and a brief expression of praise. When you sing a lament, you are right to expect these things in this order.

Psalm 22 is remarkable among the Psalms of lament because there is really no overt expression of trust in God's power or presence in the moment. The psalmist, going through one of the most difficult times of his life, knows all of the "right answers" that he learned in Sunday school... but he was still afraid that maybe God was not paying attention to him, or worse –that God didn't want to pay attention to him. He knows that others have trusted God; he knows that he should trust God, but he finds that such trust is exceedingly difficult to come by at this moment.



³Could that have been why Jesus was thinking about these words as he hung on the cross? Could it be that maybe he was having a very, very difficult time trusting his Father to see this thing through to completion?

Or was it perhaps that he brought this Psalm to mind for the sake of those whom he loved who were watching him die? In raising this particular lament, was he

² Christ in Gethsemane, Michael O'Brien (modern)

³ Crucifixion, Michael O'Brien (modern)

acknowledging to them that faith and trust and hope are sometimes incredibly difficult to come by?

Do you ever feel that way? You *want* to trust, you *want* to believe, but WOW is it hard on some days... If I'm right about some of this, then your struggles to always have faith don't necessarily take you away from Jesus – they may make you more like Jesus.

The other thing that is remarkable about Psalm 22 as a song of lament is the fact that the praise and thanksgiving section is five or ten times longer than in most of the other Psalms of lamentation.

Moreover, the praises here are not limited only to the singer. This Psalm begins with a deeply personal cry for help but it ends with the declaration that praise is due God from not only all of Israel, but those from every nation, and the ends of the earth, and even those who have already died or who are yet to be born.

What starts off as an individual's heartfelt cry of pain and isolation ("My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?") is somehow transformed in the life of the Psalmist to a song of praise that stretches not only across the entire globe but through eternity as well. In mentioning the dead who will praise God, this Psalm offers us a quick glimpse of resurrection hope.

Could it be that Jesus, in calling this psalm to mind at the moment of his own greatest anguish and pain, held out hope to himself and for his followers that pain, suffering, darkness, and crucifixion are not all that there is? Could it be that as he hung on the cross he needed to know – and he needed us to know – that there is more to the song – but we can only experience that "more" after we come through the suffering or the isolation or the grief?

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Many churches, including Crafton Heights, have adopted the practice of “burying the alleluias” during Lent. You may have noticed that we’re not singing, say, “All Creatures of Our God and King”, or any other song that includes the word “Alleluia”. “Alleluia”, of course, is an expression of praise or thanksgiving that is the Hebrew word meaning “praise God”. For many Christians, the word is a spontaneous expression of joy or thanks because of some great blessing that has been received. Churches often “hide” the Alleluia during Lent as a means of saying that there are times of great joy and there are times when our greatest hopes are realized, but there are also times when those things seem so far away. During our Lenten time of reflection and repentance, we practice a “fast” from the Alleluias not because they are not true, but because it’s not time for them right now...

Each of us, at some point in our lives, walks through a season of darkness and pain. We know the horror of betrayal or the anguish of a bad prognosis or the sapping power of doubt and uncertainty... and when we experience these things, the last thing in the world we want to see is some chipper, happy-clappy friend come bounding into the room telling us to get over it, to “turn that frown upside down”, to get busy or distracted and just feel better, gosh darn it...

In each of our lives, there are times when it is all we can do to simply sit in the dark and experience the grief or the shock or the pain. Often, during those times, it’s better if a friend is there to sit with us – not because that person is able to take away the grief or the shock or the pain, but somehow their presence validates our experience of it and offers some sort of mute testimony to the fact that this, too, can be endured.

Psalm 22 is a cry from a dark and painful place that somehow points to a deep hope that, while even though it appears to be hidden or buried, has always been there and will always be there.



I mentioned on Wednesday night that a number of years ago I had the privilege of visiting Jerusalem with my daughter. One of the most moving experiences came to me in a place of which I'd never heard: The Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu. Most of the church is dedicated to the memory of Peter's denial of Jesus ("gallicantu" means "cock's crowing" in Latin). The church was built on what is believed to have been the site of the High Priest's palace. I found it to be a fascinating place...



The upper levels were interesting enough, but it was the basement that got me. Down below was a dungeon that dated from the first century. The signs were clear: We have no way of knowing this, but since this dungeon is fairly close to what was the

High Priests' residence at the time of Jesus, there's a chance that this is where Jesus, and later the Apostles, would have been imprisoned by the authorities. In a very subdued manner, the signs explained the way that the dungeon was laid out. And there, at the darkest, lowest, point of the dungeon was a simple stand with the text of Psalm 88 – like Psalm 22, a Psalm of complaint and lament.



I'd been to the so-called "Upper Room"; I'd visited the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane; and I'd seen at least two places that

claimed to be the empty tomb of the resurrection, but I am here to tell you that it was not until I cried out to God in weakness, in darkness, and in isolation did I have some sense that those deep and hidden places are not the end of the story.

Jesus wanted us to sing the song of despair because he knows that the despair is real and true and has power in our lives. It was thus for the Psalmist in 1000 BC. It was brought to life by Jesus on the day that he died. And I suspect that it is true for you, too – at least some of the time. And on those days when it feels as though the pain will overwhelm you and when the alleluias seem buried forever, then please, beloved know this:

It's ok to be there.

It's ok to wonder where God is and how things work.

But know this, too: that the song is not over. You have heard the song – but only a part of it. Lent is not forever. Remember that nothing that is buried – not Jesus, not alleluias, not you or me – nothing stays buried forever.

Thanks be to God! Amen.