



"Joy Comes in the Morning"

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Psalm 30 (PAILL)***

Our Seekers discussion group has been savoring Barbara Brown Taylor's latest book, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. Taylor is a preacher, professor, and author whom I have greatly enjoyed over the years. I studied with her one summer in Chicago while working on my Doctor of Ministry degree, and have read several of her books and articles.

Taylor has a gift with words and is able to capture complex theological ideas using the language of everyday people. I appreciate this quality in a preacher and an author. One of my favorite lines in *An Altar in the World* has to do with a comment that Taylor makes about the interrelationship of our emotional and physical experiences with our spiritual lives. She explains that pain is one of the best examples of this interrelationship, and that pain is frequently the entre to a closer relationship with God.

In her chapter titled "The Practice of Feeling Pain," Taylor explains, "I had been teaching world religions for several years before I realized how many of them grew out of suffering."¹ She goes on then to summarize the foundational stories of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and observes, "Pain makes theologians of all of us."²

Pain is an unpopular concept in Western popular culture. A great deal of money exchanges hands in our time to alleviate human pain. It has become so unacceptable to feel pain in our time that many go to extremes to minimize and eliminate pain. Some of these efforts are noble such as medical advances that make life better for all, while other attempts at pain relief result in addictions that anesthetize our feelings while compounding our pain.

Taylor goes on to write:

There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins), p. 155.

² Taylor, p. 157.

discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never canceled each other out and I doubt they ever will, at least not until each of us—or all of us together—find the way through.³

My experience as a pastor confirms Taylor's observation that pain makes theologians of all of us. Pain may not make erudite theologians of us, but it surely pushes us into theological discourse in which even the most adamant deniers of God's existence find themselves engaged. This is so because as humans we have the propensity to ask questions such as these: *Why is this happening to me? What meaning is there in suffering? How long will this go on? Who or what could alleviate the pain?*

Pain makes theologians of all of us. Further evidence that Taylor's premise is correct is reflected in my professional calendar. For example, with rare exceptions, I find that people do not call or make appointments to share the joy that's unfolding in their lives. No, instead, most of the conversations that I am sought out for are about pain and suffering.

Pain comes in many different forms, and conversations vary. Sometimes I help hold the news of a troubling doctor's report, or the death of a loved one. Sometimes I learn that a loving relationship has been smashed to bits, and probe what can be salvaged. Sometimes I hear about the loss of a job or the desire for a more meaningful vocation. Whatever the occasion for the conversation, the premise is most often grounded in pain; because pain pushes us to ask the deepest theological questions of our lives, and to seek out interlocutors, especially when we do not find satisfactory answers on our own.

So regardless of whether we aspire to be theologians or not, we become theologians when we experience pain and begin to ask the questions that it invokes.

II

I agree with Taylor's proposition that pain makes theologians of all of us, and I wish to take her argument a step further today, having spent the past week pondering Psalm 30. I propose that pain not only makes theologians of us all, but that it also makes musicians of us all. Pain may not make *beautiful* and *talented* musicians of us, but it makes musicians of us, none the less.

Given that in God's eyes music is about making an offering rather than about performing in "America's Got Talent," God is glorified and we are nurtured—even healed—through the music we make and the music we listen to.

Pain makes musicians of us because music is one of the best means we have for expressing and exploring the heights and depths of human emotion—and because in a cathartic way it can simultaneously relieve our sense of pain. Music has helped people of faith in every time and place explore and express pain, including our Judeo-Christian ancestors. Many examples of musical genres can be found in the Bible, including the

³ Taylor, p. 173.

books of Psalms and Lamentations.

For those who have not had the benefit of learning much music or biblical history, it may be helpful to know that vocal and instrumental music has been a continuous part of our Judeo-Christian tradition at least since the first psalm was uttered in ancient times.

The book of Psalms is the most important collection of music that modern Jews and Christians have received from our ancestors.

The book of Psalms was Ancient Israel's hymnal, and it was passed down to every generation even from the time before King David, for whom many of the psalms are attributed. For centuries, the book of Psalms was also the only hymnal of the Christian faith.

For example, our Puritan ancestors translated the Psalms from Latin into Old English, and published the first book in North America, which was known as *The Bay Psalm Book*. This book was published by Pilgrim Press in 1640. (History buffs will appreciate that Pilgrim Press is the first and longest continuously operated press in North America, and is now housed at the United Church of Christ National Offices in Cleveland, Ohio.)

For those who are less interested in history and more interested in pop culture, it may be helpful to think of the book of Psalms as Ancient Israel's answer to the *Billboard Magazine* top 150 songs of all times.

The book of Lamentations, by comparison, is a collection of what we might call Ancient Israel's "blues" song book. Modern blues music was a twentieth century American phenomenon grounded in African-American experience during and after slavery, and built on the tradition of the spirituals. The blues provided musicians and audiences with a means to express and move through sorrow to joy.

While the mood and sound of the blues may seem sad and depressing, the opportunity for musicians to perform this music, and for audiences to listen to it, allowed grief to be released so that participants had more energy to work for justice, and more capacity to experience the joy that God intended for them. As the psalmist said it, and as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. frequently referenced in his preaching, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning."⁴

Perhaps it is because there are no musical notes in our Bibles that many readers—even those who dive into the Old Testament with enthusiasm—miss the fact that Psalms and Lamentations are collections of ancient songs. The reason that you don't find notated tunes in the Bible is because our forebears did not need the notes—or usually even the lyrics. For many centuries, our ancestors were mostly illiterate, so the songs that they sang were those that could be committed to memory and passed on from one

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," paragraph 2. <http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/speech-analysis-dream-martin-luther-king/>. Donna Schaper, *Sacred Speech: A Practical Guide for Keeping the Spirit in your Speech* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Publishing, 2003), p. 26.

generation to the next. Chanters taught congregations to sing using a call and response approach, somewhat like the approach used by African-American slaves in the days before emancipation, rather than by handing out sheet music and conducting rehearsals the way that we would during choir practice here at Eden Church.

III

Take a look at Psalm 30, and you will see that the content of this psalm underscores Taylor's premise that pain makes us theologians, and my premise that pain also makes us musicians.

Generally speaking, Psalm 30 is what biblical scholars call a "thanksgiving psalm." It is a song praising God for the healing of an individual. James L. Mays explains in his commentary on Psalms that Psalm 30 is much like the prayer of King Hezekiah found in Isaiah 38, which thanks God for healing, and it would have been sung following the singing of a prayer for help, like Psalm 6.⁵

Mays and others go on to explain that Psalm 30 calls worshippers to join in a celebration for healing and to listen to the testimony and preaching of the person who has been healed.⁶

They explain further that Psalm 30 was originally authored for a particular person, who lived in a particular place and time, but that the song was popularized and ultimately included in the biblical canon because so many identified with the subject matter of the text and sang and performed it repeatedly, sort of like how modern people listen to the same Top 40 Hits on the radio, and how some songs like "Trumpet Voluntary" and "Amazing Grace" never seem to fall out of favor with wedding and funeral planners.

Gradually, over time, Psalm 30 was performed for a wider array of occasions than thanksgiving services. For example, according to the Talmud, Psalm 30 was performed during the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple, which was inaugurated by Judas Maccabeus in 165 BCE, after the Temple was desecrated by their Greek conqueror, Antiochus Epiphanes (I Macc. 4:52; II Macc. 10:1ff; John 12:237-43).⁷

Irene Nowell, a noted Psalms scholar, explains that using Psalm 30 in the Temple rededication liturgy would have been appropriate because it illustrates that the Temple had also been threatened with death and was restored through the healing mercy of God. She goes on to say that the re-use and re-appropriation of the psalms in ancient times demonstrates their power and universal themes and application even to our time. "Whatever our present situation," Nowell writes, "there is something in the psalms to fit the occasion."⁸

⁵ James L. Mays, *Psalms in Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, & Paul J. Achtemeier, eds. (Knoxville, TN: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 140.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 294.

⁷ Mays, p. 146. Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 76.

⁸ Nowell, p. 76.

IV

Digging more deeply into the psalm, we hear the cries of an individual for help. We hear the singer's reflection on his/her pain, including the grief process. We don't have to be licensed clinical psychologists to notice that the psalmist expresses all five stages of grief in Psalm 30 that Elizabeth Kübler Ross described in her book *On Death and Dying*. The five stages of grief as described by Kübler Ross include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—and not necessarily in that order—which are seen in the Psalm and in our lived experience. In the end, the psalmist sings about healing and gives God the glory for this result.⁹

We never learn what malady plagued the composer or singer of Psalm 30 or how healing occurred. Perhaps these things were so apparent to the original performer and audience that no explanation was needed. Or perhaps, over time, the general themes of the song reinforced the universal appeal of it, so that no specificity of disease or pain needed to be named.

We will likely never know the details behind the origins of this other psalms in the Bible. So we are better off taking what we've received and simply allowing the lyrics and their poetry to seep into our souls, so that we may discover the healing that can occur through our sense of solidarity with those before and around us, and so that we may express our pain and be moved to joy, rather than allowing pain to fester and grow within us.

V

On this day when we thank those who serve as musicians and educators in our midst, it is appropriate to say how important these ministries of music and education are to all of us.

Through the ministry of our educators and musicians, a foundation is established for people of every age to learn about the Bible and our faith tradition, about the shared experiences that our ancestors drew on in forging their faith, and about the prayer and music practices—like the psalms—that have sustained and strengthened them and enabled our ancestors to pass on these resources to us, so that we might find our voices, work through our pain, and experience the joy that God intends for us.

So, on behalf of the whole congregation, today I say especially to our musicians and educators, thank you and bless you for your important ministry among us. Through your service God is glorified, we are edified, and healed. Thank God, and thank you. Amen.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model