

## **Sings The Lord's Song: Seasons Of Life Psalms 100, 137 and 30**

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When I was growing up, we used to say that my mom had a song for every occasion. Actually, we still say that because it's still true. No matter what you are talking about or what you might be feeling, my mom can come up with a song to sing about it. When we were young kids, Mom had songs like "There Are Many Things That I Can Do All By Myself" and "Just a Spoonful of Sugar". In our teen years as we had our first crushes, she would pop up with songs like "This Guy's In Love with You" or "Some Enchanted Evening". During tough times, we might hear "Climb Every Mountain" or the song we just heard, "You'll Never Walk Alone". And then there were the just weird and obscure ones like "The Cannibal King With The Big Nose Ring Fell In Love With A Lusty Maid". Songs were Mom's way of making us laugh, lifting our spirits, teaching us about love, helping us to know our feelings were normal, and putting to words and tune what we didn't know how to express.

Of course, that is the wonderful gift of song. With words that capture some human truth set to a melody that touches the heart or sticks in our minds, songs express the whole range of human experience and emotion. So, what better topic to explore on the day we are celebrating the ministry of Dr. Ann Marie Koukios who has brought such beautiful music to us over these many years.

Today, we are beginning a four-part sermon series about the Psalms, how they reflect our human experience, and how they might be helpful to us today. The Psalms have been called the songbook or hymnal of the Jewish faith and, therefore, of ours. They are poems that were set to music. Many of them were written by David, but there are several other Psalm writers, as well, including Solomon and Moses. At times, the voice in the Psalms is that of the individual psalmist. Yet, at other times, the voice speaks for all of Israel. Some Psalms are written as dialog, so we also hear the voice of God. The Psalms are incredibly diverse in their emotional content expressing, according to Walter Brueggemann, everything from "profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt".

Because there is so much contrast in the tone and emotion in the Psalms, they are often grouped together in different categories. You may hear of the Psalms of lament or Psalms of thanksgiving. For our sermon series, we're going to use groupings put together by Brueggemann in his book "The Spirituality of the Psalms". Brueggemann proposes that the Psalms can be divided by how they reflect on the cycles or seasons we experience in life. He speaks of the Psalms of orientation, the Psalms of disorientation, and the Psalms of new orientation reflecting a pattern in life we have all experienced. There are periods of time when life feels fairly stable and we have a sense of satisfaction, of well-being, that leads us to feel very grateful to God for all that we have. These are seasons of joy, thanksgiving, and trust in God's goodness. The Psalms which depict this season of life are the Psalms of orientation. Hear these words from Psalm 100.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his.

Yet, inevitably, there are times in life when something happens that disturbs our stability and well-being. Perhaps it is the death of someone we love or a frightening medical diagnosis. Maybe you have a crisis in your marriage or you lose your job. Or, maybe there is a global pandemic and everything stable seems to get uprooted or changed. The Psalms which depict this season of life are the Psalms of disorientation. They are filled with grief, despair, anger, and vengeance. Psalm 137, from which we are taking the title of this sermon series, is an example. Here are a few of the verses.

By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?  
And then...  
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

Finally, the longer we live, the more opportunities we have to experience a third season of life that comes when, often much to our surprise, God opens the door to a new beginning for us. You find a new job that is actually a better fit for you than the old one or you begin a new career. You meet a new life partner or your once fractured marriage becomes stronger as you work through the difficulties you had. You beat the breast cancer diagnosis and find yourself living with much more intention. Of course, the Psalms that depict this are the psalms of new orientation.

You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
you have taken off my sackcloth  
and clothed me with joy,  
so that my soul [b] may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Brueggemann is quick to point out that not all of the psalms fall into one of these categories. However, if you read the whole book of psalms, you see this cycle of seasons reflected over and over again. Of course, we also don't go through the cycle once. There is movement between them throughout our lives.

So, where do you find yourself and your life at this time? Are you in a time of stability in which you can look at your life and feel at peace and content? Or are you in a time of change and upheaval, loss or fear? Or, are you, perhaps, coming out of a time of disorientation and uncertainty and seeing a new beginning on the horizon? We can ask similar questions about where we are as a church.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be looking at what we can learn from each kind of Psalm and the movement between them. How can we apply this idea of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation personally and communally? What do the Psalms teach us about God during the different seasons of our lives?

Of course, we have an example to explore in how we are each dealing with Covid right now. Some are grateful because their lives haven't been drastically disrupted. Others are deep in the throes of disorientation as they continue to try to figure out how to live their lives, care for their children, and do their jobs. Still others got a taste of new hope and a new beginning this summer but are now feeling disoriented again as case numbers rise.

I think this is especially important for us to remember as a church family right now. Some of us are so anxious to worship in our sanctuaries with music and singing while others are frightened to be in the sanctuary or to bring their unvaccinated children to church. Our job as Christian siblings to each other is to understand and make space for each other as we continue to navigate this journey together. What might the psalms teach us about how to support each other?

This rhythm of the Psalms - the movement from orientation to disorientation to new orientation - is a rhythm deeply embedded in our faith. It is, of course, the rhythm of creation as so much of the natural world flourishes in the summer months, becomes dormant in the winter, and returns with new life in the spring. This is also the rhythm we see in the life of Christ. Through his lifetime, he taught, healed, loved, and saved until he was crucified. Then, on Easter morning, he rose from the dead opening the possibility of new life for us.

Ultimately, the book of Psalms is a book of hope, but unlike our tendency as a culture to avoid, dismiss, or numb ourselves to the pain and tragedy we experience, the Psalms don't shirk the ugliness of life. Rather, as the best songs do, they speak honestly about our deepest hurts recognizing that, as Brueggemann puts it, "that deep loss and amazing gift are held together in a powerful tension". We must embrace our struggles before we can embrace new life.

So, join us in the coming weeks as we sing the Lord's song, rooting ourselves in the hope that sustains us through orientation, disorientation, and leads us, as Easter promises, to a new orientation, a new beginning.

May it be so. Amen.