

Heart Songs (Psalm 27)

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The Second Sunday in Lent (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35)

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Why do you pray? I'm not talking about prayers said in church or in your Bible study class or any other setting where we pray as a church. I'm asking why you, yourself, pray to God, to the creator of the universe, to whomever for whatever it is you need? What moves you to say words with the Almighty? Are you so desperate you stop your flailing efforts and pause to utter whatever it is that is driving you to think the Divine might intercede on your behalf?

David, the psalmist, was most creative and articulate in the desperation of the moment. Pain and fear made David, well, *poetical*. All of us reach out for help in moments of crisis.

Psalm 27:1-6, a Psalm of David

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord.

This is the word of the LORD. Thanks be to God.

Friends, there are moments when we can muster the courage to be brave, to be assured, to create such a positive mental state that we can power our way through. But there are positive thinking preachers out there who overpaint the picture of what we can do with a positive outlook in life (i.e., if you have enough faith). If we'll just allow it, we can take challenges and turn them into victories!

That works great until it doesn't. That kind of praying is a mile wide and an inch deep. Positive thinking religion is a form of spiritual schlock that collapses under its own weight in the pressure cooker of real life. Particularly when that assurance is

made conditionally when you buy the preacher's book or make a contribution to prove your faith. That's not what David means.

I go back to my original question, why do you pray?

This psalm is a favorite for many because it expresses the central impulse of biblical religion in eloquent and poignant words. Many people love this psalm of victorious faith because of its brazen confidence. In this regard, it's like the pastoral psalm of David, Psalm 23.

David fears no human being as demonstrated by his alternating declarations about God and self: God is light. God is salvation. God is a place of refuge.

Too much, we might ask? Even when slandered by evildoers, even when attacked by a hostile army, he continues to hold firm in his faith. And so, we pray and we ask God to protect us from the life-threatening circumstances of a broken world.

Just beneath the veneer of the poetry, this is a prayer for help. Plain and simple. This psalm goes further and expresses the heart's honest (less certain) belief that often we are stretched beyond our ability to function and are nearly broken to the point that our appeal to God is also broken and we are desperate for God to intervene.

Psalm 27:7-14, a Psalm of David

Hear my voice when I call, Lord; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me. Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations. I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

This is the word of the LORD. Thanks be to God.

Once again, we find ourselves living in the shadow of a violent, senseless war. While we don't have American troops actively engaged, we are doing everything but fighting by supplying all kinds of high-tech missiles, arms, and ammunition. We are spending billions of dollars to help the Ukrainian people defend their country and defend themselves from the slaughter shamelessly inflicted by Russian troops. We're also supplying for the 10 million Ukrainians who are displaced from their homes and the nearly 4 million Ukrainians who've fled across the border to their

neighbors in Eastern Europe. They are refugees torn from their homes, their communities, and separated from the ones they love. They are exiles, families forced to leave the men in the family who stay behind to fight the war against the Russian invaders.

This second stanza in David's poem in Psalm 27 gives us a split feeling because the first six verses are so triumphant in faith and assurance. But beneath all that certitude the fear lurks in the depths of our hearts. The prayers of the Ukrainian people and the millions of world citizens who are opposing the Russian invasion through economic sanctions and spiritual warfare asking God to do whatever God is willing to do to end this maelstrom.

In this season of Lent, we are listening the poets of the Book of Psalms but we are also listening to the artists of our own time as we ponder the spiritual resources that give us hope.

How is it poetry speaks to our souls in this season of Lent? How can the word artists stir up the Spirit of life in us? Mary Oliver, in her book about the craft of poetry wrote this line about the power of poetry: "Poetry is a life-cherishing force. For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry."¹

Contra Spem Spero is a poem by 19th century Ukrainian Poet, Lesia Ukrainka. Lesia was one of Ukrainian literature's foremost writers, best known for her poems and plays. She was also a vocal activist. Her literary legacy is enormous, even though for most of her life she was ill and often bedridden for months.

As Ukrainka's poem is read, we will show a series of slides from our mission partners in the Ukraine. The first photos you will see are of Pastor Elisey Pronin and his team in our partner church in Lviv, who work around the clock serving the refugees and all who need help. Their smiling faces reflect better times.

Let's hear the poem, "Contra Spem Spero," translated into English as "Against All Hope, I Hope":

Away, dark thoughts, you autumn clouds!
A golden spring is here!
Shall it be thus in sorrow and in lamentation
That my youthful years pass away?

¹ Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, Harcourt & Brace, 1994

No, through all my tears I still shall laugh,
Sing songs despite my troubles;
Have hope despite all odds,
I want to live! Away, you sorrowful thoughts!

On this poor, indigent ground
I shall sow flowers of flowing colors;
I shall sow flowers even amidst the frost,
And water them with my bitter tears.

And from those burning tears will melt
The frozen crust, so hard and strong,
Perhaps the flowers will bloom and
Bring about for me a joyous spring.

Unto a winding, flinty mountain
Shall I bear my weighty stone,
Yet, even bearing such a crushing weight,
Will I sing a joyful song.

Throughout a lasting night of darkness
Ne'er shall I rest my own eyes,
Always searching for the guiding star,
The bright empress of the dark night skies.

I shall not allow my heart to fall sleep,
Though gloom and misery envelop me,
Despite my certain feelings
That death is beating at my breast.

Death will settle heavily on that breast,
The snow covered by a cruel haze,
But fierce shall beat my little heart,
And maybe, with its ferocity, overcome death.

Yes, I will laugh despite my tears,
I'll sing out songs amidst my misfortunes;
I'll have hope despite all odds,
I will live! Away, you sorrowful thoughts!