

Worshipping from the Heart
Psalm 27
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Third Sunday in Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
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Fairly early in my time as a congregational pastor, I was enjoying fellowship time after worship at one of the churches I served. One man asked me if I had any plans for the rest of the weekend, in that making small talk way. I told him that I was excited for the afternoon because in seminary I was knee deep in a course on theodicy, suffering, and pain. I anticipated an afternoon structured around suffering and how a loving God could permit humans to suffer as we do.

He gave me a forced smile and said Oh, ok. Most of the guys I know are planning on watching the big football game and having a few beers. (I know, I'm not particularly good at small talk.)

What do you hope to get out of being here at church today? I learned early on in my ministry that we are not all here for the same reasons. This is an important part of how I put worship together — so that for each reason someone is here, there is something included to address it. As for me, I am the sort of person who thought it was a good idea to focus a big part of my life on going to seminary and on studying the church. Perhaps then it is not so surprising that I really like to learn, to understand, gain insights, to work with

my mind. It's why I am careful to use a scholarly Biblical translation, that focuses on shades of meaning in every word. We spoke a few months ago about how others use transliterations, resulting in a Bible that is perhaps less precise, but that preserves the flow and sense of a text. More about the forest, and less about each individual tree. Some people like the King James Bible. It is not at all scholarly by modern standards, but people like it anyway for how it makes them feel.

THAT is why today's text is a psalm. I'm not sure you have ever heard me preach on a psalm, come to think of it—preachers rarely use a psalm as their primary text. I do so today hoping that it will help us experience God a little less in our heads — and experience God a little more in our hearts. The psalms are much more focused on experiencing God with your heart. It's the same reason that so many of us are passionate about music. You have an emotional experience, focused on moving your heart, and for a lot of us that is what we want out of church. Reading the Bible means reading stories, lists of laws, all manner of information being conveyed to you — directly to your brain, and not so much to your heart. If you feel most connected to God in an emotional experience, it's hard to beat the psalms.

Everyone loves the psalms, or at least the two or three of them we pull out for weddings, funerals, things like that. The rest are probably pretty good too, who knows, we don't really pay much attention to them. I'm not saying we avoid them, or anything like that. It's more that each week, as we study the scriptures together, we generally have an Old Testament and New

Testament selections. If we get fancy we might have a third or even fourth selection — imagine if I had us read four scriptures every week!

(It's not a terrible idea — maybe some times we can have 4 or 5 or even 6 scriptures and then together we can discuss why they are all assigned to the same day.)

The focus is on one of those first two, generally the Gospel. There's nothing wrong with that in itself, but I assure you the Bible has some pretty good writing in there, and I want to be sure that we explore as much as we can.

Lots of the psalms are pretty same-y, right? This one tells us that God is really great, that one asks God to please kill everyone we don't like, and nearly half of them rage at God in anger for one reason or another. I bet if you just read one each week, or each month, we'd like them better. It's like trying to watch Tom and Jerry — those are some really great cartoons, right? — but they were first shown as a cartoon short with a few other short features in front of a feature length picture. They are still great when you watch them at home, on TV, but when you watch a few of them together, you can't help but notice that the plots aren't all that different, and even the gags seem repetitive. Still great, but when you see them one after another after another, it's hard to appreciate them. (If cartoons aren't your thing, it's the same idea with all manner of sitcoms. Three's Company got nearly a decade out of what felt like about three different plots!)

One of the great achievements of Biblical scholarship in recent decades is Robert Alter's translation of the Old Testament, with a detailed commentary on it all, widely acclaimed as the gold standard in translating the Old Testament into English. I consulted it while writing and decided I want to share it with you today because it is substantially different from other translations in a way that I think is interesting. That's a little getting more into my head than my heart, breaking my own rule, sorry this is less familiar ground to me. I'm trying.

Psalm 27 is in today's lectionary, but I can't figure out why some of it is left out — so we're looking at the whole thing. It is nearly in two sections, 1-6 are praising God and God's protection, 7-14 are asking for God's help in a time of difficulty. The first three verses use lots of battle and military language to describe how even in physical danger, God can be trusted — and then in the next three verses, we are told that God will hide the speaker from enemies. Not smiting them on the battlefield. But hiding the speaker in God's tent, a reference to the temple, plus mention of God's shelter, God's palace, and the house of the Lord. We moderns hear it as a metaphor for safety, but those original hearers would know that the privilege of enjoying God's presence in the Jerusalem sanctuary is a consequence of having followed the ways that God dictates to man. And the Temple itself, within the walled city, is repeatedly seen as a sanctuary in the political sense—a place of secure refuge.

I share this because it isn't simply poetic description, but instead a real place that you can only access by following God's rules, and a place that would be recognized as about as safe as it gets. There are some familiar turns of phrase here — verse one speaks of God being my light, verse 5 of being raised up on a rock — and in the New Testament Jesus as rock of my salvation and light to the world, of course. Some in Jesus time would have certainly made those connections , adding a new layer to his bold words.

Two other parts of this psalm are remarkable. Verse 10 makes the shocking statement that “Though my father and mother forsook me, the LORD would gather me in.” The idea that the most unconditional love most people will experience would fail, at a time when that could mean exile, disgrace or worse — and that God's love is even stronger than that possibility? Breathtaking!

Finally, verse 13 is the main reason I wanted to use this translation, because the speaker is trying to express something and then trails off. An ellipsis, making it seem even more literally breath taking, that the speaker couldn't get the thought out without coming back with a hearty Hope for the Lord! Encouraging all who hear to hope for the Lord. Alter notes:

This last exhortation—whether of the speaker to himself or to an individual member of his audience—is an apt summary of the psychology that informs this psalm. It begins by affirming trust in God and reiterates that hopeful confidence, but the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies.

*we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
in your good rule.
That we may have energy, courage, and freedom to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.
We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and
high hope.*

— Walter Brueggemann