

Singing Gospel

One scholar tells us that the writer of our psalms for this morning is likely a priest in crisis, one who has been separated from the Temple, from worship, and ultimately feels separated from God.¹ While the words are ancient, the lonely feeling of being in crisis has not gone away. For all of our advancements, there are moments in every human life when we feel lost, abandoned, hopeless, and alone. One might argue that this sense of alienation is worse now than it was in years past. A colleague working in campus ministry recently shared that 53% of college students feel hopeless.² Older adults are vulnerable as well, as well as every human being of any age. On any given day, at any given moment, we can find ourselves tired, weak, and worn.

The scholar I mentioned earlier says that Psalm 43 is one “for those moments when one doesn't feel like singing.”³ Seems like an odd choice for a worship series inspired by hymns, but at least one of our favorite hymns was composed by a musician at his darkest moment, a moment when he could not see a glimmer of hope. “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” was written by Thomas Dorsey in the wake of the sudden death of his beloved wife Nettie and their infant son. What I also learned this past week was that this particular song ushered in a powerful wave of music, music that gave voice to faith in a new way for the American church.

Dorsey was the son of a pastor and a church organist in a small town in Georgia, a child who liked to pretend he, too was a preacher.⁴ When the family moved to Atlanta, Thomas's parents had to find work that paid more than their previous church jobs, requiring them to work on weekends, so Thomas's life was no longer as centered on the church. He dropped out of school at age 11 and began playing piano in blues clubs. In the blues he found “a new faith” and his musical love, a love that took him to Chicago as part of the Great Migration, the period between the two World Wars, when more than 1 million African-Americans left the Jim Crow south to find a better, different life in the north and out west. Dorsey said he moved to Chicago to find

¹ Rolf Jacobson, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1083

² From a CCO brochure quoting a 2016 survey from the American College Health Association.

³ Jacobson

⁴ Much of this background information was found in Episode 3 of a PBS series entitled, *This Far By Faith*. This particular episode, “Guide My Feet,” can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/170417727>

better paying jobs and initially played at house rent parties to make money to pay his own rent. He soon found gigs playing with some of the best known blues singers, but then suddenly at the height of his success, he found himself unable to play. Doctors could find no physical reason for his crisis, so at his wife's urging, Dorsey eventually sought out a pastor for help. The story goes that the pastor was able to heal Dorsey and then told him to stop playing the blues, "the devil's music." Dorsey could not leave his musical love behind. He still viewed himself with a foot in each world. He started putting sacred Sunday morning words to secular Saturday night music, and gospel music was born. But it was not initially welcomed by the church. Dorsey was told that the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ could not be sung, only preached, that the blues did not—do not—belong in church.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that too many of us think that's still true, that we cannot bring the blues, our blues or any blues to church, that we must put on our best Sunday smile to show up here, that there is no real room for raw pain, sadness, frustration, or struggle in this place or among these people. But to leave our wailing and our worries in the parking lot gives hopelessness and pain a power they do not deserve. Leaving our struggles outside these doors means bringing only part of our selves to worship.

The psalmist knows this, too. He does not speak in stilted or heady terms. Instead he speaks of his thirst for God and says that his tears have been his only food. He cries out about his deceitful enemies and pleads for God to come to his aid. This is no polite gentle tap on the shoulder. This is a genuine unvarnished cry for help. And the psalmist understands that hope and healing, light for the way ahead are found in God and within a community that worships and wails alongside us. As another scholar says:

This honest text suggests that both despair and hope come in life and that both can lead one forward.

The psalm moves beyond a private mourning to hope found in the worshipping community God has created.⁵

In other words, this place and among these people is exactly where the blues belong. The blues are part and parcel of who we are as people of faith.

⁵ W. H. Bellinger, Jr., http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2197

Dorsey tried to share his new genre of music with the church community in Chicago for three years with little to no success. He often said that he had been thrown out of some of the best churches in America for offering up a new way of worshipping, a new way of speaking and singing about raw pain in the midst of the faithful. Ironically, the song that breaks through sounds like a psalm. Like the psalmist, Dorsey's powerful testimony comes when he feels most distant from God and from the church. And in that moment, he offers the church one of her truest testimonies of faith in the midst of heartbreak, a shining light in the depths of darkness and despair. This music—known as gospel music enabled the church to recover the ancient voice of the psalms, the voice that does not simply sing in a polite, guarded way, but one that wails and laments and cries out to God with a rawness not often found in proper church music. But as I mentioned, the church did not welcome this new way of singing. So one of our most beloved hymns began as an outlaw, something new and uncomfortable that challenged the very fabric of what worship sounds like. Perhaps more importantly, it opened up a window into faith and its most passionate expression, one that has deepened the church's faith and faithfulness by bringing weekday struggles and Saturday's music into Sunday's worship.

When we are tired, worn, frightened, angry, or grieving, we can be tempted to hole up, to hide away and keep our pain to ourselves, but the church is poorer when we do. The church is not strictly a place for shiny, happy people. Pain and doubt and protest are uncomfortable and not very pretty, but church is not about being comfortable. From its earliest days, as heard through the voice of the psalmist, our tradition has held space and made room for honest lament and unvarnished doubt. The church, the body of Christ is the place and the people who cry out on behalf of our own suffering and that of the world. The clergy and activists and everyday people marching and praying and working and crying out for peace and justice in Charlottesville and DC on this painful anniversary weekend are heirs of a full and rich tradition. As are we. At our most faithful, we are the heirs of Thomas Dorsey and the psalmist. At our most faithful, we, too boldly call on God when we are hopeless, when we are hurting, when we honestly wonder if God's promises are true for us or for others. We are bold to weep and wail and wonder out loud because we are beloved children, sisters and brothers of God's own Son, Jesus the Christ. Jesus himself knows what it is to be abandoned, to grieve, to struggle, and to wail in the face of hopelessness. Throughout his ministry, he touched the untouchable, cried when his friend died, upended

tables in the Temple, and found himself on the wrong side of the law and proper religious types. On that desolate Thursday, he was unjustly arrested and condemned while his friends slept, panicked, and ran away. On that fateful Friday, he was mocked and tortured by the powers-that-be before he cried out in despair from a criminal's cross. On that lonely Saturday, he languished dead in a borrowed tomb. And on that first Easter Sunday, when God raised him from the dead, Jesus brought every bit of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday with him, breaking the ultimate power of death and despair and redeeming it all, saving us all, helping us stand, and leading us home. At our most faithful, *that* is the gospel we whisper, wail, cry, shout, and, yes, sing. And, by the grace of God, it is the gospel we live and preach, too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.