

Text: Psalm 89  
Title: Learning to Sing  
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Craig Barnes' father was a preacher who believed in the memorization of scripture. As a boy, Craig was given a passage each Monday to memorize by week's end. If he couldn't recite the text he was dismissed from the dinner table.

When Craig was 17 his parents split up. His father disappeared and his mother went to live with her sister. Craig and his brother were left alone on Long Island. They had to box up the family belongings in the parsonage and make their own way. His brother dropped out of college and got a construction job. Craig worked at a gas station as he finished high school.

A year later, without enough money for a train or bus ticket, Craig and his brother decided to hitchhike to Texas to see their mother for Christmas. Somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81 they got stuck in a blizzard. For hours, they stood on the side of the highway hoping that a ride would come along. A state trooper told them that the highway was closed ~ and then left to tend to an accident. The snow got deep, the night got dark, the time grew long, and they were alone.

Craig writes that after months and months of hustling to meet immediate needs he and his brother "were finally forced to talk to each other." They'd never talked about feeling "disposable" to the people who were supposed to love them. On the side of the road they tried to face those emotions but ended up quizzing each other on sports statistics. Finally, Craig's brother pointed at him and said, "Romans 8:28." This was territory that they knew. Craig spit back the text and they spent a good deal of that night recalling memorized verses.

Craig Barnes writes this about that:

*At one point, I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." By the time I was finished reciting those words, I was crying.*

*That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life.*

Dear friends, most of us have texts, lyrics, and lines running through our heads and burrowed in our hearts. They slip in uninvited; they surface unannounced.

While mowing the lawn you find yourself singing an old song.

While working in the kitchen you whistle a familiar hymn.

While running an annoying pop song ear-worm sets your stride.

Rummage around in your soul's attic and you'll find lines from novels, movies, and poems that serve as anchors or jokes or bridges to other people. Rummage around long enough and you'll probably even find a few verses of scripture.

In this line of work, I often have a front row seat to the human condition. I've sat with people in joy and crisis; and as they've breathed their last. I've been struck how in those decisive-life-turning-moments most people don't speak off the cuff or offer a freewheeling reflection; they often fall back on familiar lines and sing deeply rooted songs.

For example, when Bill Stoub died at 99 the family that gathered around his bed sang him out with old revivalist hymns that most hadn't sung in years. But in their last moments together those lines and melodic hooks were the deep reservoir from which they drew comfort and strength.

The Psalms are the song book of scripture.

While the Bible is a library full of all sorts of literary genres, it is the Psalms that detail the full range of what it means to be human. There are psalms of protest and praise, psalms of lament and love, psalms of despair and delight, psalms of supplication and dedication, psalms of thanksgiving and psalms of trauma, etc. The Psalms offer a window into the human heart. And as they give language to the landscape of human spirituality they also seem to open a way to God ~

to engage God,  
to be in relationship with God,  
to wrestle and weep and wonder with God,  
to find God.

In 2016 poet-prophet-and-profiteer, Bono, interviewed Eugene Peterson. Peterson is a pastor and writer, probably best known for his translations of the New Testament and the Psalms into modern, colloquial, English. Bono and Peterson have a relationship built primarily around their shared love for the Psalms. In that exchange Bono says this:

*Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do—they introduced me to God, not belief in God, more an experiential sense of God. Over art, literature, girls, my mates, the way in to my spirit was a combination of words and music. As a result, the Book of Psalms always felt open to me; and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the book of John.*

For the next two months, we're going to open and sing the Psalms. Each week a psalm will help shape our liturgy, be the text for preaching, and be sung or played in a variety of different ways. We will consider a variety of different kinds of psalms. Our hope is that these psalms will take root ~ there may even be the encouragement to memorize a few verses. Our prayer is that these psalms will open us to an experiential sense of God.

So, this week, Psalm 89.

Psalm 89 opens with rich clarion call:

*I will sing of the Lord's great love (hesed) forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness (aemunah) known through all generations.*

*Hesed* is that delightful Hebrew word that defies translation.

It's lovingkindness, compassion, mercy, loyal-love, etc. It's that quality of God whereby God acts on behalf of people/creation without regard for God's self. It's central to the covenant making activity of God.

*Aumunah* is faithfulness, fidelity. It's God's faithful commitment to *hesed*.

And, some form of those two words get paired up together seven times in Psalm 89. (Think here of seven as the number of completeness or fullness....)

Psalm 89 celebrates the fullness of God's love. The Psalmist stacks up ways that God is loving and faithful to his people and his promises. He points to God's covenant with the Israelites and he highlights the ways in which those promises are realized and extended in the line of David.

So, for example the writer gives voice to God proclaiming:

*I will not take my love (hesed) from him, nor will I betray my faithfulness (aumunah). I will not violate my covenant, or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness – and I will not lie to David – that his line will continue forever...*

I know that sounds like jargony-religious-god-talk ~ easy to glaze over ~ but there is here a crucial announcement. God is doubling down. God is banking on God. Because of God's very nature you can count on the love and faithfulness of God. Thanks be to God.

But....

But, what about when you can't?

What about when the love and faithfulness of God lets you down?

What about when the promises fail?

Verse 38 of Psalm 89 is a big "but." For 37 verses the psalmist waxes eloquent about the nature of God until he runs into historical reality. It's good-god-talk until life interrupts....

Chances are that this psalm was written after the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, laid waste to the line of David, and drug away the Israelites. God's people were refugees ~ forsaken, shattered, betrayed, and alone. As James Luther Mays puts it:

*The Psalm describes that disaster as the work of God himself. It does not question his power, but his promise.*

So, listen again to the psalmist:

*But, you have rejected, you have spurned... you have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust...  
How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?  
Lord, where is your former great love (hesed), which in your faithfulness (aumunah) you swore to David?*

The same one who celebrated God, banking on God, now spits back at the bankruptcy of God. God failed. God is silent. God broke his promise. "The chosen one has become the rejected one." (Stan Mast) It is a hard-harsh-honest turn....

Dear friends, I find companionship and take great comfort in Psalm 89.

The cries of one abandoned by God are not simply precursors to God swooping in to the rescue, nor are they literary foils before the grand finale when God saves the day, but they are an authentic expression of human brokenness before the silence of God. Their inclusion in scripture's song book is evidence that faith is not some kind of achievement that can be earned or egged on, but faith is a fragile gift. We hold in tension

both trust and longing,  
both confidence and doubt,  
both faith and despair.

So, I don't know how you are broken or wrung out this morning.

I don't know how you have felt betrayed or abandoned.

But, I do know you are not alone.

The psalmist in the middle of proclaiming the love and faithfulness of God learns to sing of the abandonment and silence of God.

Don't be afraid. It is okay. You are not alone.

Psalm 89 closes with the cry that God would "remember." Sometimes that's all we've got. God remember your promises. God remember your character. God remember me.

Craig Barnes, the boy on the highway, went on to become a wonderful preacher and the President of Princeton Theological Seminary. He's come a long way from that dark night with his brother, but listen to how he frames his journey:

*I don't keep taking chances in offering leadership because I expect to succeed; I take them because I know I can handle it if I fail. What's the worst that can happen? Will I be alone, broke, and abandoned? Been there. Will I make humiliating mistakes? I tried hitchhiking on a closed interstate. And at the bottom, I found the relentless love of God who was with me and always will be, no matter how deep the waters.*

*When you find God at the bottom, it's possible to enjoy life's highs and lows without fearing you'll fall beneath the love of a Savior. No one can be fully alive, and no one can lead, without getting rid of that fear.*

Friends, let us learn to sing with an honest voice of both the silence of God and the love and faithfulness of God.

*I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth, I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.*

Amen.