

Praying the Psalms during the Pandemic

by Jean R. Boehler

During this tumultuous time, we turn to God in prayer. But when words fail, when we do not know how to articulate the sighs of our hearts, the voices of the faithful can speak for us. We look to the book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible. Although composed in a faraway time and place, praying the psalms transcends historical settings, community issues, and individual experiences. Psalms deal with every emotion. Anger. Delight. Peace. Disappointment. Trouble. Uncertainty. The psalmists seldom give specific details about the situations that inspired their poetry; yet, just as light passes through a lens or prism, their words are focused and refracted in ways that speak to our circumstances and become our prayers.

For the cantors of the church, music is not just a vehicle for prayer but prayer itself: the Spirit of God moves within our hearts, our breath, our hands, and even our feet, enabling us to pray with and for the community. But what happens when gathering as an assembly is limited, prohibited, or considered hazardous? Who are we, then, as a community? For that matter, who are we, the cantors of the church? This question extends beyond specific tasks, such as planning worship, leading rehearsals, and accompanying congregational song. In these challenging times, our tasks seem to change and evolve on a weekly basis. But the central, vocational question remains constant: when the role of the cantor is changed or even diminished, what is left?

“A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:17; KJV). Those words, attributed to our brother musician, David, give voice to the prayers of our hearts when our very

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being cries out to God. David seldom mitigates or rationalizes all that he and his community have experienced; realness and authenticity are prioritized before stoicism. An artist of profound emotion, David minces no words as he berates enemies and oppressors; he does not blithely sing his version of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” Rather, embracing the complexities of faith and doubt, he gives voice to the questions and uncertainties of life. In the psalms, we experience the emotions that accompany the joys and perils of lived experience, both in David’s time and our own. In the reflections that follow, I invite you to consider singing and praying the psalms with the whole people of God. Join David in weeping. Be uncertain. Be frustrated. Be joyful. Be.

Psalm 27

For in the day of trouble God will give me shelter, hide me in the hidden places of the sanctuary, and raise me high upon a rock.

Even now my head is lifted up above my enemies who surround me. Therefore I will offer sacrifice in the sanctuary, sacrifices of rejoicing; I will sing and make music to the LORD.

(Psalm 27:5–6; ELW)

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Again and again we see a predictable pattern in the psalms: something bad happens; there is much lamentation; God delivers; a song of grateful praise arises. I must admit I am somewhat jealous of David. In this psalm, David reveals his plan to go to the tabernacle and offer a sacrifice with shouts of joy. In these pandemic days, I understand how the course of the disease is spread in crowds. At a rational level, I understand that out of concern for my neighbor, I cannot follow David’s lead and enter the tabernacle to offer shouts of joy. At a spiritual level, I plead with the psalmist who cries, “how long, O LORD?” My pastor recently told me, “Cantor, don’t try to figure it out. It just is.” Such advice conflicts with my instincts as a planner and organizer, characteristics common among church musicians. But we must always remember that God is our stronghold, our helper. We should not be so foolish to think of our well-intentioned plans—or even ourselves—as saviors during difficult times.

I can, however, give thanks to God in my present circumstances, even if it is not in a physical building. Even as the snapshots of our grim reality turn into a never-ending slideshow, we can sing with David, “This I believe—that I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:11). May we, too, open our eyes to see the life and beauty of God who is still in our midst! While pictures of the dead kept in refrigerator trucks may haunt us, we see signs of God’s resurrection in green blades of the forest. We see neighbors helping neighbors in the provision and sharing of food; we rejoice in small acts of kindness—diapers are dropped off to help an immigrant family in Queens or in Minneapolis—that remind us of God’s life-giving touch in seemingly barren days.

We live in the land of the living. We live as people of the resurrection. It kind of makes you want to sing, doesn’t it? “Love is come again like wheat arising green” (ELW 379).

Psalm 37

When old routines become nostalgic memories, what activities take their place? Do you vow to exercise more? Try a new recipe? Or perhaps, more nobly, work out the fingering of that Bach fugue you’ve always wanted to learn? David gives us some useful advice: “Take delight in the LORD, who shall give you your heart’s desire” (Psalm 37:4).

Delighting oneself in the Lord involves making God’s priorities our own. Have we taken time to weep with those who weep, feed the hungry, comfort the sick, and proclaim the gospel? As our task lists evolve in different ways, how can we serve as Jesus would have us serve? It may be time to declutter. I am not talking about cleaning out closets or filing cabinets. Rather, we need to make time for our own self-care, to monitor our physical and mental well-being in the midst of much change. Our hyperactive, “on-the-go” culture—conditioned by a perpetual display of productivity and achievement on social media—discourages moments of stillness, silence, and reflection. In their place, fear and worry run rampant, much to Satan’s delight.

But God promises peace. “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently” (Psalm 37:7). Turn off your electronic device(s). Light a candle. Clear your mind. Take a deep breath. Try saying the familiar Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”¹ Or, let the psalmist’s words gradually fall away into contemplative silence:

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am.
Be still and know that.
Be still and know.
Be still and.
Be still.
Be.

Wait and listen: “put your trust in the LORD, and see what God will do” (Psalm 37:5).

ENCOURAGEMENTS: WISDOM, BEAUTY, TRUTH

We have been tasked to appraise the ... fortifications that have long supported our physical notions of church. May this psalm encourage us to think about our work as cantors beyond our usual boundaries.

Psalm 48

These days, I miss looking in the organ mirror and, in its reflection, glimpsing a great procession with the cross leading the way. I miss the fragrance of incense permeating the air. I miss the sound waves reverberating through the neighborhood where I serve as the people of God offer praise with boisterous strains of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” (*ELW* 841; *LSB* 964; *TFF* 296). I miss the sound of water splashing as another soul is united to Jesus’ death and resurrection through baptism.

But the church is much more than what we can physically perceive. The church is more than a building. We are Zion! While the outward church includes both believers and unbelievers, Zion is a term reserved for those who belong to God through faith. Let your mind think about the saints and the faithful from all generations. We join them! So, cantors of the church, lift your head up high:

Make the circuit of Zion; walk round about it;
count the number of the city’s towers.
Consider well its ramparts; examine its
strongholds; that you may tell those who
come after.
Mark this—God is our God forever and ever,
guiding us even to the end.

(*Psalm 48:12–14*)

Our response to this pandemic is not only a witness in this weary world but also a witness to future generations. The poetry of this psalm attests to God’s faithfulness to all the ends of the earth, even during times of great uncertainty. Perhaps you have seen or heard some variant of the recent catchphrase “the church has left the building”! We have been tasked to appraise the ramparts—literally, the fortifications—that have long supported our physical notions of church. May this psalm encourage us to

think about our work as cantors beyond our usual boundaries:

In the midst of your temple, O God,
we meditate on your steadfast love.
Your praise, like your name, O God,
reaches to the ends of the earth;
your right hand is full of righteousness.

(*Psalm 48:9–10*)



KATHRYN BREWER

May this silence deepen our appreciation for sound; may it help us to someday sing a more profound “Hallelujah!”

Psalm 42

Like you, I have vivid memories of my work as a cantor. I remember:

- those five seconds of breathtaking silence after a hymn as the Spirit lived, moved, and breathed among the gathered assembly.
- singing the song “Circle of Love” with the babies and toddlers of the Sunday School, in which all ended up in a big laughing hug.
- that one troublesome choir voice that never blended and could always be heard above the entire congregation. I would do anything to hear that voice again.

We remember just as our ancestor David remembered:

I pour out my soul when I think on these things; how I went with the multitude and led them into the house of God, with shouts of thanksgiving, among those keeping festival.

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul, and why are you so disquieted within me? Put your trust in God, for I will yet give thanks to the one who is my help and my God.

(Psalm 42:4–5)

“For I will yet praise,” sings David at the end of this psalm. We can even imagine him expanding this sentiment with familiar texts that we sing, saying, “I will praise God now, whatever my circumstances. I will join the angels of heaven, singing ‘Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.’ I will join the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven, singing ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord, Lord God of power and might: heaven and earth are full of your glory!’” We will keep singing—now and through eternity. As one music teacher told me, “I hope you like singing. We’re going to do it for an eternity.” Or, as the hymnist reminds us, “and through eternity, I’ll sing on” (*ELW 666; LSB 543; CW 120*).

Our music teachers have also taught us that silence is just as important as sound—from the carefully timed silences between hymn stanzas that prompt us to breathe to longer silences that give shape and meaning to musical phrases and gestures. During the silence of this pandemic, we remember and wait, trusting that we will again sing together. May this silence deepen our appreciation for sound; may it help us to someday sing a more profound “Hallelujah!”

Psalm 77

Why? Sometimes, people of faith wonder if they have permission to ask “why?” If you find yourself asking, thinking, or lamenting “why,” know that you have a lot of company, including Asaph, one of the temple musicians appointed by David. Like you, Asaph had pressing and urgent questions:

“Will the LORD cast me off forever and never again show me favor?”

Has God’s steadfast love come to an end forever? Has the LORD’s promise failed for all time?

Has God forgotten to be gracious, and in anger withheld compassion?

(Psalm 77:7–9)

These were not just fleeting thoughts. Question after question reeled through Asaph’s mind. Over and over again he questioned God’s love, faithfulness, and God’s very character.

Do you have questions? I do. I have grown exasperated and frustrated from asking them. Enough already! Lord, do you not hear our pleas for the sick and dying? Have you noticed the long lines of people at the food pantry—many of whom have not there before? And what about the never-ending racial injustice? Will this civil unrest destroy our government? How can your beloved church be a beacon of hope in these

ENCOURAGEMENTS: WISDOM, BEAUTY, TRUTH

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desperate times? For that matter, how can we, as leaders of the church's song, lead a church that is advised not to sing?

Real questions. Heart-wrenching questions. Is it really acceptable to question God? Of course! The very act of questioning God affirms God's presence and power to act; though their words are forceful and challenging, questions of the psalmists and others (like Habakkuk) are rooted in faith. And, following Asaph's example, we do not have to linger in questioning mode. What does Asaph do after his urgent questions? Beginning in verse 10, the singer's individual complaints give way to communal memory, the stuff of faith:

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds."

(Psalm 77:10–12; NIV)

God hears our prayers. How do we know? Look at what has been done by Christ, the Son: he healed the sick. He raised the dead! He fed the hungry. He was no stranger to confused, corrupt governments. Talk about injustice! They put him to death. And what did he do? He prayed for them. God is with us even when we are clueless about how to proceed. Like that first Pentecost, the Spirit is sent to guide us in our vocation as leaders of the church's song. While the road and timeline may not be clear at this juncture, the Triune God is with us, now and evermore.

Psalm 87

Even in troubled times, many of us are blessed with benefits and privileges of citizenship unknown to many throughout the world. Yet the psalmist reminds us of another citizenship:

Of the city it shall be said, "Everyone was born in Zion, and the Most High shall sustain the city."

Enrolling the nations, the LORD records:
"These also were born there."

The singers and the dancers will say,
"All my fresh springs are in you."

(Psalm 87:5–7; ELW)

Marked by Jesus' blood and claimed as God's children through baptism, we enjoy all the benefits and privileges of a heavenly citizenship. This citizenship is an eternal citizenship that does not falter. This citizenship in heaven will be filled with the hosts of heaven singing the songs of Zion forever. Nothing will keep us from singing there. Not even a pandemic.



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Psalm 105

In these times of isolation, it has become easier to live within our own minds, a vast and insulated digital world where few things seem immediately tangible. When one's worldview becomes so myopic, it's time for a change in perspective. Look beyond the here and now and see what almighty God has done! Throughout all generations, God's people have endured hardships, yet God never abandoned them. Like the psalmist, we recount God's everlasting covenant:

Remember the marvels God has done,
the wonders and the judgments of God's
mouth,
O offspring of Abraham, God's servant,
O children of Jacob, God's chosen ones.
The LORD is our God, whose judgments
prevail in all the world,
who has always been mindful of the
covenant, the promise made for a
thousand generations.

(Psalm 105:5–8)

The psalmist goes on to recount how God sent the plagues to the land, gave them faithful leaders like Moses and Aaron, and brought the faithful out of Egypt into the land of milk and honey.

Have we forgotten the goodness of all that God has done? Cantors of the church can help with our persistent forgetfulness. Even as memory fades, music lingers. Humming that phrase of "What a friend we have in Jesus" may be the catalyst to sing "take it to the Lord in prayer" (*ELW* 742; *LSB* 770; *CW* 411). A recording of "A Mighty Fortress" (*ELW* 503–505; *LSB* 656–657; *CW* 200–201) may help the listener—like the singer of Psalm 46—recall how God has been a strong and sure refuge in times of trouble. As we keep humming, we remember the goodness of the Lord, whether we are sitting in front of a screen watching a Zoom service or, someday, in the midst of the congregation in God's holy temple: "through the church," in or beyond a physical building, "the song goes on" (*ELW* 414; *LSB* 940; *CW* 278).



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Psalm 113

Even in this chaotic time—*especially* in this chaotic time—we praise God:

Who is like the LORD our God,
 who sits enthroned on high,
but stoops to behold the heavens and the
 earth?

The Lord takes up the weak out of the dust
 and lifts up the poor from the ashes,
enthroning them with the rulers, with the
 rulers of the people.

(Psalm 113:5–8)

God is not content to observe this messy world from a distance but is in our midst. God sees the victims of injustice, raising them up and seating them with princes. In God's promised reign of justice, no one will be weighed down by knees, unable to breathe. In this song and prayer, we glimpse a radical reorientation of the world through vivid verbs: God *stoops*, *lifts*, and *enthrones* the weak, poor, and needy. If we look close enough, we see the Spirit working in and through us to do these things. Praise the Lord!

But there is still much work to be done. And so, dear cantors of the church, we open our eyes to serve in new ways as long as we have life and breath. And we continue to sing and pray these ancient words alongside new texts. Every waking moment. From sunrise to sunset. In times of peace, prosperity, and even pandemic.

In God's promised
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Hallelujah! Give praise, you servants of the
 LORD; praise the name of the LORD.
Let the name of the LORD be blessed, from
 this time forth forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to its going down
 let the name of the LORD be praised.

(Psalm 113:1–3)



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Note

1. Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2009).

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