

WGUMC June 3, 2018 Psalms Alive! Psalm 27

When I'm doing a memorial service, I operate on the principle that every one of us is a word of God. Of course, Jesus is *The Word* of God. But he rose from the dead and left each of us to be *a word* of God in the world. Because we don't think of ourselves that way, my task is to sit with the grieving family for a couple of hours, listening to their stories, until I start to hear God speaking through their loved one's life. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about finding the right words, because I'll come up with a Scripture that says it for me, and more often than not, that Scripture is a psalm. So when I sit down to write the person's story, I just let the psalm tell it for me.

It works because psalms are all about life. It's too bad that you have to die before I will sit down to think of a psalm that fit you when you were alive! So I say, why wait? Why don't you let a psalm read you today.

A couple of weeks ago, our confirmation kids shared with us their life verse, a verse they chose that is meaningful to them at this time in their life. And I got to thinking: what if we had a life Psalm? What if we each chose a psalm that speaks to us where we are in our life? And what if we were to read it and repeat it until we had learned it by heart and locked it into our heads? Then, whenever we got stuck in life, whenever we needed guidance or assurance, a better option or new direction, it would be right there for us. Even when we weren't thinking about it, it would surprise us by floating up into our consciousness. Unlike all the other earworms in there—the stupid advertising jingles from our childhood, the sappy love songs we heard on the radio and outgrew long ago—unlike all that other trash, our life psalm could tell us something true about our life and about what God is doing with it.

Psalms make good life verses because they are written in verse and that makes them easy to remember. While much is lost in translation from the Hebrew, even in English, the psalms are poetic.

They are begging to be sung. In fact, they were the songbook for Jews and the earliest Christians. The first hymns in the Church were psalms set to music. And many Christian songs today are based on psalms. So if what you really want is a life song, the psalms are a good place to find one.

Psalm 27 has been a life psalm for me because it has had a way of singing my life for a long time. In these verses you hear faith and doubt, hope and fear, fulfillment and longing, trust and anxious questioning. They cover just about everything, so there is hardly a day that I can't find myself somewhere in this psalm. There are few problems or situations that are not described here, and there is little promise or hope that isn't captured here.

All I have to do is get myself into it, and I do this by praying my way through the psalm. Now there are many ways to pray a psalm. You can read it responsively, as we did at the start of the service. You can sing it, as we are doing in worship in the coming weeks. But

as my sermon-meditation for today, I want to show you how I use a psalm when I pray.

First, I make sure that I'm alone so that I can pray aloud. That way, I don't have to worry about anyone hearing what I might say, and I never know what I might say! I begin by reading the psalm to myself, and I never know what I might hear. I just know that I often hear things in the words spoken aloud that I don't see in the words on the page. Somehow, the Holy Spirit fills up the space between what's on the page and what goes in my ear. After reading each verse, I stop and put that verse in my own words and insert it into my own situation. The reason I do this aloud is because I often don't know what I am really thinking or feeling until I hear myself saying it. I can't tell you how many times the tears finally came when I heard myself speak and only then did I discover what was really in my heart.

This is the real gift of the psalms. All the rest of the Bible is full of what God wants to say to us. But this one book contains

everything we always wanted to say to God, whether we knew it or not. The psalms give us permission to think and to feel and then help us put those thoughts and feelings into words that can heal. So I wrote down some of what I prayed yesterday.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?* God there is so much darkness and fear in this world. For me, too, there is darkness, and it seems to be growing. As I get older, my light gets dimmer, but I shouldn't be afraid because that just means that I can see your light even better. As I begin to lose strength, that puts me in a better position to rely on yours. Again I have to learn the lesson that no matter how hard I try, I cannot save myself. Now I can rejoice that you are my salvation.

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?* I cannot deny that you, O Lord, have always been my strength: through all the trials and tribulations of puberty; through the meningitis, the epilepsy, the surgery; through the many successes and failures of ministry; through the joys and struggles of marriage

and parenting. Your love and grace overwhelms me. Why am I not feeling your strength now?

*When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.* No one is nibbling on my fingers or toes, but something has surely devoured the body I had just a few years ago. Time, with all the things it takes away, is becoming my enemy. At least I am starting to think of it that way. But, Lord, you created time, and this is an enemy of mine that is not going to stumble and fall. What is going to stumble is my attempt to defy time. What needs to fall is my graceless resistance to the aging process. These are enemies of my own making, and I pray they don't become my undoing.

*Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.* These last three years have been a battle. That's how the doctors talk about cancer, as if it were a war to win. But you promise that whatever else happens, love wins. So my heart will not fear, because I know

that death is not the worst thing that can happen to me. By your grace, I will be confident because you have promised to be with me. And when my heart can't feel it, all I have to do is look back; my own history proves it. So when I get cranky, when I complain too much, tell me to shut up. I don't need to win the war. I just want to find the peace.

*One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.* One thing I am learning: the more I seek you, Lord, the less I worry about me, the happier is everyone around me. I guess I am always in your house, but working in it is not the same as living in it. So show me what it really means to live in your house. You're the head of the household. Help me to abide by your rules and not forget to pay "rent," giving you everything that is due to you. Make me sit down and eat with you, have some face-time with you, not just once a week, but every single day. When dinner is over, remind me to take out the trash,

because there's a lot of garbage in this world and it stinks to high heaven. Then, when my work is done for the day, tuck me in bed at night. Plant a kiss on my forehead. Sing me a song. Living with you. It's all I want. It's all I need.

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! "Come, my heart says, "seek God's face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.* Many people think that your face is a face of wrath and judgment, rejection and condemnation. But I don't think so. I will try to be honest with you and lay bare my heart to you. If I would just stop trying to do your job, stop judging and hurting myself, I would figure out that aren't angry, just anxious for me. Then I would see your face of mercy.

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!* I am ever so grateful that I get to see your goodness, Lord. If I can't see it in my own life, I can readily see

it in others'. And the good thing is that I don't have to die first. The land of the living is not in-the-sky-by-and-by. It is wherever your goodness is, wherever you are. So whether I am living or dying—and I'm doing both all the time—it's all life to you, and it's all good. I don't have to wait for you, Lord, because I trust in your promise and put my hope in the fullness of your presence. That hope is the only thing that gives me courage and strength. But it is more than enough because you are more than enough. You are my life psalm, and I will forever sing you. Amen.