

## We Sing to Remember

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Jun 2, 2024

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 5:6–21, Psalm 81, II Corinthians 4:1–12, Mark 2:23–28

One of the best tools for memory I can think of is music. If you need to remember something, put it to a little melody in your head. This is the reason I can still tell you to this day that the capital of Honduras is Tegucigalpa... I came up with a little song in 4th grade. No, I will not be sharing it this morning. Think of all the song lyrics you have stuck in your memory, not even in your regularly accessed memory... Go back and listen to a few albums (for those younger than me, albums are this thing where you took a bunch of Spotify singles and put them together in one place)... listen to an album you had on repeat ten years ago. You will be surprised at how many of the words you know by heart, words you haven't heard in years.

What we sing or the music we hear shapes our memory. My dad, who has worked as a nursing home chaplain for his entire career, told me one time about a resident who had largely lost the ability to speak, but could sing without a problem.

God, who designed us, knew the special place that music could hold in our hearts and minds. Beginning today, we are spending our summer Sundays with sermons focused on the Psalms, the song book of the Bible. The Psalms are words, pieces of music that are meant to form and shape us. And lucky for us we even get to sing them each week, whether by chanting with the organ or singing a refrain from these holy words.

So why the Psalms? As suggested already, we believe that these songs, these prayers of God's people, are formative. As we go through these Psalms over the summer, I invite you to look for a few verses that speak to you and to memorize them. Put them to a little melody yourself so you can sing them as prayer! The Psalms are ripe for memorization and a ready defense and encouragement in those

times when we are outside of the church building. If you have not experienced this before, you will be blown away at just how much having something to say when you feel discouraged, tempted, or harassed will help you face those things. The Psalms give us many such defenses.

The Psalms run the full gamut of human emotion, from lament to exaltation, from doubt to praise. There is a Psalm for what you are feeling. Not only does this give us permission to go through the ups and downs of a Christian life, it shows us how we can be faithful through and in spite of our difficulties, triumphs, and the times that are in between.

We also read the Psalms because we don't think that God's work among his people began at the Incarnation. There is a long condemned heresy that goes by the name of Marcionism. It is named for the early heretic Marcion, who argued that the Old and New Testaments presented two separate divine beings, and that the god of the Old Testament, along with the books themselves, should be jettisoned from Christian teaching. And while you will not find very many confessional Marcionites today, there can be a tendency to become functional Marcionites if we do not study and learn from the Old Testament. Thus the Psalms offer us an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the worship not only of our Christian ancestors, but of those who came before the Incarnation. In short, if the Psalms were the book of prayers and songs that Jesus knew and used, it is certainly to our benefit to use them!

So we turn to the Psalms. We sing them to help us to remember. And our Psalm for this morning emphasizes just that - remembering God's story of faithfulness in covenant with his people. Problems arise when the people of God, and us by extension do not listen to his voice or remember what he has done. The Psalm acts as God's plea that his people listen to him and that they would remember their own covenant history. There is a direct appeal for the people to listen by a command in verse 8:

"Hear, O my people, while I admonish you!  
O Israel, if you would but listen to me!"

This is followed by a reminder to those singing this Psalm that it was Israel's inability to listen to God that led them into trouble. See verses 11 and 12:

"But my people did not listen to my voice;  
Israel would not submit to me.  
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,  
to follow their own counsels.

Then, God expresses his desire that Israel would listen to him in verse 13:

Oh, that my people would listen to me,  
that Israel would walk in my ways!

The Psalm then concludes with a description of the blessings that would flow to God's people if they were to listen to him:

I would soon subdue their enemies  
and turn my hand against their foes.  
Those who hate the Lord would cringe toward him,  
and their fate would last forever.  
But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat,  
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

Listening to God's voice means deliverance and protection from enemies as well as provision in the good things we need. It is because God desires his people's good that he wants us to listen to him. It is not out of some need for control (he already has it!). It is not out of some relational need he lacks without our attention. God desires a relationship with us that is for our good. That's why he wants us to listen!

If the Psalm for the morning is a plea for our listening ears, the question then becomes how we listen and to what. How we listen matters. The filter we use matters. I am sure you all have walked out of a meeting and heard someone

summarize what had just been discussed and what the next necessary steps would be, and thought that summary didn't reflect what you heard at all!

And so as we begin this series on the Psalms with a plea for us to listen, I want us to think about the way we listen and how we may listen well to the formative melodies of the Psalms.

How you hear a story matters, your frame of reference matters. How many of you have watched a film again after a while and because you were in a different place, the story hit you completely differently? For me it was Michael Mann's *Last of the Mohicans*. I watched that movie in high school and loved it, so much so that whenever me and my college buddies would be sitting around and want to watch a movie, I would throw it out there as an option, but no one ever got excited about it. Flash forward to a beach trip after graduation, I finally got my chance to show this movie to my friends after four years of talking it up. It was pretty obvious nobody was into it pretty soon after it started and while I still liked it, I felt completely differently than I thought I would at the end, with half of my friends asleep around me. There is nothing quite like the self-critical internal voice that shows up when you are sharing a film you love with friends! It totally changed my viewing experience!

How we receive stories - like the sacred story of the Scripture, or the story of God's working in our own lives, can change based on our frame of reference. Light coming through stained glass looks different than light coming through a clear pane. How we listen matters.

There are a couple of ways that our culture forms us to hear our stories, both the stories of God's people and the stories of our own lives, in unhealthy ways. For this morning, I am going to call these ways of hearing and remembering "nostalgic memory" and "suspicious memory," before finally turning toward how the Psalms teach us a different way, encouraging us to cultivate a "sacred memory."

In considering our own story and the story of God's people it is easy to fall into the trap of looking uncritically or too critically about our past. An overly nostalgic memory will cause us to misremember things as if they were perfect before and an overly suspicious memory will discount the wisdom of our forebears in favor of what is seen as the inevitable progress of history.

A fundamental problem that both approaches share is the tendency to judge others and minimize the misdeeds of the self. For example, an overly nostalgic view of one's life can lead to a perspective allergic to and judgemental of any change, and that any problems that exist now are results of those changes. This leaves little room for self-critique or the owning of one's own responsibilities. So too can an overly suspicious view of one's own story lead to a lack of taking responsibility for one's own actions, a blaming of everything on "the system," or some other nebulous entity, while only looking forward to the next innovation and never back to the wisdom of our fathers and mothers.

Take our gospel reading for today. The Pharisees who critique Jesus and his disciples for feeding themselves have a nostalgic view of God's law. That view has caused them to forget the pro-people purpose of the Sabbath commandment. They have

grown so enamored with their own interpretation of the law that they have forgotten how David himself rightly got food for his men, the example Jesus needs to remind them of. They haven't considered how their own rigid ways may keep others from getting what they need, and in doing so they have actually misremembered God's story.

We may also imagine an overly suspicious response to the same situation. A group of Roman philosophers comes by and overhears the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees. They add their two cents: "Why not stop there, Jesus of Nazareth? Why keep the Sabbath at all? Those archaic rules were made for different times and are used to keep others down, as these Pharisees have just attempted to do to you and your disciples. Clearly your god's rules need an update."

A nostalgic memory makes us blind to the ways to which the past had things backwards and deaf to the voice of God calling us forward. A suspicious memory urges us to burn down everything that came before and those that would keep them that way, while uncritically pushing forward with the winds of whatever is next.

What we need, what the Psalms offer us, is a sacred way of remembering. A sacred memory begins with praise Listen to how Psalm 81 begins, showing us right away that the focus here will be on God:

"Sing aloud to God our strength;  
shout for joy to the God of Jacob!"

The genesis of sacred memory is praise. Praise is the hallmark of a memory formed by the right remembering of God's work among his people. If you are wanting to remember well, seek to praise God for all that he has done.

Sacred memory also tends to focus not just on the individual, but on the collective body of God's people. Part of the problem with a nostalgic or suspicious memory is an overfocus on the personal, a turning inward that leads to judgemental and ungracious attitudes. Psalm 81 celebrates the things God has done for the whole of his people. The Psalm focuses on God's faithfulness, (the deliverance from Egypt), and is also honest about the people's failings at Meribah, where they questioned whether God was really with them or not, prompting Moses to strike the rock so that water flowed out of it. Sacred memory pushes back against the pitfalls of both a nostalgic and suspicious memory, by neither discounting good in the past nor hiding that which is bad. Oh I pray that I would be able to tell my own story with a sacred memory, neither discounting God's faithfulness to me nor covering over the places I have failed. This is why we need the Psalms, to help us remember rightly.

A sacred memory prepares us for the next true and good thing. The goal is not some sense of arrival, but of continued faithfulness. Nostalgic and suspicious memories have an end in mind, whether a return to some idyllic past or a constant progression to a realized utopia. Sacred memory is not that optimistic about human efforts, and yet it is actually more hopeful. What it has in mind is obedience to the one who calls. A sacred memory enables us to say yes to God once more. Our reward is our delight in him and his delight in us, so that we might be considered faithful enough to once again be given the opportunity to say yes to him.

God pleads with us in Psalm 81 that we might listen to him. To whom are you listening this morning? Nostalgia and suspicion have very skilled promoters. They compose attractive earworm jingles that form our memories into tools of their interests, tools of our own captivity. What you listen to has a tendency to get stuck in your head. What gets stuck in your head forms you.

Let the Psalms get stuck in your head this summer, this year, this season. See what the formation of a sacred memory will do to your inner life and outlook. Listen for the music that has sustained the people of God for as long as we've been around. You will find yourself singing praise. You will find yourself shouting for joy.