

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Mark 14:1-15:47

When participating in a congregational process to create a series of Lenten meditations, I came upon the readings in Matthew and Mark, describing the last supper, and a phrase jumped out at me: “When they were finished, they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives.”

It was hard for me to imagine their singing a hymn together. Jesus knew what the future held for him and the disciples were distressed at what he had just told them. In addition, we read these passages through the lens of the sacrament of the Eucharist making it more difficult to put them in the context in which they occurred, that is, the celebration of the Passover Feast. How did hymn singing fit into this scenario?

The rituals of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover are ancient and well established. Scholars widely recognize a set of hymns sung during Jewish festivals and celebrations, including the Passover meal: Psalms 113-118 called the Hallel or Praise God. Psalm 118 in particular is a Psalm of victory and praise of God’s steadfast love: *O Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!* v1. This continues for several verses then the writer turns to recounting how in his distress he called on the Lord:

*⁵ Out of my distress I called on the Lord;
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.*

*⁶ With the Lord on my side I do not fear.
What can mortals do to me?*

*⁷ The Lord is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

*¹⁰ All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

*¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

NRSV

The community at the Last Supper was quite familiar with the Psalm. In fact, the phrase *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord* which the crowd shouted on Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is from this Psalm (118 v.26). The Psalm is a recounting of how Israel was surrounded by its enemies when David became King: Philistines, Moabites, Syrians, Ammonites, etc. so they knew the story of Israel’s defeat of those enemies and rejoiced with a song of Victory:

*¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the Lord helped me.*

*¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous

However, when we read it through the lens of what happened to Jesus later it is rather astounding: v5-6 *Out of my distress I called on the Lord...With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?* and v. 13 *I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.* Jesus knew where he was headed; he had just told his disciples that one of them would betray him, so they were confused and hurt. And yet together they sang this hymn of praise and victory.

Music, particularly sacred music, has been and continues to be a large part of my life. Music is very important to my worship, which is, I'm sure, why the verse about singing a hymn before they went out from the Passover table spoke to me.

When asked why I love singing, I often respond that it transports me to another place. When I sing, I can't think of anything else (if I want to do it right!) Whatever happened during the day is put aside as I concentrate on the music. It doesn't matter how tired I am when I go to choir or chorus, once I get there the tiredness wears off and I embark on an energizing endeavor. I have had at times, experiences in performance when I know the music well, I can concentrate on perfecting my part but also hearing and synchronizing with the other parts, I can express the meaning of the words and the whole experience totally transports me. It is almost an out of body experience, a spiritual lift that makes all around me disappear, and puts me totally in the moment. This prayer from the BCP says it better than I:

For Church Musicians and Artists

O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your servants who seek through art and music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; and grant to them even now glimpses of your beauty, and make them worthy at length to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

And so, while pondering the activities of Jesus and the disciples, I thought about their singing. The last Psalm they sang is called the Great Hallel. It is like our Great Litany, a call and response:

- ¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*
- ² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*
- ³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*
- ⁴ who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

It continues like this for 26 verses.

Jesus went out to his betrayal and death, but he sang a Psalm. The words were familiar, they are penetrating, he was singing in community with his friends, perfecting his praises. So, maybe, just maybe for the moment he was transported out of himself into a place of peace and comfort and saw glimpses of God's beauty.

With love and thanks to God for the joy of Music,
Jeanette Peterson

Note: First written for a Lenten meditation booklet prepared by congregants at Christ Episcopal Church Poughkeepsie in March, 2018.